

FOREWORD BY
PRESIDENT JACOB G ZUMA



**LIBERATION
DIARIES
REFLECTIONS
ON
20
YEARS
OF
DEMOCRACY**
EDITED BY BUSANI NGCAWENI

LIBERATION DIARIES IS THE STATE of the nation address, by the people. In this, the twentieth year of the country's democracy, regular South Africans were asked to share their liberation diaries. This reflective exercise comprises 50 essays by writers of different demographic backgrounds and ideological persuasions, all telling the story of post-apartheid South Africa. The essays are a reflection of the trials and tribulations, high and low points of the contributors' stories of 20 years of democracy, as well as their journey and experience of it.

"So, as one reflects on the first 20 years of a democratic South Africa it is clear that the situation is, in itself, quite complicated. Yet, it is also clear that it was not just a handful of political activists who paid the exorbitant price for freedom. It was all of us. And some continue to pay the price two decades later."

— AMANDA DLAMINI, WRITER

"I was nearly five years old when I held the hem of my mother's dress as we walked through the gate to the Makinana Lower Primary School Cottage, a newly opened school at Eziphunzana in Duncan Village, East London. This is the first time that I became aware of my surroundings, during January 1964. Half a century later, it gives me pleasure to share these personal reflections as we celebrate 20 years of our democracy. We as a society have gained some good experience, which should inform our strategic direction towards the realisation of a better life for all."

— DR NOMONDE XUNDU, SOUTH
AFRICAN HEALTH ATTACHÉ



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In search of ubuntu: A political philosopher's view of democratic South Africa

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I WRITE AS AN HONORARY SOUTH African, someone born in the US, but who has had an interest in the country for a long while and has lived here for 13 of the 20 years since the transition to democracy. In the 1980s, as a teenager, I helped to organise protests in Des Moines, Iowa to push banks to divest themselves of Kruger Rands, and then I supported the divestment movement at universities, as well as followed, with delight, the process by which Congress overrode President Reagan's veto of legislation that imposed economic sanctions on South Africa.

My interest in South Africa has not been merely negative, in the sense of wanting to see a patently unjust system of racism and autocracy abolished. It has also been positive, a matter of hoping for some approaches from Mzansi to culture, society and the state that would be different from typical Western and Eastern dynamics. I am a political philosopher who has long been disenchanted with the centralised authoritarianism characteristic of the East and the fiercely competitive and instrumentalist models often found in the West. In the early to mid-1990s, I looked to South Africa for the proverbial 'third alternative' that would foster more cooperative, participatory and communal relationships and organisations, ones that would produce more cultured, egalitarian and meaningful ways of life.

In the vernacular, I have been hoping to see more ubuntu in South Africa's institutions than had been present in the two dominant socio-politico-economic models across the world in the 20th century. I haven't been expecting utopia from the past 20 years of democracy; I've just wanted something new to come out of Africa. In this essay I

recount my experience of learning that it is not always forthcoming, at least not as quickly as I would have liked. However, I conclude by indicating that the promise remains, suggesting several concrete and attractive ways that South Africa could apply traditional values of ubuntu to a contemporary setting.

Welcome to Johannesburg: Africans, Americans

I first arrived in South Africa in 1999, when I was a young lecturer in philosophy based in St Louis, Missouri. At that time there was an African American rapper from St Louis, Nelly, who was making it big. As I stepped off the plane in Johannesburg, I did not know what to expect as I entered the airport. Oh, I knew not to expect lions – after all, knowing some detailed history of the country is what persuaded the Durban woman after whom I was in hot pursuit to spend time talking to me at a Halloween party in St Louis. But I didn't know how the Joburg airport would be decorated, which sort of food and drink would be on offer, what people would be wearing, that sort of thing. I certainly was not expecting to hear Nelly as the airport's choice of background music. But guess whose voice was blaring out of the speaker on the ceiling as I entered the building.

Part of me was happy to hear my hometown singer getting some play in a major city about a 20-hour plane flight away. I felt at home. But I shouldn't have been able to feel quite so at home. I, an American white guy, should not have had my life so easily recreated here, without any effort, let alone intention, on my part. Another part of me was sad for South Africa, and continues to be.

One promising thing about post-apartheid South Africa has been its opportunity to blend the Western and the African, to create new mixes, styles and relationships in ways that tie its diverse populations together. No single extant culture has it all. America has onion rings, jazz and great universities, but also strip malls, an inadequate amount of paid holiday for workers and Miley Cyrus. South Africa has the ethic of ubuntu, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and the TRC, but also grotesque inequality, poor public transport and the occasional muti killing. As humanity moves forward, various civilisations should, ideally, reflect on themselves, learn from one another, and fashion the good, the true and the beautiful in ways that, while growing out of a given locale, speak to fundamentally human themes.

