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The Afrikaners: Who are they? What is their future?

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Danie Goosen

Andries, thank you, thank you very much for the honour of being part of this series of lectures and yes, I have agreed with him that I will merely present you with a few scattered remarks on what it means to be an Afrikaner today. Sorry for that because certainly there will be a lack of coherence in my story but nevertheless I will try to focus especially on the nation-state and the phenomena of the nation-state and thereby creating some sort of coherence in my story.

In the first part of this presentation, I would like to refer to three related phenomena that can be described as signals of crises: namely Afrikaners present experience of alienation, perhaps a controversial point; the experience of the nation-state seen as a challenge especially when seen against the background of the colonialist past; and thirdly the impact of globalisation on the Afrikaans speaking community. In the second part of my presentation, I would like to speculate a bit on a more positive note on the way forward for Afrikaners. In this regard I will not pretend to speak as a neutral observer but as a committed Afrikaner, also as a committed South African and also African. For the purposes of record, I do not understand concepts like Afrikaner, South African and African as exclusionary but rather as complementary concepts. In fact it is for me personally, impossible to isolate the concept Afrikaner from the encompassing cultural, political and economic context. I think the holistic philosophy, to refer to some of our people in the past – the holistic philosophy of Jan Smuts – is still applicable in this regard. According to the wise counsel given by Smuts, particular communities are dependent on and enriched by the whole just as the whole is enriched by the multiplicity of self-respecting communities with its unifying embrace.

I think the interplay between interdependency or the whole or the unity and differences, the multiplicity, is a pre-condition for the whole to be a human and living whole.

So the first part, the experience of alienation, the experience of the nation-state and the globalisation - firstly then, the alienation. I think in order to understand what's happening to Afrikaners, it's important to focus on the experience of alienation – a difficult concept, even a controversial one. Although I don't want to speculate on the causes of this wide-spread phenomena, research done in this regard identifies an overwhelming feeling of being left without any meaningful say in their own affairs as certainly an important cause in this regard. But whatever causes are identified, alienation amongst Afrikaners manifests itself first and foremost in the radical lack of a symbolic coherence and meaningful cultural, political vision. In other words, absent among Afrikaners is a meaningful symbolic universe that can provide a minimum of coherence amongst Afrikaners. I of course thereby deny the often-expressed view that Afrikaners always lacked a coherent symbolic universe. Like any other community, the Afrikaner community was always marked by different practices, different symbolic universes and a wide-ranging continuum of personalities that embodied these differences. Perhaps Bo Kreer and Sir Breyten Breytenbach do represent opposite poles on this continuum. However when only the differences are emphasised, one tends to overlook the continuum connecting them and the powerful influence exerted by a rather coherent set of symbolic references.

The alienation experienced by Afrikaners manifests itself in a withdrawal into private existence. In other words, a feeling of being left without any meaningful say in their own affairs translates into a collective farewell to public life. Public life is experienced with utmost skepticism. The direct cause behind the flight towards private existence is often portrayed as being related to phenomena like violence and high crime rates. Although certainly true this explanation falls prey to a too subjective and individualising style of thinking, I believe. The real cause behind Afrikaner privatisation, and eventual Afrikaner emigration, is the collective feeling of being alienated from social-political realities. Afrikaners are privatising and emigrating because they can't see a future for themselves as a cultural and historical community in our country. This translation of their own self-image from a nationalist – because I think this is what happens – to a new liberal one is often accompanied by a confirmation of racial stereotypes. The more Afrikaners are individualised and left powerless in terms of their ethnic preferences, the more they tend to withdraw into white enclaves arguing that if their ethnicity is not recognised in a meaningful way, they will rather opt for countries like Australia etc - countries symbolising the values of so-called Western society. In short, I think the alienation among Afrikaners also manifests itself in the unholy marriage between new liberal lifestyles and racism.

