

SOCIETY AND THE COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS

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Can the South African state, understood as a liberal democratic constitutional state, recognise the political significance of the collective colonial unconscious? Can it build people-centred development in ways that address the marginalised in all material aspects, including consciousness?

There is much to celebrate twenty years into democracy, as millions of marginalised South Africans have gained access to social services and welfare that they never had before. Nevertheless, the democratic transition has not succeeded in eradicating the legacy of colonialism, apartheid and dispossession.

Building a capable developmental state in South Africa, in line with the vision outlined in the National Development Plan: A Vision for 2030 (NDP), is intimately linked with the construction of good governance through a popular democratic, people-centred dispensation. Achieving a capable developmental state is therefore not a technical exercise in state and good governance formation. *Rather it requires us to rethink the relationship between state and society.* The state includes the executive, bureaucracy (public administration), parliament and the judiciary. All these branches of the state establish a range of institutions, which give rise to complex webs of relationships and interactions, binding the branches of the state and the people to the state.

COLLECTIVE COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS

South Africa can be viewed as a “colonial unconscious” society,



The concept of the colonial unconscious helps us to understand how the colonial and apartheid construction of “African society” unconsciously shapes racist and class-based understandings of uneven development, social inequality, ethics and corruption.

to use Frantz Fanon's concept, as adopted by Peter Hudson (2012). The concept provides an explanation for the way that racist colonial ideology, underpinned by socio-economic relations of domination and subordination, remains deeply entrenched in the postcolonial period. This mentality uses the emergence of formal bourgeois-democratic individual rights and equality before the law to repudiate a history of

collective oppression and exploitation and assume that “the playing fields have been levelled” through the political settlement that ended apartheid.

This helps us understand why South Africans in general and whites in particular only look towards the future without reflecting on the past. Our tendency to act in ways that are determined and restricted by an unconscious colonial worldview also narrows the space to address the gross inequities of the present. In practice, this means that our ability to address poverty and unemployment is constrained by the need to reassure existing vested interests – which were originally created by colonialism, reproduced by apartheid, and reproduced again by the resolution of the national question in the form of a Rainbow Nation of “pure (non-racial) citizens” (Hudson 2012, 6) – in the absence of substantive redistribution and socio-economic inclusion.

Hudson poses fundamental questions that we tend to shy away from: Can the South African state, understood as a liberal democratic constitutional state, recognise the political significance of the collective colonial unconscious? Can it build people-centred development in ways that address the marginalised in all material aspects, including consciousness?

The colonial unconscious calls for us to “let bygones be bygones”, but to do so would deny the national history that has shaped who we are today. It is essential to recognise the long tradition of extra-economic coercion and ultra-exploitation by the apartheid state and its various colonial predecessors (including those of the Boer Republics). It is essential to recognise that the state apparatus has always been used to facilitate multiple forms of capital accumulation, often in deviant, outrageous ways. This has laid the foundation for the various

problematic institutional practices and cultures that we now need to address. The current racist narrative of corruption as a post-apartheid phenomenon is offensive and hugely frustrating.

At the same time, this history contains lessons on the use of the state to empower a particular segment of the population as well as the construction of effective developmental institutions. *It is important to acknowledge the legitimate use of the state to facilitate empowered forms of accumulation to redress the colonial and apartheid imbalances.*

By and large, people who are colonised lack access to the means of accumulation. The postcolonial state became a key vehicle to address this legacy. Developing nations have thus had to grapple with the forms of accumulation that arise and the emerging combination of political and economic power. This is what makes *autonomous development* so critical: policy interventions need to serve the “public good” as opposed to individual (vested) interests.

SHIFTING DISCOURSE

In the week leading up to the 104th anniversary celebrations of the African National Congress (ANC) in January 2016, a number of South Africans, mainly white, were admonished for racial outbursts on social media. The January 8 statement of the ANC’s National Executive Committee (NEC) affirmed the ongoing need to fight racism: “We have travelled a long way to finding each other as South Africans. The ANC calls on people of this country to work together and defeat the demons of racialism and tribalism” (African National Congress 2016).

Another major theme of the NEC statement was the need to accelerate land reform. Noting that a new growth path required “a fundamental break with the ownership patterns of the past”, it described the dispossession



Frantz Fanon (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Frantz_Fanon.jpg)



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of indigenous black people from their land as a “centuries-long injustice” (ibid.). At other events that weekend, President Jacob Zuma paraphrased Sol Plaatje, the ANC’s first general-secretary, on the 1913 Native Lands Act, saying, “When we slept we had land >>

and when we woke up we had nothing. We were worse than slaves”¹, and declared that the source of poverty, inequality and unemployment was land which had been “taken, not bought, stolen. But the government of the people has to buy it back, as if it was sold at one point” (SABC 2016, 0:32–0:45).

This is an important discursive shift that confronts the colonial unconscious head on. Further questions need to be posed about mineral rights in the context of radical economic transformation and the impact of old order property rights on natural resource ownership and control. Too often, discussion on the role of the state conflates “the state” with “government and the executive” and fails to appreciate the role of parliament and the judiciary in social transformation. Realising the socio-economic rights guaranteed by the Constitution requires complex legislation that can only be successfully formulated and implemented if the judiciary and parliament play an active role. The best legal and parliamentary minds need to come together to determine how to best develop and execute transformative legislation to deal *inter alia* with old order land and mineral rights.