Too often, I think, South Africa has messed up its chances to mix

– Nelly as its welcome to visitors coming from abroad and citizens returning home being a case in point. It has not been all bad, of course. Lebo Mathosa, Mandoza and Freshlyground are great. And at the Rosebank Mall in Johannesburg, management allowed people to write messages on a wall in honour of an ailing Nelson Mandela. There, I encountered, ‘Get better Mandizzle. If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be on a date with a white girl right now.’ Here, the appeal to African American slang is adapted to a South African context in a bottom-up, creative, political, funny and touching way.

However, on the whole, South Africa has not escaped the strong gravitational pull of the West. Better West than East, I suppose, but better still would have been more South, as I explain.

East and West: The two elephants

One of the two major types of society in the post-war era was exemplified by the Soviet Union and China. They used extreme coercion to advance a specific conception of how to live, centred on the realisation of a political agenda or a vision of human nature. The state took control of the means of production and employed them in the way that a small group of unelected bureaucrats thought best. They stifled ideas that could have competed with their programmes, and killed, jailed or exiled those who they judged to be disinclined to support their ideology. Some states continue to adopt a similar strategy, enforcing a single, narrowly interpreted religion and punishing those deemed to have flouted it with, for example, whippings for alcohol possession, beheadings for apostasy and hangings for homosexuality.

In the cases of the authoritarian regimes of the previous century, violence and other severe practices ultimately did little good as far as bringing about the desired goal, instead causing mass starvation, large-scale warfare and, more day-to-day, lives full of fear and frustration and devoid of much wealth. And more contemporary forms of state coercion, while more limited, are still usually ineffective. Punishment and threats of it are unlikely to change people’s attitudes, while keeping silent about one’s views merely to avoid punishment is unlikely to impart meaning to anyone’s life, neither the one threatened nor the one threatening.

On the other hand, there have been liberal societies in Western Europe, North America and Australasia where the state has largely

aimed for neutrality with respect to how its residents live. The state has sought mainly to enforce people's rights to choose their own ways of life, regardless of whether they are pious, virtuous, meaningful, healthy or not. Instead of expressing support for one particular way of life, this sort of state has protected people's civil liberties and provided financial and other resources, such as healthcare and education, that would be useful for achieving whatever goals people might elect to adopt. It has allowed the means of production to be privately owned and deployed to promote profit by buying people's labour-power, making products and then selling them on an open market.

Although the liberal societies avoided the disasters that befell the totalitarian ones, their residents are not living as well as they could be. People feel alienated from the political process, their participation reduced to a miniscule vote once every few years or, alternately, expanded to a disproportionately huge share of influence on politics in the forms of corporate lobbying and threatening to relocate to tax havens.

The unemployed feel that they are failing to contribute to society and to support their families, while the employed think they are working too much on activities they do not find important. Typical jobs are organised so as to maximise outputs (sales, responses to clients) and minimise costs (salaries, time), which require workers to conform to assembly-line models of production.

When workers get home from their isolating drives, they are exhausted and unable to do much more (after having sorted out the kids) than watch television or play on their iPads. The rich are surrounded by material objects but often lack human connection, while the poor find themselves without the resources to acquire, say, education, artistic supplies or sporting equipment.

In general, people in the West suffer from lives of boredom, loneliness, isolation, neurosis, depression, alcoholism, addiction, conformity, adaptation, passivity, aimlessness, manipulation, repetitiveness, ugliness, separation from natural beauty and a lack of wisdom (trenchantly captured by critical theorists such as Erich Fromm and Guy Debord).

Neither society has been maximally attractive considered in itself – but then the post-war era was all the worse for the two giants having fought and also sought to expand and replicate themselves.

Invasion, annexation, colonialism, imperialism and proxy wars were the name of the game. As the old African saying goes, when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

A third way, in principle

In lieu of both models, I, and many others on the left, have sought a 'third way': roughly, a society with more community, creativity and, more generally, human excellence. It would be a matter of the state adopting policies designed to promote meaning and flourishing in people's lives, but with a minimal use of coercion. Instead of radically narrowing residents' options in light of a monolithic conception of how best to live, and instead of refraining from acting for the sake of people's good and leaving citizens utterly to their own devices when it comes to how to live, a state could seek to guide people's decision-making towards a variety of value-rich behaviours, albeit without substantial punishment and threats.

