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Book Launch

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Cape Town

TOPIC:

**THE MANDELA DECADE: LABOUR,
CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN POST-
APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA BY ARI
SITAS**

SPEAKERS:

**PROF. PITIKA NTULI
MS. BARBARA HOGAN**

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

The Mandela Decade 1990 – 2000: Labour, Culture and Society in Post-Apartheid South Africa by Prof. Ari Sitas

1 December 2010

Prof. David Linkin – Head of Sociology at UCT

The publication of a book is a significant intellectual marker for any academic. So, I would like to welcome you all to the launch the 'Mandela Decade' and I would like to congratulate Ari for his achievement. Ari has come here tonight surrounded by his family right down to his first grandchild. So, welcome all. This book launch takes place amidst a workshop on new labour studies and at a session this morning, Ari was talking about the labour configurations that affect us nationally, globally, locally. I have no doubt that this book will contribute to this discussion both nationally and locally. To speak about the book in a little more detail, we have two eminent guests:

Ms. Barbara Hogan: a retired politician. We debated whether to refer to Barbara as 'retired' or 'retiring' politician (laughter).

Prof. Pitika Ntuli: who is a sculptor, poet, writer and African Renaissance man. He will speak second.

Finally, the last word will be Ari's.

Barbara Hogan:

You know when you have someone following you speaking who is going to be much more interesting than I am, it is a bit disconcerting. I will try to not be political, not academic but maybe truthful. You know, it was such a luxury, Ari, to be able to have the time and read this book that you are launching today because we normally rush through things without being able to savour it. I sat in my armchair and I read and I read, and I know that I will come back to this book to read once again. Let me first say thank you.

We live in extremely tempestuous times. Many of us are of a generation who has gone through decades of 'the struggle', 'the political moment' and every turn in this struggle is a moment where we said 'we never thought that this was possible'. I spend so much of my time meeting with people who say 'heh, this ANC, we don't recognize it anymore, this is a new phenomenon that is there'. With the turbulence of these last few decades – we must not underestimate quite how unsettling it has been. We came with many precepts and understandings of what the vision is and what the truth is. Ari refers to the 'wonderment' during that first decade when we were still thinking about whether this can still be true, pinching ourselves because we could not believe it. In the second decade we are all in a different kind of pinching mode because this it is pinching very hard. It is bruising. And let us say that South Africa never fails to surprise us or confront us or make us wrestle with fundamental issues. And that is why I very much welcome this book.

Probably it has come at an opportune time for me to reflect on the journey that we have all travelled. This book gave me so much food for thought; pointers and directors. We cannot rely on the accepted wisdom's of the past. So much has moved, changed, and been blown open and past that we have all been facing existential dilemmas and been involved in all types of businesses in our

head that do not give us a chance for reflection. For me, the distance of this first decade of transition is sufficiently far away enough for us to appreciate in time exactly what this decade was and how it set the precedent for what was to come.

Let me start by saying that all of us here and you have put it eloquently and well, would accept that there was an enormous symbolism that came with Mandela. We are all people here who understand that history is not made by one person, and yet the configuration and symbolism that were associated with him was a startling and moving moment for all of us who had been battered by struggle for many decades. You put it well when you say:

it took more than Mandela and more than the political and social leadership in the country to usher in the democratic transition. Rather, during the Mandela decade, using the real and the symbolic space afforded him, his authoritative presence, the space offered to him by the respect he enjoyed by the younger cadre of leaders, the mythology woven around him, sometimes using his patriarchal charm or anger, Mandela has given the ANC's achievement a unique character in 3 years.

Ari goes on to expound that. Firstly, he insisted on a humanism that was animated by a libertarian idea of justice and backed up by law. This was an idea, through the Robben Island experience, that justice, through the constitution and the courts would provide an alternative to the noose and the prison. Secondly, he insisted that the moral and philosophical grounding of the country would be based on an African Republicanism and thirdly, he insisted on his moral authority to lead was a part of a broader tradition of deeds and practices that demanded respect and self-discipline.

In the post-script, Ari refers to these three legacies of the Mandela era, and he asks a question, although maybe I am distorting it. He asks, were we realistic, when we proposed everything, or put so much on justice and a constitution and a court that would provide the remedies? In other words, we supported the very strong constitutionality of our political transition, but what weaknesses are there that we find now as a result of this strong insistence on constitutionality?