Let me refer to a last example in this regard: alienation is also reflected by the discrepancy between Afrikaners self-image and the image portrayed by the media. As far as Afrikaners are concerned, being and language are contradicting each other leaving the ordinary Afrikaner rather nude as an invisible presence in South Africa. There is a stark contrast between the image

portrayed by journalists in editorial columns and what is happening amongst ordinary Afrikaners. The almost schizophrenic situation is illustrated by the lack of media influence of the political preferences exercised by Afrikaners. While the Afrikaans media often do their utmost to portray a positive image of South Africa, this has almost no effect on the political preferences of Afrikaners. They tend to side with those images and feelings that mostly are negative.

The nation-state and colonialism

Modern colonialism was made possible by the nation-state. It is simply, theoretically and historically speaking impossible to isolate modern colonialism and the nation-state. In short, the nation-state was instrumental in the colonial project. Follow Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "decolonising the mind," one can argue that this has not changed over the years. Although perhaps not that visible, the nation-state is still fully inscribed within a logic serving Western lifestyles, Western ideas and Western practices. Although Afrikaners resisted colonialism, they repeatedly found its impulses vis-à-vis the black majority in South Africa. How? By imitating and eventually using its most powerful instrument to perfection, namely the nation-state, and that is the natural tendency, I would argue, to centralise power in the hands of the elite. Afrikaners thereby unwittingly gave them huge impetus to the colonialist logic.

However Afrikaners nowadays are on the receiving end of the nation-state's centralising tendencies – a controversial statement. Despite the promises built into the Constitution, Afrikaners do not have any meaningful say in those affairs that are a pre-condition for a cultural transmission. For example, the principle of representivity are applied by ruling forces, makes it almost impossible for there to be any meaningful spaces where Afrikaans can flourish. As to the immediate political forces behind this state of affairs, Afrikaners of course differ among themselves. As some commentators argue that an effective appeal to the present Constitution is still enough to safeguard cultural transmission, although they will be the first to recognise the ever-widening gap between the Constitution and present practices. Others again argue that the big problems experienced at present are due to poor provisions made by the Constitution for cultural transmission. Whatever view is eventually accepted, the fact remains that Afrikaners are at the receiving end of the nation-state or at least in the way in which they experience the nation-state.

Afrikaners fought against the colonialist nation-state, used it to their advantage during the apartheid years and are nowadays again experiencing its negative impact. Having been nationalist, they are now again at the receiving end of a new nationalist agenda – the afro-nationalist agenda project. Like the Afrikaner agenda of the past, the afro-nationalist agenda is marked by its belief in the redeeming powers of the nation-state, and like the Afrikaners during

the apartheid years, they may be caught unwittingly within the very same logic they resisted so bravely, namely colonialism. The fundamental question is whether we can collectively move beyond the heritage of the nation-state. If not, the century old rhetoric of anti-colonialism by both Afrikaners and Africans will be exposed as mere rhetoric. I'm not arguing that Afrikaner nationalism and the new afro-nationalism are identical, but let us not over-emphasise the differences at the cost of having a clear perspective on the many commonalities between them. Although the one was exclusive, certainly, and the other inclusive, both strategies share a pathological inability to recognise the diversity of communities. While Afrikaner nationalism excluded diversity from its own ranks, the present nationalism tends to absorb diversity without remainder within an inclusive unity. In short, despite differences, both strategies share a resistance against a meaningful policy or policies of recognition for the diversity of voices, communities etc. I think the real challenge for the future is to do away with both manifestations of enmity against diversity and the colonialist legacy still informing these intolerant practices.

Thirdly, the problems experienced by Afrikaners in the process of globalisation

According to William Kabanar the rise of the nation-state is marked by the triumph of the universal over the local. This is exemplified by the sovereign states whose usurpation of the power from the church, the nobility, guilds, clans and towns etc. The question is whether globalisation represents something new. The answer is of course negative. Globalisation is not contradicting the modern drive to do away with the local. On the contrary, globalisation enacts a universal mapping of space typified by detachment from any particular localities. Globalisation does not signal the demise of the nation-state but is in fact a hyper-extension of the nation-state's project of subsuming the local under the universal.

