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The psycho-social healing of a nation: A few pointers: Response to Van der Watt

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1   Introduction

Van der Watt's analysis of the wounded nature of Botshabelo's society is sobering. Her description, of course, speaks to more than Botshabelo. Effectively, Botshabelo functions as a metaphor for current South Africa. That yearning for a place to call home, a place to provide security, dignity, the right to the city and a certainty of belonging, is the yearning of South Africa. This problem is what Lefebvre refers to as habitation (see chapter 1). Similarly, the disappointment and frustration when the promised 'place of refuge' turned out to be far less than perfect is as real in the country as in Botshabelo. Yet, the dislocation of Botshabelo from Bloemfontein remains a prime example of dislocation under apartheid rule.

The question is how to deal with the psycho-social woundedness of society linked to the exclusion of the right to the city. Today, much of our public discourse focuses on our nation's economic and political frailties. The more uncomfortable truth is the persistence of a psycho-social malaise: anger, disconnection, dysfunctionality, depression and, ultimately, violence. How do you process the psycho-social healing of a nation following years of apartheid and colonial rule? How do you provide post-traumatic stress therapy sessions to millions of people? How do you break the chain of the generational transfer of trauma? The reality is that the elusiveness of the right to the city will be felt for generations to come.

There is no single, definitive answer to these questions, nor is this the space for an in-depth discussion. At best, we should recognise three pointers that will be discussed in more detail.

2   The systemic nature of the superiority-inferiority syndrome

South Africa is a product of almost four centuries of European colonialism. The Dutch version was straightforward – it was driven by the primacy of the economic interests of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC). The British version was more complex. The need to dominate was not only driven by greed but was sanctioned by social Darwinism – 'the white man's burden', as Rudyard Kipling[1] expressed it in his poem written with the objective to support America's war of 1899 to 1902 to colonise the Philippines.[2] Those on top of the scale of the evolution of humankind must carry the burden to 'take care' of those lower down. Colonisation implemented in this frame of mind assumed the superiority of whites in every important transaction or interaction. During the apartheid era, this superiority was expressed and applied in brutally brazen ways – as the treatment of farm workers demonstrated. Van der Watt is correct in stating that these states of superiority and inferiority had been deeply internalised. They have become ingrained in the very psyche of our society and all its social systems.

The instruments for transforming this situation, as negotiated during the transition period, were the Constitution of South Africa, the Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Commission and the Public Protector. All these institutions were consciously designed to transform and regulate relationships in the new South Africa according to the principles of equality and dignity. The objective was to prohibit any further expression of such racism. Furthermore, it intended to protect citizens against humiliation and exploitation by fellow citizens and the state. The expressed promise of the new Constitution was the complete transformation of South Africa's superiority-inferiority complex by guaranteeing the basic human rights of all and guaranteeing people in the broader sense (non-legal) the right to the city. Has this grand project failed?

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1   A Kipling 'The white man's burden' (1899), http://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/11whitemanburden.pdf (accessed 16 January 2023).
2   S Schama *The American future. A history* (2008) 117.

The answer is neither yes nor no. There certainly is reason for concern,[3] but it is simply too early to tell. It is more important to appreciate the complex nature of this transformation and to realise that the struggle is still ongoing. The literature on systemic transformation is clear about the tenacity of societal systems' resistance to change. Acemoglu and Robinson,[4] in their 15 years research project on what made nations fail, emphasised this tenacity and, concomitantly, the importance of 'disruptors'. These were events that, at the time, might even have seemed inconsequential but that disrupted the system's normal functioning. Such a shift would initiate major systemic changes down the line. There can be no denying that the Constitution of 1996 was a major disruptor of the colonial psycho-social system.

Furthermore, it is important that the Constitution and its institutions continue to enjoy the support of the majority of South Africans to this day. The 2021 survey of the Reconciliation Barometer of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)[5] (the longest-running public opinion survey of its kind anywhere in the world) found that the Constitutional Court ranked sixth as the most trusted institution in the country. Thirty-eight per cent of their survey sample indicated strong trust, while for 27 per cent, the trust was 'somewhat'. The institutions that scored higher than the Constitutional Court were the South African Broadcasting Corporation, first, then the South African Revenue Service, the Hawks (the South African Police Services' Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation), the President and religious leaders. The negative side to this finding was that 30 per cent of the sample expressed little trust in the Constitutional Court, with 5 per cent giving no opinion.[6] Of greater concern is that even a prominent cabinet member, Lindiwe Sisulu,[7] voiced strong support for this dissenting group. However, these voices

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3   K Bentley, L Nathan & R Calland (eds) *Falls the shadow. Between the promise and the reality of the South African Constitution* (2013).
4   D Acemoglu & JA Robinson *Why nations fail. The origins of power, prosperity and poverty* (2012); D Acemoglu & JA Robinson *The narrow corridor. States, societies, and the fate of liberty* (2019).
5   M Moosa *SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey 2021 Report* (2021).
6   Moosa (n 5) 31-33.
7   L Sisulu 'Who's law is it anyway?' *Mail & Guardian* 8 January 2022, https://mg.co.za/opinion/2022-01-08-lindiwe-sisulu-whose-law-is-it-anyway/ (accessed 15 January 2021).