Secondly, the moral authority that Ari refers to; he talks about 'mutinous energies' that are released in the country that require a popular perception of an authoritative order that requires an authoritarian populism. Ari seems to be saying that we do see this change from a moral authority and the dangers that exist, moving towards an authoritarian populism that we see very much in action these days. Of course this book deals with this journey from the one to the other. These are the kinds of issues which we are trying as a nation to come to grips with.

In the early years, people used to say to me 'South Africa is going to become a tyranny'; there are so many contesting forces. I used to say that the danger is not tyranny but anarchy. We have seen so many anarchic forces that have been unleashed in the popular discourse. In these anarchic forces, the danger is a call for the restoration of law and order, for an appeal to an authoritarian populism. These anarchic forces, in the absence of a moral leadership and in the absence of what Ari refers to (as does Joel Netshitenzhe) as a cadre of politicians who are able to guide that movement in its precarious moments. I think that we are at such a moment in this stage of our history. I find it very insightful the kinds of comments that Ari is making that needs a 'higher up', 'somebody' to be able to say what is right and how we will take it forward. In retrospect, we had no clue the kinds of forces

that would be unleashed upon us at the time that the ANC was unbanned and Mandela released in 1990.

Firstly, globalization and the necessary (or unnecessary) structural adjustments that took place in the economy at the time. We need to look at two significant moments in this period. One in 1998 with the Asian Financial Crisis which blew our economy out of the waters. And then once again now, another financial crisis, which has become not just a financial crisis but the biggest depression that the world has ever seen particularly in the so-called 'developing countries'. Those two forces alone are enough to blow a developing country off the map.

In 1998, I was sitting in the Finance Committee in Parliament and seeing what cuts had to be made in the budget because there was simply no money. In a 6 month period, what money we thought we had just flew out of the door. And there was an enormous depression around that time. This was a period that was critical to consolidate the RDP program and we were blown out of the sky by that. In Ari's reference to that period, when you talk about the impact of structural adjustment, we are still yet to come to terms with what this particular depression actually means to us. And then the current financial crisis and the fact that our banks and financial systems actually survived this period has almost led to an illusion as to how bad the economic situation actually is. When you have got over 1 million people who have lost jobs, the impact is massive.

Ari, your figures that show throughout the Mandela period how jobs were lost (although there was a period of growth), but this is a silent phenomenon that is eating us as a country. The question of unemployment is the single biggest issue facing us. And the fact that we almost, in our body politic, in our public discourse, are not able to emphasize how dire the economic situation can be seen when we compare South Africa to what has happened to a country like Ireland. When we see the queues of people thrown onto the street, and maybe I can now sympathise because I know what it is like to be fired from your job. But, it is precisely these issues that come through so strongly in your book.

The second issue that comes through strongly that threw us off our course completely was HIV/AIDS. Again, something that was hidden, something that even to this day, we accept as one of the service delivery issues that we need to deal with. Maybe it is a result of this country, where everything requires improvement and delivery and so we cannot just focus on the 2 central issues of HIV/AIDS and unemployment. But, in the book, the consequences of these debilitating forces are very starkly laid out.

Ari refers to senior trade union leadership. He puts them into 3 categories: first, those who were upwardly mobile, those who were stuck and those whose positions deteriorated. In the discourse that we have, and this is what I found particularly valuable, we either have a discourse about BEE and the upwardly mobile, we might be talking about those who were thrown out of jobs but I don't think that we are exploring what the impact on the social fabric is, when you see your fellow *struggelista's* being promoted and you are being left behind. Or where your situation deteriorates even though you were amongst the leading echelons at the time. And your sense of being dispossessed and alienated.

The second decade would be the decade of all these multiplicity of forces that are being churned up, but what has caused this churning up now? It would be interesting if you (Ari) were to write on this in the future. You have spelt out very clearly by setting the stage of many of these disjointed forces. We have reason now to be concerned about authoritarian populism and it is something that we need to be aware of, you say in a different space that:

they are crises because cultural formations can neither recoil from nor refract them into coherent practices and in the process cultural formations lose their capacity for steering and navigating social practices as such. What emerges is not a vibrant civil society but a spasmodic and turbulent reconfiguration that points to directions away from the vectors that were designed by South Africa's democracy. Only authoritative cultural and political intervention will do.

