Perceptions, imaginings, and practices of collective identities in the transition: National identities and ethnicity in the Western Cape

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In the Western Cape collective identities are treated rather uniquely by comparison with the rest of South Africa. This situation, where the fear of expression of identity borders on the pathological among certain academic and political quarters, arises from at least two things. The first is the failure to be able to understand and explain where identities originate. If one believes identities are necessarily based on inherent racial or ethnic qualities, then fear of them is understandable, particularly if the fearful party is from the left of the political spectrum. The second cause of this fear of social identities is the fact that many people see identity as fixed, unchanging, and not subject to any form of management or voluntarism. This results in the magician's approach to the question of identity, where the opponents of any notion of Coloured identities in particular have been known to confuse the censorship of the word Coloured with the ability to make the actual collective identities that people experience, disappear.

Regis Debray, among others, has offered a significant critique of existing theories dealing with collective identities and in particular of the national question (Debray 1977 and 1983). He argues that collective identities are historically forged and are therefore strategic in nature. Nationalism, in his view, and arguably all collective identities, can only be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed,

through the process of organisation, that is, in struggle. Any identity, in this view, is only as permanent as the extent to which and the manner that people are organised, that gives rise to a particular identity, remains a viable political project. Identities are thus always multiple, multi-faceted, layered, and undergoing a constant metamorphosis.

Debray argues further that, because identities are a product of the collective, they are essentially religious phenomenon. Debray expands Durkheim's definition of the religious, which defines religion as a collective or social setting apart of sacred things, to all aspects of social existence which involve the setting apart of sacred things and the ritualised experience of this sacredness (Durkheim 1976).

The coincidence of biology, psychology, and territory, the fundamentals of the social physics that are said by Debray to forge identity, give rise to a structural dispensation of the social which ensures collective identities are a constant and unavoidable feature of social existence. This permanence of the phenomenon of group identity, of which religious and national identities are an expression, is therefore a transhistorical category of collective social identity. It exists and functions as the manifestation of a religiopolitical unconscious. This religiopolitical unconscious is governed by terms of conditions that are sacred. Social organisation necessitates the definition and recognition of the other, the alienation of the individual by the collective as other, and the definition of the subject through the collective.

Collective identities can therefore be expressed as national, religious, ethnic, tribal, or familial. But in essence these are all manifestations of the essential features of social existence described by Debray as being regulated by the social production of sacred space and time. Debray argues that identities are formed through enclosure and exclusion, that is through organisation around a centre and in opposition. This view redefines ideology as the phenomenon of symbolic efficacy, which determines the extent to which identities

are effective, that is, are seen to effectively mobilise people. The apparent capacity of symbolic resources to give effect to social practices and the ability to successfully manipulate these symbols, are said by Debray to be best studied through the discipline of mediology (Debray 1996).

Debray's view of identity, of which national identities are the predominant form in modernity, that is, the predominantly globalised capitalist world, does not emphasis the economic aspect of identity sufficiently. It is clear that nationalism, and even religion, must be understood in relation to such phenomenon as colonialism, imperialism, the political economy of any society, and in general in relation to the issue of the control of and access to resources. In short, all identities must be viewed in relation to the state, to patterns of ownership and power, to the relations of production, as well as to geography, and history.

There are other theorists that have criticised the economistic nature of some, particularly Marxist, theories of nationalism, as well as the contradictions of primordialist and modernist theories of nationalism (Dexter 1997). Debray is not the only theorist to have recognised the similarities between nationalism and other social phenomena, such as the institutions and identities of kinship (Anderson 1983). Whilst there has been a general tendency to over-emphasise economic factors in relation to the national question, the issue of resources and access and control of these is obviously central to the national question, since identities are strategic precisely in relation to such resources. The classical Marxist critique of religion, upon which much of Marxist theory is premised, has other weaknesses which are also an aspect of the Marxist theory of the national question, which Debray has criticised. The most important weakness pointed out by Debray is that Marxist theory regards religious belief as false consciousness. This view does not recognise the fact that religious belief is a product of social organisation, that is, the collective. Religion is therefore effective not simply because people believe in a god, but because it organises

them to do so. In other words, the religious nature of our existence enables belief precisely because it creates identity.