(still) represent a minority. Furthermore, the legal system as a whole enjoyed more trust than political parties and Parliament.

The role that the Public Protector (Thuli Madonsela), the Zondo Commission and – increasingly – the Investigation Directorate and the National Prosecuting Authority played in unmasking and prosecuting state capture figures further underscored the 'disruptive' nature of these institutions – disrupting, in this case, patterns of predatory elite formation that would have been detrimental to the rights and dignity of the poor. At the same time, we all understand that it could have gone the other way.

The struggle, therefore, continues.

3   The interface between state and society

One of the most poignant aspects of the interviews with Botshabelo's residents is their experience of the current state's indifference and haughtiness. The struggle to obtain critical documents, such as title deeds, which could prove ownership of their houses (their need for habitation), against the background of their desperate need for a home, is particularly damaging. It re-infects the wounds caused by the contempt and disregard that was their daily bread under apartheid. Van der Watt made a critically important point when she stated that 'fair treatment and procedures are a more pervasive concern for most people than fair outcomes. Procedural justice affirms to people that politeness, respect, and dignity are their due.' The absence of procedural justice reinforces the message that, in the eyes of the state, they are second-hand citizens.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated Botshabelo phenomenon but a country-wide frustration that, over the years, had found its clearest expression in the so-called 'service delivery protests'. These protests have become a regular phenomenon of the 'new South Africa'. The Social Change Research Unit at the University of Johannesburg reported more than a thousand protests that turned violent per annum for the years 2009 to 2012.[8] From 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021, 900 incidents took place – according to an answer of the Minister of Police to Parliament

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8   P Alexander 'Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests – A preliminary analysis' (2010) 123 *Review of African Political Economy* 25.

in April 2021.[9] The specific objectives of each 'toyi-toyi' differ, but the main underlying narrative is frustration with the local government for its failure to deliver basic services.

These protests, overall, are not irrational. They often occur following a history of attempts by citizens to engage the state to get satisfactory responses from them. They can be avoided. Gould[10] wrote a case study demonstrating that prevention of protest action is possible and that quick, respectful responses by local government can offset the damage of failed service delivery. Sadly, the relationship between elected officials and communities, overall, is weak. A possible explanation for this situation is the combination of cadre deployment and the used proportional representation model. These measures effectively strengthen the central control of party leadership at the cost of effective local representation.[11] In other words, the priorities of elected local leaders are to satisfy party leaders rather than the interests of the voters, hence their significant absence from these protests and from efforts to prevent or resolve them.

When corruption is added to the already potent mix of high community expectations, low political support and bureaucratic indifference, the result is the effective collapse of representative local government. With that, one of the most important instruments to restore the dignity and security of the former victims of colonialism and apartheid has become blunt.

The overall repair of local governance, therefore, is a precondition to the restoration of the dignity and security of people.

4   Personal and community relations

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the chapter is the description of fatalism expressed by some of the interviewees. This fatalism was

9   G Martin '900 service delivery protests in South Africa over six months' (2021), https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/900-service-delivery-protests-in-south-africa-over-six-months/ (accessed 16 January 2023).

10   C Gould 'Lessons in preventing violent protest in South Africa. Good communication and respectful responses to local service delivery problems can prevent anger and violence' (2021), https://issafrica.org/crimehub/iss-today/lessons-in-preventing-violent-protest-in-south-africa (accessed 16 January 2023).

11   S Booysen 'With the ballot and the brick. The politics of attaining service delivery' (2007) 7 *Progress in Development Studies* 21; A Odendaal 'South Africa's incomplete peace' in OP Richmond, S Pogodda & J Ramović (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of disciplinary and regional approaches to peace* (2016) 287.

portrayed as the end product of woundedness; the final outcome of sustained experiences of powerlessness in an unfair and bewildering context. The fatalism not only related to individuals' powerlessness in the face of larger political realities, but to intra-personal relations in families and within the community.

The opposite of fatalism is what Wood[12] called 'pleasure in agency'. She explained the concept as 'the positive affect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention'.[13] This pleasure in agency is an important ingredient of the ointment for healing the wounds.

The transformation of fatalism into agency is the third key approach when seeking to heal the woundedness of a society. It obviously is a very complex matter, more so because remedial action cannot be imported or mechanically imposed; it must be 'home-grown'. In the context of this discussion, the transformation needed is that of the race-determined superiority-inferiority social system that lies at the heart of the complex South African society. It is a transformation that must take root at personal and community levels.

In his theory of conflict transformation, Lederach[14] emphasised the centrality of relationships in the transformation of complex socio-political systems. Change does not happen in a mechanical or technocratic manner; rather, it is enabled by shifts within relationships. The question, therefore, is what relational shifts are taking place in South African society and how these impact on the healing of the wound.