Let me end off by saying that in periods of serious depression, all manner of social forces are released. The kind of economic depression that we are facing at the moment, although its causes are perhaps similar to 1998, is of a distinctly different order. We need to look to many histories of many countries to understand what a depression can create when over a million people are thrown out of their jobs and when these people are removed from the discourse, from the inner circle. What happens when they are removed and are now outside of the 'us', the 'we'. What does it mean for the social fabric of a country? Does it mean that it is disintegrating?

Now, this all sounds like doom and gloom but I would not like it to be that way entirely. But, I do share some of the discordant notes that Ari strikes, especially in his postscript, of the potential dangers that do lurk in a conjuncture such as this. We are the most extraordinary society – we have been through to many transitions, so many changes and that energy, those energizing forces that you see there, are still roaming about and the die is not yet cast. So, Ari, thank you. I cannot begin to give recognition as to just how complex and interesting a discourse is that you have given here.

I encourage you all to read. It was the first time that I had the 'aah yes', 'oh yes', 'that makes sense' and now is the time for all of us to be doing deep reflection, deep analysis of the conjuncture that we find ourselves in and what gave rise to this conjuncture. This is a time like never before, where we need to be focusing all of our time, all of our theoretical attention, and all of our political energy into unpicking that enormous mosaic of South Africa that alarms us and makes us rejoice, makes us fear and makes us happy. So, thank you Ari, it is a wonderful book.

Prof. Pitika Ntuli:

It is not easy to follow up in the footsteps of a very able politician, retiring or not retiring, who will just marshal their thoughts in a more coherent way. I plead for your indulgence – I am not an analyst, I am just a poet. And I was just listening to Barbara was talking, and a poem was born which I hope is not going to do injustice, to Ari or to her.

I will not be political

I will not be political

Therefore I will only be truthful without rushing things like reading Ari's book

Our times are tempestuous, consumed by defining, refining concepts of good and evil, the progressive and the conservative

Wrestling with this truth, distilling dreams from reality

Pinching our mind till we bleed

With Ari we have come to learn how deeply wisdom is hidden in words

Our comforts, our dreams, frogmarched into silence

Silence of poverty by those who marched alongside us, in the trenches of our dreams

We check on the three step ladder into the Mandela legend

We grapple with moral authority, stumble on popular authoritarianism without footprints of tyranny

I read Ari

And I reached for my glasses to trace the faint and faded path of moral authority that eludes me

The stage set for disjointed words to be arrested, sentenced into terms of imprisonment to guide us into action if our country is to survive

In this onion republic of thought, I am the sector that spoke truth to power

I know the cost

I will do it again

Within the mosaic of our dreams

I think that the reason I am able to write a poem while Barbara is speaking is because she speaks to logically with images. But the other reason is simple – for the past 4 months I have locked myself in my study and I was reading the works of Mayakovski, of Pasternak, of Klebnekov, of Mandelstam. I was reading these people during the period of the October Revolution and what followed after, when the revolution started to devour its own children.

I was impelled to read these things because I was starting to see certain parallels running through our own country. And then as I did that, Ari's book came and I realized that the book could not have come at a better time. Because like all of the collective books that I was reading, it seemed like Ari was reading the same books that I was reading at the same time I was reading them. But because he writes faster, he wrote the book that I would very much like to write.

Ari is not writing something that he has simply explored sociologically. He is writing about the period that he lived through, that he has participated in. Where he worked down with people. Where he comes up with the thoughts of Castells or Weber, he is only illustrating the path that he himself, in blood and sinew, has travelled.

When I arrived here, after 32 years of exile and I landed up in Kwazulu Natal, it was Ari who introduced me to the people that he writes about – the poets: Xole, Masungu, Gladman Gngubo. These are the people who would always stop him along the road or would be up in his office. These people were heroes: they were the poets, they mobilized people, they were in meetings.

What Ari writes about are the people who are the non-winners, the losers, those who were not upwardly mobile. But, when you read the lives of these people, you realize that they constituted the essence of the moral authority that guided our own action. But, then you meet these people in the streets begging for money or unclear, it just tells us that morally, something has drastically gone wrong.

But, Ari is not melodramatic in his statement of these issues. He is stating the bold facts that confront us. But, when we go deeper, we deal up in a world that as human beings, we are constructed – Madiba was constructed. They created a person that they wanted to create for the purposes that they wanted to.

