THE GREAT CHALLENGE:

AFFIRMING THE MAJORITY CHARACTER OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY DURING AND AFTER NEGOTIATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two years, the concern about affirmative action, has become obvious because there is a burgeoning of literature and numerous training/educative sessions by socalled "experts" on the subject.

Affirmative action has become the "catch" phrase of those that are talking about and/or working on transforming and/or democratizing South Africa. But the concept has become highly emotive; it is often trivialized by the manner in which it is defined and by the content of the discussion about it. The popularization of the concept has been via radio and television programmes, the policy discussion by political organizations such as the ANC and other organizations such as the Black Management Forum, the tertiary institutions and COSATU. Whilst opening up the debate has been constrained by the fact that contending social forces have not been transparent in their agendas.

At a recent UDUSA conference at UDW, it was agreed that the concept is inescapably a reformist one, rather than a radically transformative one.

Debbie Budlender - one of the NEPI researchers on Human Resource Development - says it, addresses in the main (at least in the manner the discussions have taken place) the top echelons of the political spectrum, the public and private sector including the worker sector. (See NEPI report on Human Resource Development).

The limitations in the approaches to the subject and hence the nature of the discourse of affirmative action appear to be the result of:-

(a)   the historical origins of the concept (the US especially) in that, though there have been changing definitions of the concept, those origins continue to set the boundaries and shape the content of the discourse.

(b) those who dominate the debate/discourse (whether they locate these within the discourse of transformation in general or not) are not transparent. As Marla Singh [1] says:-

> "The notion of trasformation in South Africa is not transparent; it is indeed contested and is contestable"

In the current phase of transformation the discourse on transformation and democratization has been dominated by derived or received notions rooted in European origins. The danger that this poses for us is well articulated by Jacques Depelchin (1988) [2] when he said:

> "Whoever manages to impose a theoretical framework, will end up also imposing the framework within which the answers will be given"

Consequently the objective should be:

> "to scrutinize the conceptual framework which was put into place through colonial domination..............[whose] concepts and theories continue to hold sway".

If this is not done we will find that racist, colonial, sexist assumptions will remain even when control appears to have passed to the traditionally disadvantaged groups. At the present conjuncture we should challenge the very understanding of dominant notions e.g. affirmative action and link the debates to the discourse of the transformative political policy process and the democratization processes. Thus the notion of affirming the majority character attempts to escape the above historical origin and the narrow conceptions and problematize the issue differently by taking into consideration the efforts of the oppressed at organizing and breaking free from institutions; structures and processes that continue to reproduce subordination i.e. for each group we should begin producing analysis that do not "incarcerate" them in the same oppressive arenas under different conditions.

Singh therefore suggests, and correctly so, that we examine the nature, form, content (process) and pace of transformation. The context within the discourse is located, the participants in that discourse and the boundaries set for the discourse, will all determine whether the outcome of transformation will indeed affirm the majority character of our society.

We therefore need to contribute towards this outcome. We need to do this by avoiding getting caught in false problematics which let us carry forward, under a new guise, old assumptions and social relations.

The paper therefore attempts to move the debate from the old conceptualization of affirmative action to one derived from progressives of the freedom struggle, but one which has not received the attention it deserves. The paper further examines the discourse, its notions, conceptual framework and its boundaries and the possibilities and constraints of this discourse in shaping the transformation process in such a way that a truly democratic society, in which the majority people are truly affirmed, is realized. For, it is to the latter outcome that Ruth First had dedicated her life to struggle. In the spirit of her intellectual rigor I pose challenges for us the socalled intellectuals and plead to those of us who recognize the need to link our intellectual work not only to the political policy process but also to the democratic process of transformation.

WHO ARE THE MAJORITY

It may be simple to define the South African majorities as undeniably being:-

(a) Blacks - Africans especially

(b) Women

(c) Rural people

(d) Youth

(e) Poor

(f) Functional illiterates etc.