For example, a state could: offer rewards; provide incentives; warn of risks; inform about goods; educate the young in certain ways; obtain pre-commitments from people to adopt certain practices; adopt 'facilitative' law that would give people legal options, such as marriage; make opportunities available; and use 'nudges' such as making bad choices harder for people to make, but not forbidding them (on this, see *Nudge*, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein). It could also use coercion in ways that close some doors but do not force people to go through a single door, so to speak. Here, the state might prohibit television broadcasts during, say, Saturday mornings, with the expectation, but not requirement, that people would spend more time together as a family or engage in hobbies (an approach suggested by André Gorz long ago).

Such policies would, arguably, deal with human freedom in the right way. Substantial meaning or excellence cannot accrue if people are forced into a certain way of life that they would otherwise not choose, and yet people often need help from the state in order to uphold ways of life that they themselves are likely to recognise as desirable. To enrich people's lives, a state could enable them to pursue the good, the true and the beautiful.

And it could also do so in participative ways. Although direct democracy is a tall order in large territories and urban environments, other forms of collective decision-making could be practiced that

would be more attractive than either having no vote and being controlled by a small political party, or merely voting once every few years for distant representatives. For instance, imagine a state whose officials routinely consulted with civil society organisations, engaged in 'town hall meetings' and publicised their plans on television and other media, actively encouraging feedback from the populace via SMS and the web before implementing.

The road still not travelled

In the 1990s, South Africa looked as though it might carve out a new kind of society, in the direction of the sort of ideal I have sketched. The Constitution was constructed in response to substantial input, not merely from political parties, but also thousands of individual citizens; the Constitution explicitly counted indigenous customs as law to be considered alongside parliamentary statute; the first elected government was one of national unity; the beginnings of an inclusive South African identity stirred, especially with Nelson Mandela's support of the Springboks; the TRC was a novel and inspirational approach, grounded on sub-Saharan mores, to dealing with political crimes in a way that aimed to heal broken relationships; and the state established bodies such as the Commission for Gender Equality, the Moral Regeneration Movement and the National Heritage Council.

However, these approaches did not continue much towards the end of the 20th century or at least they did not blossom in salient ways in the 21st. Formally segregated facilities are gone and interracial relationships are on the rise, but racial divisions have deepened. There is neither enough goodwill between races, nor enough of a sense of togetherness among them. One cannot expect every day to feel like it did on the first day of the Soccer World Cup, when a garage attendant told me, 'Jesus better not come today because no one would pay attention'. However, the spirit of the country these days feels like one in which people are out to hang onto and secure as much as they can for themselves and their respective groups.

In addition, the style of governance post-Mandela, both with respect to the ANC and the government, has been widely perceived to be fairly closed to different viewpoints. Democracy is real, a patent gain over the apartheid era. And yet togetherness is missing, with the ANC routinely taking advantage of its majority in legislatures and

executive positions to push through laws and policies that lack broad consensus, as well as to appoint administrators and managers on a cadre basis. People generally feel out of touch from the government – not even officials at the municipal level do a good job of responding to queries from residents. And people are streaming to the courts, NGOs, the media and other outlets to complain and seek relief because their impression is that the government will not hear them out and give them a fair shake.

The underclass is secure with an enormous state-funded grant programme for some quarter of the population, and the upper and middle classes now include black folk. However, healthcare, education and services in general are extremely poorly managed, even if they cover many more people now; attempts at land reform have been unsuccessful, with little land transferred and with the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform indicating in 2010 that more than 90% of the land so far transferred to blacks was lying unproductive; unemployment is among the highest in the world, with millions of people remaining idle and scavenging; and there is substantial skewing of public resources towards private interests.

The major cities are overrun by cars, such that those with them are often stuck in deadlock and those without them spend lots of time waiting for transport by taxi, bus and train. And with regard to culture one routinely gets: Steven Seagal and other American ‘B’ movies on television; KFC, McDonald’s and similar fast-food outlets; the blight of constant advertising and the annoyance of unexpected sales calls; colonial-style hotels that evince nothing of Africa; malls that, in terms of atmosphere, organisation and store content, feature little that one could not find randomly in the West; and Nelly on the airport sound system.

In short, the country of South Africa has moved thousands of kilometres in a Western direction (but with a large chunk of inefficiency).

The next 20 years for South Africa: More of a ‘third way’ in practice?
As a political philosopher, I cannot predict South Africa’s path between now and 2034, but I can close by making some recommendations about how I think it should develop. Just look at that Freedom Charter! Just look at that Constitution! South Africa has dared to pursue big goals. I have some more to suggest, which

involve refurbishing for a modern context instances in which pre-colonial sub-Saharan societies exhibited ubuntu. I submit that these projects would not take a lot of money or even many complex skills. Or, let me put this way: if the government could host such a smoothly run World Cup – complete with new trains and stadiums – then it could implement programmes such as the following.