Three findings of the 2021 Reconciliation Barometer are important in this respect. The first is that South Africans across the spectrum strongly identify with the concept of South African nationhood. People are happy and proud to belong to this diverse nation. Put differently, most South Africans do not want to chase specific South African groups into the sea. This sentiment has in fact grown over the past years from 61 per cent in 2007 to 68 per cent in 2021.[15] Second, inequality is the greatest perceived stumbling block to reconciliation. Inequality is

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12   EJ Wood *Insurgent collective action and civil war in El Salvador* (2003).
13   Wood (n 12) 8.
14   JP Lederach *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies* (1997) 23-35.
15   Moosa (n 5) 39-43.

squarely blamed on the colonial and apartheid past.[16] Its persistence, by implication, is seen as a continuation of that past or as a sluggishness by the government, business and the farming community to deal with it.

The third finding is particularly relevant. Seventy-two per cent of the sample stated that ordinary South Africans could only rely on one another rather than on political elites.[17] This sentiment partly reflects the low level of trust in political elites. Sixty-nine per cent felt that the political elites were not to be trusted. However, this conviction may have deeper roots than the present situation, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s. It suited the image of the African National Congress (ANC) at the time to portray itself as the sole liberator of South Africa. However, the internal resistance to apartheid rule, as led by the United Democratic Front (UDF), had been an indispensable factor in bringing the government to the negotiation table. The UDF was not a top-down structure but a collective of already existing community structures across the country. At national level, the UDF provided coordination and a national voice to the movement, but it was never able to direct or control community initiatives. The movement was locally owned and driven[18] and a clear expression of agency and activism at grassroots levels.

This dynamic has been visible in the various community protest actions of the past two decades. It is, increasingly, the same dynamic that works for reconciliation. Respondents to the survey expressed that the reconciliation process should be defined and initiated primarily by citizens, by a citizen-led approach. South Africans, in other words, want to play an active role in reconciliation and do not necessarily want the government or political parties to lead this process. They want to do it themselves. This position is influenced by their understanding of reconciliation as an act of forgiveness, which is a personal and not a legalised act.

The press is increasingly picking up on local initiatives to reach out, fix and rebuild what has been broken.[19] Such demonstrations of agency

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16   Moosa (n 5) 34-36.
17   As above.
18   K von Holdt and others *The smoke that calls. Insurgent citizenship, collective violence and the struggle for a place in the new South Africa* (2011).
19   SA People News 'Harrismith's water heroes fixing the town one selfless act at a time' (2021), https://www.sapeople.com/2020/01/19/harrismiths-water-heroes-fixing-the-town-one-selfless-act-at-a-time/ (accessed 18 January 2023); B Lindeque 'Senekal continue to inspire SA by working together to heal their town!'

built on transformed relationships are highly meaningful. They counter the drift towards a deepening pessimism and, with that, a revived racist fatalism.

5   Conclusion

Acemoglu and Robinson[20] spoke of the 'narrow corridor' which is the pathway that leads nations from being failures to successes. This narrow corridor is the space between, on the one hand, a despotic state and, on the other, an absent or failed state. It is the space of the 'shackled Leviathan' – a strong state, yet subservient to the people. The South African experience thus far has posited two other variants: a white Leviathan (the state that belonged exclusively to white interests) and a captured Leviathan (a state that served the greed of a very small elite). We have, to our collective credit, rejected these. We need a state that is strong, meaning a state that can make *and implement* decisions. Yet, we need a state that respects the Constitution and its expressed intention to safeguard and serve the human rights of all its citizens. This is the first ingredient for becoming a nation where the wounds will heal.

Second, we need a state that expects its civil servants to serve the people. When citizens encounter the state at whatever level, they must step away with the sense that the encounter was respectful and fair. However, we also need a state that can effectively deliver on its promises within the limits of the available budget. This, indeed, will also serve to heal wounds.

Third, we need an active citizenry that does not wait for the state but reaches out to one another in goodwill. Lefebvre argues that urban rights go beyond habitation (see chapter 1). The superiority-inferiority complex these days gets activated mostly through personal encounters at the grassroots level. An incident of racism may be an experience or a perception. Actual racist events must be dealt with through the legal system. The remedy for perceptions, however, is dialogue – sitting down

(2021), https://www.goodthingsguy.com/environment/senekal-continue-to-inspire-sa-by-working-together-to-heal-their-town/ (accessed 18 January 2023); InTransformation Initiative (ITI) 'Clanwilliam development partnership brings community closer' (2021); https://www.intransformation.org.za/2021/10/01/clanwilliam-development-partnership-brings-community-closer/ (accessed 18 January 2023).
20   Acemoglu & Robinson (2019) (n 4).

to talk and listen. Much of this is happening. Much more needs to happen. Perhaps this is the most important medicine for healing wounds – to listen, understand, apologise, correct the misdeed, and forgive.

The search for a home by those marginalised by colonialism and apartheid, therefore, continues. The destructive system of entrenched superiority and inferiority has indeed been disrupted, yet the struggle is not over. Much has been done; so much more remains to be done …

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