The universal mapping of space and the global detachment from particular localities do have a direct impact on smaller communities across the world. It also has a direct bearing on present day Afrikaners. Due to the universal mapping of space, by means of abstract and purely instrumental coordinates, it has become possible for those privatised and individualised Afrikaners to move almost at ease wherever they want to be. The ability to detach themselves from their particular histories and their willingness to become fully individualised consumers within a new liberal symbolic system already gives rise to an Afrikaner diaspora across the world. I think this is a real challenge for Afrikaners of course. New thinking is necessary to respond to this in meaningful ways. No clear answer has yet been given; in fact the problems experienced by the nation-state are merely exacerbating the problem. Even those that do not possess high mobility are drawn into a socio-psychological space that accepts being there as preferable to being here. The most legitimate response to globalisation comes from those Afrikaners who argue in favour of an alternative process of globalisation. That is, Afrikaners who accept

globalisation as inevitable but at the very same time challenge the new liberal power structures directing this process. Alternative globalisation is the one that both recognises the local, original and particular community, and emphasises their radical interdependence.

This brings me to the second section of this short presentation, some remarks on a possible future for Afrikaners.

There are clear signs that Afrikaners are coming to terms with the trauma of 1994. They are entering the last stages of their own so-called work of mourning and they are preparing themselves for a new and more affirmative role, one that emphasises democratic participation instead of privatised individualism. The diversity of voices instead of his master's voice and the dynamic interplay between the whole and its parts.

Following Benedict Anderson's idea of modern historical communities as products of our imagination - Anderson's so-called "Imagined Communities" - one can argue that Afrikaners are faced with a challenge to imagine themselves as a community along lines beyond nationalism, beyond new liberalism and beyond a fundamentalist idea of identity underlying these concepts. Phrased in more positive terms, the challenge facing Afrikaners today is to imagine or re-imagine themselves as a participating community along radical democratic lines.

Nationalism

In the past Afrikaners as an imagined community was fully committed to nationalism and its most important institution, the nation-state. But what we are experiencing today is the demise of Afrikaner nationalism. The question is does this mean the end of the Afrikaner as a historical community – I don't think so – but, and this is an important provision, there is to my mind only one way forward and that is for Afrikaners to re-imagine themselves as a post-nationalist community committed to radical democracy, committed to the ideals of democratic participation and a communal sovereignty informing the heritage of radical democracy since its inception. One can rephrase this dream about us becoming radical democrats by arguing that Afrikaners have to recommit themselves to the so-called intermediary spaces between the state and the individual. Why? Because the true spirit of democracy and the unpredictable eventfulness of the political – and is this not what the political is all about, that is the care for the unpredictable event – can only find expression in the in-between space between state and individual. I'm arguing in favour of a new topos₁ or new space for communities, that is a space below the state's abstract mapping and above the spaces used by free floating consumers to imitate their fellow consumers. Why? Because the spaces in-between may be able to mediate meaningful political events while the state, by means of its drive towards universal mapping, reduces the political to the administrative

and while the individual is fully immersed within a mimetic struggle to consume ever more commodities, the spaces in-between may be communal spaces – that is spaces that allow communities to be, in a politically meaningful way.

According to John Millbank, nation-states tend to reduce the so-called complex space that is the institutional spaces between the individual and the state to simple space; that is space without intermediary and communal institutions. Because the historical communities of those social forces that traditionally reside in complex spaces, nation-states almost instinctively experience them as enemies. This is also the reason why Ernst Renan, the 19th century spokesperson for nationalism, so eloquently praised the nation-state. According to Renan, the nation-state deserves his praise precisely because it declared war on the many communities residing within this complex space between the state and the individual. In short reinterpreting themselves along post-nationalist lines, Afrikaners may become a radical and democratic community seeking the very rationale for a meaningful existence in its commitment to those places where real political events may still be possible.