Using the tools Debray's thesis creates for us, the collective identities that prevail in the Western Cape can be considered against the background of the history of the Western Cape and the dominant features of that history. Any historical process has to be considered in terms of the parameters of space and time that are essential to that history, and also by those parameters set by the proponents of particular historical views. For the purposes of argument, the history of the Western Cape can be divided into a number of periods or organising projects; the pre-colonial period, the colonial and imperial/resistance period, the apartheid/resistance period, and the transition/liberation period. These processes and experiences organised, and still organise in some respects, social relationships in various ways; patriarchal that is father and mother/family and male—female, ruler and subject, servant and master, conqueror and conquered, baas and kaffir/hottentot, Black and White, worker and boss, as well as many others. The most recent experiences are those which inform identities in an obvious way, but they are not necessarily the only, or even the strongest factor that needs to be considered.

In Debray's view, identity is forged in and through the historical process of organisation. The particular identities formed may therefore wax or wane, may even be defeated in the sense of being subordinated to a new or different organising project, but the residual aspects of an identity may linger on for some time. Our country has a number of examples that prove this point. The particular identities and polarities that have existed or remain in the Western Cape often lie beneath the surface of what is articulated. Some are more visible and expressed explicitly. Obviously, these processes are both an aspect of and a microcosm of the national and international processes that inform history, as well as being a set of processes and relationships in their own right. We should therefore not see the experiences in any part of the world as unique or outside of history,

but they are distinct experiences with their own character, features, and of course, subjects.

It seems obvious, but needs to be said, that the need for resources to survive and the mortality of people in the Western Cape is as much a fact as it is for all human beings. The people of the Western Cape are therefore not immune from the psychological processes that Debray argues are a feature of human social existence, arising from human mortality, fragility, and general human insecurity. The biology and psychology of people in the Western Cape, at the level that Debray believes these are crucial determinants of identity, is the same as anywhere in the world. The geography and territory are not however, and neither is the history. Within the relationship between these three aspects of social existence lies the key to understanding the question of identity in the Western Cape.

The fact that the Western Cape is the southern most tip of Africa certainly places it in a spatial location that tempts many people to see themselves as outside of Africa. Life on the periphery has its own comforts, however illusory these may be. The extent to which pre-colonial society in this geographical area were affected by this spatial location is obviously a matter of speculation, but it would be reasonable to hazard a guess that the general expression of difference which is a common feature of all communities was amplified even in that period. Even if that were proved to be a false hypothesis or an unimportant factor, the geographical position of the Cape certainly made it the strategic focal point of the colonial encounter. It was here that the violence, brutality, the upheaval, and subsequent pattern of exploitative and oppositional relationships which were to remain a central feature of our society, and which continue even today, were first configured (Chidester 1996).

It is arguably the case that the institution of slavery existed in the Cape to an extent unequalled in any other part of what is now South Africa. Besides this, the degree of integration between indigenous people, colonisers, slaves, and immigrants was also more ad-

vanced. The apartheid era arrested this integration process and even began to reverse it, but the diversity of people in the numbers that were a feature of life in the southern tip of the continent were never matched in other parts of what is today South Africa, except in the later movement of people into urban, industrial areas with the advent of the gold mining industry and the subsequent rise of manufacturing industry. All of these later processes of urbanisation took place within the segregationist/apartheid framework, so that integration was limited to people of indigenous identities and those who were the poorer sections of the people who were identified as being mixed-race and later officially classified as Coloured by the colonialists and the apartheid regime.

During the colonial, imperial era, which was also an era of resistance, the identities officially expressed were predominantly those configured by the relationships of the conquered and the conqueror, or even determined solely by the conqueror. The military superiority of the Dutch and English settlers and colonial authorities ensured that the identities of all others, indigenous people, slaves, those of mixed race were expressed officially by the victor. But the extent to which Zulu, Xhosa, and other indigenous people actually saw themselves as 'tribes', 'clans' or 'ethnic' groups is debatable. The notion of 'a people' functions as, and approximates as closely to a national identity, as to any of these other categories, if not more closely.