Sharing labour

In many traditional African societies, it has been common for people to help one another harvest their fields. Instead of those living on the land being solely responsible for gathering up the produce from it, all those who had harvesting to do would collectively move from field to field to help one another. In southern Africa, such cooperative farming is often called *letsema*. How might such a practice be realised in today's South Africa?

One way might be if the government were to ask everyone in society to lend a hand to help improve education and then coordinated their contributions. Of course, the state should do what it can to fund and otherwise improve public education as usual, but it could also organise the efforts of many other, private agents. It might ask: construction companies to put up some rooms that would serve as a school library; wealthier individuals with extra books to donate some to the libraries, taking the time to collect from their neighbourhoods; and retired persons to volunteer their time to run these libraries. And it could widely publicise, on the Internet, radio and television, a list of who has contributed and how, indicating to society how far it has come towards its goal of X number of new libraries and how far it has yet to go.

A state that mobilised a wide array of actors to help achieve a common goal in this way would: improve social cohesion; enable people to give their time and other resources towards a concrete goal; and, of course, help to improve students' education.

Sharing power and ideas

According to the sub-Saharan proverb, if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together. Or as Steve Biko remarked of Africans, 'we are prepared to have a much slower progress in an effort to make sure that all of us are marching to the same tune'. In the political sphere among many indigenous black peoples, this sort

of orientation has been manifest in the form of consensus seeking. It has been common for societies to elect (usually male) elders who are expected to come to a unanimous agreement about what should be done and then for chiefs usually to defer to their judgement. Another political instance of the inclination to walk together has been for small-scale societies to make decisions affecting the group consequent to giving all adult members the opportunity to voice their opinion. How to bring such practices into the 21st century?

Some would suggest changing the Constitution to require parliamentarians to come to consensus in order to ratify legislation, fascinatingly advocated by several African political philosophers (including Kwasi Wiredu and South Africa's own Mogobe Ramose). More practically, the dominant political majority of our time, the ANC, could be less opportunistic with regard to the power it has legally secured. It could make appointments based much more on qualifications, including integrity, and much less on party membership and patronage. It could also appoint more persons to Cabinet who are not ANC members, as well as meaningfully engage with those likely to be affected by proposals as well as with experts who are not part of government. Working together, South Africans could do more!

Sharing space and children

Nuclear families, let alone single-parent households, are a bad idea. Rearing children is too big a job to be done by one or two adults, especially when life in a modern economy often requires labour to be undertaken on the job market. If it takes a village to rear a child, a village should be created. What if a state designed housing so that a dozen or so units formed a collective compound reserved for those with children and those interested in supporting them?

Perhaps the units form a circle, so that the middle is a play area for children, on which all could keep an eye. Maybe the compound requires a certain balance in terms of the genders and ages of its residents, and it might favour some women with children who have suffered abuse and need shelter. A few of the residents could stay home to watch over the younger children during the day and be financially supported by others who work outside the compound. Suppose there is a collective area where all children do their homework, or there is a compound rule that no one

may play outside until their homework is done or that television broadcasts are turned off between 4:30 and 7:00 pm. Parents might meet together every two weeks to talk about parenting issues or matters of collective concern, or listen to social workers and child psychologists. Wouldn't this attempt to extend families be a social experiment worth conducting?

Sharing opportunities

According to Walter Sisulu's understanding of ubuntu (as related to Johann Broodryk in an interview), if you have two cows and the milk of the first cow is enough for your own consumption, you are expected to donate the milk of the second cow to your underprivileged brother. Similar practices abound among indigenous Africans, where, for instance, those with many cows would donate one to a recently married couple to help them get started. How might this type of giving guide South Africans, particularly those with wealth and power, beyond them paying taxes and donating the odd bit of change to beggars at crossroads?

Here are three ideas. First, white farmers could decide to impart skills to black people and to transfer a certain percentage of fertile land to those with the demonstrable ability to make use of it. Current agricultural associations would be sufficient to coordinate such a redress programme; state supervision would not be necessary. Surely this is how AfriForum should be keeping busy.

Second, businesses could lend a hand to unsuccessful job applicants. For instance, they could provide a brief indication to candidates about why they were not hired and offer constructive advice on how to make themselves more competitive. Of course, it would not be feasible to do this in cases where there are several hundred applicants. But it could be done for those shortlisted or some other subset of the pool.

Third, and finally, governments, businesses and other organisations could go out of their way to provide chances for local artists to display their work. I encountered a Zulu poet at the opening of an academic centre and a Xhosa musician at a book launch, and both gave powerful, memorable performances (and if I could remember their names, I would plug them here). Who stepping off a plane in Joburg wants to be greeted with Nelly? Hear me, Airports Company South Africa – not even the fellow from St Louis!