New liberalism

I think the most intense meter of political dividing line today is the one between new liberalism and democracy. That is between the trust in pure procedural processes protecting the rights of individuals on the one hand and the democratic belief that political is only allowed when communities directly participate in public affairs. The search for a balance between liberalism and democracy is an ongoing one marking historical and political events since at least the French revolution. The impact of the nation-state and globalisation in allowing the need for Afrikaners to embrace their democratic heritage with its emphasis on community participation. I'm not thereby flatly denying the importance of the new liberal culture of rights – the search for a balance between the rights and community participation is an ongoing one. However, Afrikaners have to face up to the fact that the culture of rights entrenches those anti-social forces that undermine the influence of communities and neutralise real critical spaces. The culture of rights is not necessarily the adversary of nation-states and globalisation, but often the very instruments they use to legitimatise each universal mapping of space. In other words, although loyalty towards the culture of rights can in future be an important instrument for Afrikaners, it is even more important for them to embrace the democratic ideals. While the appeal to rights tends to inscribe us within an administrative logic, the radical democratic impulse can create the pre-condition for Afrikaners to be a meaningful mediator of political events.

Identities

Attempts to re-imagine what it means to be an Afrikaner, as is the case with any other historical community, is always mapped on certain ideas on the meaning of identity. What idea of identity will enable us to refer to oneself as a democratic and participating Afrikaner? This question, I think is at the very heart of the Afrikaner issue today. Let me try to identify at least two pre-conditions for the concept of identity to comply with before it can be experienced as a democratic one.

I'll formulate it at first in negative terms:

It is of the utmost importance that Afrikaners should reject a mono-logical idea of identity. Mono-logical thinking is at the very basis of a fundamentalist concept of identity and the very pre-condition for exclusive, violent, undemocratic practices. And racism is one of its most ugly faces. But also of course, xenophobic mentalities all over the world. Nation-states imposing their universal will. Globalisation destroying those local forces left intact by the nation-state etc

The one-two identity is seen as the norm, the others as something to be excluded from or submerged within a dialectical fashion within the folds of a cell. The correct response, I think, is not to deny the politics of identity but rather to imagine an alternative politics of identity.

At the very same time, the self-denial amongst Afrikaners should also be transcended. This denial is often accompanied by the post-modern claim that the concept of Afrikaner is unstable, signifies nothing and is therefore without any real political importance. In short, the concept of Afrikaner, and for that matter, any stable meaning at all is approached with utmost skepticism and eventually also with complete indifference. However, this so-called post-modern skepticism towards stable meanings, is the mere opposite of the mono-logical approach and therefore caught within its mimetic plague – the one being the mere shadow of the other.

But, more serious than this logical argument, is the point that the post-modern melting away of stable means and the lack of symbolic coordinates can create the pre-condition for those practices it claims to resist, namely mono-logical exclusion or inclusion. Recent examples of xenophobic practices all over the world can be seen as a direct result of the identity-denying logic at work within capitalism and the processes of globalisation. In short, the denial of identities by means of an appeal to the instability of our concepts, can lead to its opposite namely mono-logical practices.

This brings me to my conclusion. I think the real challenge for the politics of identity is to think beyond both, what I referred to as the so-called mono-logical approach, and the skeptical denial of any stable meaning at all. My proposal is to think the concept identity in analogical terms, using the concept "why" because the analogue enables us to move beyond both the above-

mentioned possibilities by thinking unity and difference, coherence as well as diversity, the one and the many. The concept Afrikaner is an analogical concept allowing for both the continuum as well as the multiplicity of idioms within the Afrikaans-speaking community. Although they never portrayed themselves in analogical terms, the Afrikaner community was always already an analogical community. In the past, Afrikaners consciously embraced either mono-logical exclusionism or skeptical indifference forgetting the analogue that was always already inscribed within their very self-constitution. The analogical balance between the one and the many is to my mind the very pre-requisite for a democratic idea of identity. It escapes both the intolerance of mono-logical totalitarianism as well as the indifference of post-modern skepticism.

Phrased in positive terms, the analogue allows for interplay between the whole and its parts, the crossing of lines between the universal and the particular. This represents, I believe, the very essence of democracy. If the analogue is used not only to understand Afrikaner identities but also our South African and African identities, they can open the spaces for real democracy to happen again.