Colonial settlers in the Cape had their own institutions of government that later extended the franchise to all property owners, including those who were Black. But the province was still ruled by those who saw themselves either as English or Dutch, and later, by those who saw themselves as White Afrikaners, and was populated together with the various remaining indigenous people, the descendants of slaves, and others of so-called mixed race. In many instances these identities were intertwined.

It is the period of official segregation of perceived racial groups and later apartheid, which essentially begins at the time of the

colonialist victory over the last standing armies of indigenous people, that saw these official identities configured in a manner that is recognisable today. The patterns of property ownership and politico-military power determined in the colonial conquest to all intents and purposes excluded the descendants of the indigenous people and the vast majority of the descendants of slaves, except as workers and servants. The institutions of slavery, private property, and patriarchy certainly ensured that the numbers of people of so-called mixed race parentage was already significant. But already at the triumph of the White Afrikaner nationalist project, new identities were being forged through the creation of the national liberation movement in the form of the ANC, whose founding statements sought to end tribalism and create, at that point, a common South African identity amongst the indigenous people. In the then Cape identities were still defined by the prevailing predominant relationship, that of White, colonial master on the one hand and Black subject on the other. The rise of Afrikaner nationalism, a project derived from the experiences of the colonial settlers and their descendants and the struggle between these settlers and the colonial powers, between the different colonial powers, and significantly from the organised formations of Afrikaans speaking people who were later to be officially classified as Coloured, were the most significant factors affecting the creation of collective identities in this part of the country. (O'Meara 1996). By the time the narrow, racist national projected succeeded in gaining political power through the unrepresentative and illegitimate institutions of government, there were a number of clearly identifiable identities of people in this part of the country. But the period of the union of the colonies and independent republics and the response of the African people via the national liberation movement in the context of urbanisation and industrialisation, and later, the departure of the British as colonial authority, ensured that the majority of people had already begun to see themselves as South Africans.

The state may have later defined people as White, Coloured,

Indian, and Bantu/Black/African under apartheid, but the liberation movement allowed all to begin to see themselves as South African. The period of our history that culminated in mass defiance of the official definition of identities reached an unprecedented level in the 1980s. Through organisations such as trade unions, the UDF and in underground and exiled structures of the ANC, SACTU, and SACP, people lived their lives as South Africans in a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic organisation. This new, progressive national identity South Africans are even now beginning to take for granted, was being demarcated in the process of the national democratic revolution. Of course, the democratic breakthrough of 1994 was a significant advance for this project, but there is no immediate end to the process of national identity formation once these have been formalised in recognised institutions and relationships.

As we move through the transition the key issue is to define an identity as South Africans, that which locates us all within Africa and that takes account of our history. Throughout this process the rulers, authorities, and the official discourse has defined the Whites and descendants of indigenous inhabitants that have not had their entire language, culture, and social existence annihilated, fairly easily. There was little ambiguity in these categories. But those who were and are of so-called mixed-race, whose identity has often been defined on the periphery, as being somewhere between the oppressors and oppressed, as somewhere on the second rung of the ladder of exploitation and therefore as labour competitor, or whose precursor identities were wiped out in the genocide of colonialism, has presented a conundrum to the oppressors, the oppressed, within the descendants of these communities themselves, and for political activists and politicians who seek to mobilise people in contemporary society.

The period of liberation, the transition we are living through, is obviously one that gives rise to many contradictions. It is no surprise therefore that we find remnants of past identities, clashes between the old and the new, even embryonic social identities, in

short a general climate of effervesence in relation to social identities that is unprecedented in the last half a century. Why is this so and what are we to make of it? The space given by the transition to democracy has allowed the historical identities to flourish. But the crux of Debray's theory is sobering. These identities are what remains of past organising projects. Thus Xhosa, Khoi, White, Coloured, and even Black are identities of already failed, defeated, and even archaic projects. This does not mean they will simply fade away. In themselves they are a resource for the various proponents of political positions and theories to utilise to further their own ambitions. But the dominant project is one that is steadily eroding these and will eventually, eclipse them.