Similarly, “good governance” frequently pertains only to the ethics of the executive and public servants and the independence – as opposed to the *interdependence* – of institutions of state. The institutional relationships between the state, the people and the networks that bind them together are minimised in an analysis that focuses solely on the failures of government implementation. People-centred governance, which is a constitutional imperative, remains an elusive value and practice for the public service, state- and public-owned companies and local government. Although substantially transformed in terms of composition and frameworks, service-

delivery institutions have failed to demonstrate the agility required to drive the agenda of a capable developmental state as envisaged by the NDP.

The post-apartheid state has been challenged to skew the provision of state services to the people who need them most, while minimising opportunities for corruption. The colonial unconscious, however, casts doubt on affirmative efforts to redress the past, as well as the legitimate use



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of procurement for socio-economic transformation and empowerment.

Given that capital accumulation in South Africa explicitly favoured the white minority, it is appropriate that the state now use its policy instruments and purchasing power to open up new channels for the black majority. Nevertheless, the current approach to economic development is diffused, fragmented, and has generated disappointing growth in both composition and magnitude. Black South Africans need real accumulation pathways outside of a state connection, and more legitimate pathways to use state procurement as a lever without patronage.

Current options for wealth creation reproduce historical patterns – and so far there has been little genuine empowerment or innovative strategies for black capital accumulation beyond a parasitic comprador form. Local procurement through supply-chain management, which is a key lever for economic transformation, has become highly vulnerable to corruption. If corruption is to be curtailed, and the forces of economic dynamism harnessed in a way that favours emerging black capital, it is essential to establish clean, value-for-money supply-chain systems.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGJAMS

One key to successful developmental states has been an “embeddedness” that binds the state and society together through networks that build the capabilities required to transform material conditions. Through innovative institutional reform, maximising the state’s resources and combining these with both private and civil-society innovation, the collective focus of the state and the people has led to dramatic upturns in economic growth rates and development.

South Africa’s public sector is trapped in a bureaucratic logic that prioritises mandates and turf over collective leadership and action. Policy goals and outcomes have now been set that require new ways of working beyond the silos. Institutionally, the National Planning Commission and the department of planning, monitoring and evaluation (DPME) have been created at the centre of government to establish new ways of working, and to coordinate a collective approach to priority areas that would pave the way for socio-economic transformation and development.

The theories, processes and practices to drive this collective effort have only partially been identified, but countless institutional monitoring

and evaluation (M&E) structures and committee meetings stifle their implementation. Rather than a discipline that promotes empowerment and changes peoples' lives, the "logical framework" approach to institutional development has become a set of M&E practices with a focus on reporting, encouraging compliance rather than learning, and geared towards targets yet unsure how they relate to particular outcomes. The Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) – the first five-year plan of the NDP – is enmeshed within these processes and has become subject to the "tyranny of the logframe".

Strategies to develop the state's human and institutional capabilities have been formulated, but quality learning remains elusive and implementation has been unsuccessful. The public service has been fragmented within government and its tasks outsourced to consultants, under the influence of new public management (NPM) systems that emphasise alternative institutions of service delivery. In many instances, these consultants are less capable than those who have contracted them, but institutional confidence in internal capacity has been substantially eroded.

BREAK WITH POSTCOLONIAL MODELS

The 2008 financial crisis saw the state return to its key role in resolving societal challenges in both developed and developing countries. Nevertheless, governments across the globe appear unable to address complex contemporary challenges, especially when they have to negotiate rather than impose solutions.

African states and governments must break with postcolonial models. The African Union's Vision 2063 identifies capable developmental states as essential for Africa to resolve its key challenges of poverty, inequality,



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economic development, governance, peace and security, and environmental degradation. States and governments have strong leadership roles to play. This may be far more important than growing large state apparatuses for control and domination.

The "wicked" nature of many current governance challenges means that collaboration and trans-disciplinarity – traditionally government and public administration's weakest areas – are what are most needed. Successful governance requires flexible institutions and administrative apparatuses capable of implementing people-centred developmental programmes and interventions.

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how the colonial and apartheid construction of "African society" unconsciously shapes racist and class-based understandings of uneven development, social inequality, ethics and corruption. With its foreshortened view of history and the belief that postcolonial states are inexorably captured by corrupt forces hell-bent on self-enrichment, it also obfuscates the need to see ethical, transparent affirmative procurement as the key lever for broad-based black economic empowerment.

In real terms, many contemporary states see citizens, citizen engagement and institutions of business and civil society as threats or resources rather than as actors who may retard or advance the socio-economic transformation agenda. The innovative potential of building, consolidating and developing the networks through which the state may embed itself in society is not well understood, but it may hold the key to socio-economic transformation. [NA](#)

NOTES

This is an edited extract from the author's chapter in a major study on beneficiation and value addition conducted by the Institute for African Alternatives for the United Nations Economic Commission of Africa (forthcoming).

1. Referring to the introduction of the 1913 Natives Land Act, Plaatje wrote: "Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually, a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth." *Native Life in South Africa*, 1915)

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