In 1916, when the Easter Uprising was escalating in Ireland, the Nobel Peace Prize was given to two people, a catholic and protestant nun. When Lumumba was being murdered in the Congo, who was in charge of the UN force there, it was Ralph Bunche – a black good guy and what did he get for it? A Nobel Peace Prize. And when we were waging a freedom struggle in South Africa, who did the Peace Prize go to? Of course to Luthuli. And when we were rendering this country ungovernable, who did the Prize go to? Bishop Tutu. When they thought that Madiba was out of prison and they thought that we would run up and attack the Barbara Hogans of this world with our cultural weapons, they said no, we must give it to Mandela *and* Mandela. The outside world makes an impact on how we understand ourselves as to who we really are. And in looking at the issue of this configuration of Madiba, Ari is actually touching on a much broader kind of issue that we should be looking at.

And it also comes up at a very nice time when I am discovering Wikileaks. So, there is nothing bad that you can be criticized here for. With Wikileaks coming here and telling us what is actually happening.

In other words, Ari also writes the story of this decade in a manner that is accessible, from the bottom up, but at the same time, in a very clear and scholarly way, taking issues with the people that he needs to take issue with (Castells, Bauman who are speaking about networks). Ari tackles all of these theoretical issues in a manner that no one else can do.

So, Ari, we shall actually say that ultimately, you deserve a grandchild. Thank you.

Ari Sitas:

I am supposed to say something very sensible.

This was a difficult book, because it was about 'the transition': a transition that most of us lived through intensely, sometimes we felt that we were major players in something that was important. Sometimes we were liked, sometimes we were ignored, and sometimes we were disliked. There were all of these emotions and you had to find a way to yank yourself out in order to write sensibly about what was going on around you despite what you felt. We had these theories about transition: transition it is all about backroom boys shaking hands and elite pacts and as we move into the new world economy and so on. But, that was not what I was seeing around me – the mass gatherings and union meetings. We were seeing major cultural shifts and things that we could not decipher. So, I was being very challenged by the mismatch by theory, scholarship and what was happening around us. I was the most privileged person on earth to have been involved with people who were writing intensely about this period and who felt hurt about this period.

And that is basically the important opening to an understanding about how it all felt. If you look at the poetry that I am weaving my story around, I think that it is stunning stuff because no sociologist has been able to describe the contradictions as well as those people did. Let me give you two examples: one example is my friend and person who wanted to put me in my place – Alfred Xhlobula who passed on seven years ago. He was a celebrated poet of the trade union movement. He got published and translated. Read in the book what he writes about the actual negotiations: it is about land, bones and money. See how, when you read it, you have that moment of going 'of course': 'land - the negotiation over land (1913 - that is the cutoff point). 'Bones' is about ancestries and the relationship between the ANC and the traditionalists? Is that what you mean? 'Money', is this NEDLAC, is this government getting together with business? In other words, what I am trying to say is that these popular symbolic expressions allowed me to understand things in fantastic ways. You can look there what Max Masungu wrote, what Qabula wrote. They are trying to experience the contradictions of the transition and it is profound stuff. Unfortunately, seven of the eleven are passed on. Some from the 'greater disease', some from class and the average age in South Africa is 53 years.

The second thing that is that I got so frustrated by all of these people who go to the US or the UK, find a mentor, bring a theory and read off social processes and experiences off them all of a sudden and/or the new wannabees who say 'class, therefore class consciousness, therefore this is the consciousness and this is false consciousness'. I said 'no, no, no'. I spent a lot of time trying to construct how the black working population is not a tabula rasa – it has a history, it has had forms of symbolism, forms of experience that precisely define the navigating methods that people use to act. Whether people like it or not. It is important to decipher what that is about.

It was not an easy task to put together, but again, I was the luckiest guy on earth. Number one, people must remember the labour monitoring groups and I was a leading person in that. What is not known that when the civil war started in Kwa-Zulu Natal, I was put in charge of the Violence Monitoring Groups. So we had 400 people and we organised networks to find out what was going on. That has been given over to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But those 400 people can be traced up to 2000 what happened to them. I traced them in 2000, in 2005 and find out exactly what the damage was. I was the lucky guy with COSATU and its cultural history, including many of its

leading cultural figures, about 40 of them and writing about that experience. So, it is possible what those cultural parameters are and then trace them.