This project is the national democratic revolution, within which the contest for the definition of a non-racial, non-sexist, working class biased national identity is being fought. To talk of ethnic, racial, religious and other categories in a manner which suggests they are permanent, natural, eternal, or based on some biological or physical characteristics is to miss the point. It is to mistake the effect for the cause. This revolutionary project must of course express itself in terms of the past. Like all such projects, the birth of this nation is often expressed as a return to an original, and even ideal state. In this respect the category of African is somewhat ambiguous, as are many of the claims to African philosophy, beliefs, culture, and religion. But these are no more or less ambiguous than the claims to European or any other identities.

The demographics of the Western Cape is a significant factor that makes the issue of Coloured identities so controversial, since the confusion around Coloured identity is not unique to this part of the country. The issue has been so hotly contested in this part of the country because of the fact that those people whose identity was forged as a range of identities that were defined as not white, not black, not strictly African, not European, and often not Christian, but a lived, social reality nonetheless, involves the majority of people in the Western Cape. Aside from the experiences of Coloured

people and other formerly oppressed minorities in our country, there are international experiences of this phenomenon. What is distinct about the lived experience of Coloured people in the Western Cape, and in South Africa in general, is not only the diversity of languages, culture, and religions that make up the totality of this heterogeneous group of people. It is also a fact that the proponents of apartheid specifically sought to divide these people into sections of an over-arching category of Malay/Cape/Griqua/Baster/other Coloured people, and then later attempted to reverse this process and forge a common Coloured identity.

It is well documented that people who are now referred to as Coloured are the descendants of both the oppressor and oppressed. Under the apartheid project the National Party cynically mobilised such people away from an inclusive African identity, towards the Eurocentric identity of the oppressor. This was done through a combination of coercion, persuasion, and later by even attempting to bribe such communities, but also through managing the spatial and historical aspects of peoples lives. Thus Coloured townships were created, with their own schools, hospitals, churches, and sports teams.

This attempt to organise such communities in this way has been partially successful. Playing on the superficial differences of colour of skin, curliness of hair, but also cultural traditions, ways of eating, drinking, talking, and singing, the National Party (NP) regime was able to reinforce existing differences among people. It even created new senses of difference and amplified them by the physical separation of those classified as Coloured people. This difference is based not on any single previously defined national or ethnic identity, but on a complex matrix of multiple identities that became something of a refuge from being African/Black. To be African/Black in that society was, and in many respects still is, equal to certain poverty, misery, and even complete dispossession. The apartheid project did all of this but never allowed such people to be part of the ruling, White, Afrikaner nation. It is important to note that this strategy has its origins in the colonial system of the classification and ad-

ministration of its indigenous subjects.

What shocked most progressive people in the Western Cape was the practical refutation of the much-believed truth that oppressed people had been united against apartheid and the NP. The result of the 1994 election in the Western Cape put paid to this myth. The NP put in place a counter strategy to the New Labour Movement in the dying days of apartheid which sought to close the gap or difference between Coloured and White people. The organisational project was to attempt to break down the excesses of segregationist practices and to attempt to forge a common identity against the ANC. As Ebrahim Rasool, has pointed out, this essentially amounted to an attempt to create, reinforce, manipulate and manage the fears of a national minority in the context where they formed a regional majority (Rasool 1995).

But such a strategy, while it may be able to delay the inevitable formation of a common national identity, is doomed to fail. It is ahistorical and astrategic. The dominant trend of organisation in our society has been through the ANC led Alliance, which has not only succeeded in becoming the largest and most powerful political organisation, but which has also successfully managed to capture and has begun to transform state power. This process has also begun to affect the lived social existence and daily experiences of people. The new manifestations of the sacred aspects of the nation, the new symbols of the nation, the flag, two national anthems, some good sports teams, and a President who is also a founding father that almost everyone loves, means that identities are still in flux. It is apparent from Debray's thesis that the sacred discourse of the national project sets the parameters within which anyone or any collectives must define themselves. To live in South Africa is to partake in the new patriotism, is even to declare oneself to be against racism. As a South African one needs to atone for the sins of the past, to love the President, or else be considered to be non-South African and even anti-South African.