Thirdly, you cannot understand the horizontal solidarities were created about the 'we-ness' of the people. How is the 'we' experienced? We are trying to explain how the elastic band that kept the people together has been stretched, it has not been broken. We need to explain that. Because if you look at the economic divergences that happened between the mobiles and the 'stuck', the non-winners, the academics would say that those divergences are breaking apart, they have nothing in common. But, no, the elastic band, however frayed, held. And that allows you to understand what is going on now: that is this need for an 'authoritarian other' because they are externalising the problem - 'it is not me comrade, it is the Metro, its not us, it's the Province, I am good you know'. It is always externalised. What creates these dynamics that cannot be read off so easily? What has created this comradeship? Is it still there from the 70s and 80s? Maybe not, but you need to understand what it is.

The next point is that a critical evaluation of an institution through which we try to steer a society to some desired outcomes and why is it that there is such a mismatch between the institutional design and the vectors is a critical thing that needs to be understood by sociologists. I tried my best.

But, in the final instance, this book is about people. It is a tribute to people tried to do the impossible, read that they could do the impossible, believed that they could do the impossible, mobilised their emotions, their creativity towards a new society, danced, recited, organised and so on. People who made me a sociologist, it is payback time so that their voice is not erased by the belly button sushi-licking. So, I stop in 2000. My evidence stops in 2000. But, I added this postscript because the book was meant to come out in 2006. The post script involves what I understand as what the road to Polokwane to have been. I have added two stories - from Alfred Xlabula under the pseudonym of Martha Mkize and how their deaths create new dynamics from below as people try to reconfigure their livelihoods. I am trying to pull things to the present.

But, Barbara is right. The next decade is important. I don't think that I even have the emotional energy to think about the next decade. But, anyway I take the challenge. Barbara was around when we were undergraduates. So we are very privileged to have her here. She knows all of my thoughts but none of my virtues. We were there in sociology, anthropology in that ferment that was Wits in the 1970s when history smacked us. She paid the price. Again, I was the lucky guy. Thank you for being with us.

For Pitika, ahh, man. I have never met a man who can write a poem in 3 minutes while listening to someone else speak. We also had a dream that we shared, that we thought that we could through an African Renaissance idea get the Province of Kwa-Zulu Natal together. He was the cultural leader, I was the dumb sociologist and we were trying to bring the different elements together. But, we failed. No, rather, we did not fail. There is daily reconciliation that is happening in KZN, but, in terms of the bigger dream, we failed for reasons that will remain secret. But, you should go to the better book, which is Pitika's book about his retrospective sculpture exhibition: if you want to see sculptor that dances and speaks in a new way by pretending to be ancient, Pitika's is the work. I appreciate that you took the time to be here. I always loved his restlessness and creativity. His words were hurting.

Two things: if it is the next decade, our work in KZN starts when this book ends. I do not have our ability to reflect on what happened thereafter. The second thing about the comments: of course I was faster than him and of course I was reading the Russian Revolution at the same time, and I was also pretending to be Mayakovski. But, I could do it, due to the generosity of the people who worked behind the scenes to be able to write things. A latecomer to this was David Linkin and the hospitality of the Sociology Department at UCT and the welcoming atmosphere of Cape Town in my move from Durban. But, then also the younger generation of people who took the load. I appreciate the fact that Debbie Bodan is here, Stembisa is here, Bianca, Ayesha, Nadine, Nonkosi, are all moving to Cape Town. Without them doing the nuts and bolts of the big political economy research things, my ability to write eloquently would have been compromised. If it were also not for the Wolpe Trust believing in my nonsense, I would not be here.

In the end, two little things. The first thing is that once you produce a book, it is out of your hands. You hope that you have done your best. But, you start to become more nervous by the day, because the minute that you pick up and open to page 21, because you cant read it again, you realise, 'oh no, I mentioned that but not this'. So, it is a brutal separation and I hope that it is appreciated by the critical community. Please don't be kind to me, I am not used to people being kind to me. The second thing is that I feel that we are going through a moment when some of the key moral issues about who we are, who we should be, in a world that is highly connected and where we are asked to play some leadership in the development dilemmas of the South and the North, we need more critical thinkers and more and more work from the Humanities and Social Sciences and we need to be absolutely honest with each other without any nonsense if we are going to be successful in that.

I still believe that our revolution was one of the most significant events of the last period of the 20th century. If we fail, then we all fail. I threw my little log on the fire, please all of you throw your logs on as well and lets all move on, critically, honestly and the waves of authoritarianism can be controlled.

Thank you.