Attempts to arrest Coloured identity developing, through the

launching of quasi-nationalist projects, such as those of the Kleurling Weerstands Beweging and even the NP, ignore the fact that our country's institutions, the official discourse, and the symbols of the new South Africa are very powerful. They move people away from narrow nationalism and ethnicity, towards a common, broad, non-racial, non-sexist, inclusive African identity. Of course for this project to succeed it must also deal with the unemployment, poverty, landlessness, and the extreme disparities of wealth and access to resources that are as much features of a South African identity as the Bafana Bafana national soccer team is. But the mistake some theorists of the national question make is to ignore the organisational base that is at the centre of the new nation.

What Debray argues is essential for us to grasp in the Western Cape. There are survivals of past identities. We can identify ourselves as White, African, Coloured, Brown, and Black. But the sacred nature of collective identities, which calls on us to become South Africans, does so in the context of a framework that is anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-working-class, and biased towards the poor. The structural nature of the determination of these identities also persuades us, cajoles us, attempts to bribe us, and ultimately must force us, to accept that we are African, even if only geographically, and certainly South African. But these aspects of the identity that South Africans share are now central to that identity. The remains of the past can be called upon in times of emergency, when access to resources are threatened, when a community, whether Coloured, White or Black/African, is made to feel under siege. But since that is not happening to any identifiable group in a significant or systematic way, what can any counter identity be organised against and through ? There is nothing that can be done within the legal opportunities that exist, except perhaps if the ANC does not begin to address the issues of social transformation. Likewise there is no significant or serious opposition to the national liberation movement and the nation-building project. Those who try to define themselves in opposition to the ANC's vision of the nation, literally

define themselves out of the nation, out of the future, and experience the sacred nature of the national question directly. Hence the disarray experienced by our political opponents.

In essence what Debray's theory shows is that there may have been Africans, Coloureds, Indians, and Whites in pre-democratic South Africa, but these categories will fade or be reinterpreted as we all become South African, and African in the continental sense of the word. Of course the residual identities will remain and sink below the surface, but they will be of no significant value against a progressive, working-class biased and led, progressively gendered national project. The democratic breakthrough presented a new sacred time and new sacred space to all South Africans. No doubt the spatial location of the Western Cape will give this experience a particular flavour, as has always been the case, but the way in which identities are imagined, perceived, and practically experienced necessitates our collective inclusion in the new South Africa. We may take longer to come 'on board', but we have no other option as people in the Western Cape to be part of the new South Africa.

This means that there can be no harm in rediscovering history, the past that shaped our individual and collective presents. Whether people rediscover their Khoi, San (if those are the names that indigenous people in this part of the country gave themselves) Malay, Dutch identities, or their Muslim, Christian, and African religion is not a matter to fear. Because these will all be under the overarching non-racial, non-sexist, and already significantly African identity in our new democracy, there is no strategic value in this other than to position people within that new configuration. The error of some theorists is to elevate this renaissance to the level of the nation-building project itself. These identities belong to a time past and were organised around centres that no longer exist. Like White Afrikaner and English identities, the identities of Coloured people are the remains of the past lived experience of people. They are being slowly, but systematically, and even deliberately demystified, deconstructed, reconstructed and integrated as we all are in the

transformation of our country.

The most powerful example of the new South African identity was evident in the depth of the resonance, the moving and eloquent declaration of this multiple, multi-faceted, complex, historically located, and self-conscious identity made by the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, on the occasion of the adoption of the new constitution on 8 May 1996. Is there anyone who is South African who can say they are not of the European, Malay, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Boer, Indian, Chinese ancestry that allowed the Deputy President to make the claim of being an African in South Africa? The history of the Western Cape, the space and time within which identities such as White, Coloured, African, and Indian were forged was above all else, an African space and time. There is nothing un-South African in these identities, but we should remember they are not the alternative to being a South African.

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