But we all know that such numerical definition assumes homogeneity that does not exist in reality. Yet if we look at the historically disadvantaged groups in society, they do in the main fall in these categories. At a conference at the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) held in order for this institution to examine itself and shape new directions for itself, a question was asked: "How can we create a non-racial society non-racially"? We could extend the issue to gender by asking: How can we create a non-sexist society by not engendering"? I am not sure I can do any of these things by not talking about women or different races etc. But this is not the problematic we need to engage in. If we had to consider the above mentioned majorities, not in isolation, but in a holistic manner and focus on how to affirm them individually and collectively, we may have a totally different outcome. The interconnectedness between these groupings is what is important; The challenge is how to theorise and problematize this connection in such a manner as to answer the question as to how we can affirm the majority, character of South African society and achieve true democracy.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Out of an estimated population of thirty five (35) million people in South Africa, eleven (11) million are thought to be illiterate adults. Of the total labour force of South Africa, 30% is estimated to have no formal education and 38% regarded as having primary education only. This means at least 55% of the population have 'a problem'. This has serious implications for the processes of transformation and democratization. Given the complexities and rapid nature of social change, the capacities of this group of people to understand and participate in processes of change remains severely constrained.

The problem faced by this majority of people, who happen to be in the main African, was highlighted recently when the debate about a CODESA crisis was at its height. The issue was discussed on television and radio (in English); the diagrams that were used on TV and in print media not only confused TV

personalities but persons like myself who regard themselves as highly literate and very multi-lingual. An old man from Katlehong in Transvaal commented:

> "I thought we are to inherit the new South Africa - all of us including we the illiterate blacks and these stupid boers at these factories in Alberton. But none of us understood the debates".

After a half hour explanation by one of his comrades, using sticks, grass, bottle caps and quite flowery language, the same old man commented:

> "If I could write and read and use those diagrams, I would have a thing to teach those [white] guys".

He clearly had a very good grasp of the problems.

A further illustration of the problem is one that I think is so very easy to solve. Two morning television programmes on health and living with nature discuss in bilingual form, important health issues such as diabetes, arthritis, allergies, diarrhoea, cataracts etc.; problems that are very important for the improvement of the general health status of especially poor blacks. In the presentation, references are constantly made about reading labels. The programme living with nature discusses herbs and other plants which are very much located within the experience of the poor, blacks and rural people. Yet by the very nature of the format, the advise given, the scheduling of presentations etc. excludes the very population which needs the information most.

Recognition that literacy and information is important to all citizens in order to improve the health status of South Africa, will begin to address the affirmation issue because it is Blacks, women and Africans in particular who would benefit in the main.

The Adult Basic Education group of NEPI, has stated that:-

*   Adult illiteracy prevents the growth of a democratic society.
*   The lack of basic education keeps productivity levels low and limits skills training.

* Illiteracy makes people powerless. They cannot take part in development programmes, support their children's learning or benefit from health programmes. (See NEPI Briefing Papers).

Yet experiences of Cuba and Ethiopia in improving literacy levels form +90% to 40% illiteracy in a few years are very instructive in how we can address these problems. (Johnetta Cole 1983). This is certainly one way in which the participation of the majority in development and democracy affirms them. But in this stage which is crucial for setting in motion democtratization, not much attention is placed on solving the illiteracy problem.

It is generally accepted in most circles, that South Africa's major resource is its people. It is estimated that by the year 2000, no more than 7-10% of the employed working population of South Africa will be white. It is generally accepted that South Africa will/should be economically strong and therefore some affirmative action will be necessary. In particular, the affirmative action discourse has focused on the role education and training plays or should play. But it is acknowledged that education and training may be simultaneously functional as well as contradictory to the system of domination (Wolpe 1991 p.9). Indeed race, class and gender discrimination can infact be maintained by education as experiences of some countries have shown. For example Julie Frederickse's study of Zimbabwe illustrates the importance of socio-economic status in determining access to education[3]. Debbie Budlender says that "its not what you know but whom you know and what you are"[4].

What clearly emerges is that much of the debates have occurred within a pre-established, accepted framework; one which is not necessarily located within the struggle for fundamental transformation of socio-economic and power relations which are imposed by Apartheid Racist System. (Rachmat Omar[5]) Mayibuye Nov. 1991, p. 20).

NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Because affirmative action has been shown to be necessary but not sufficient for transformation of South Africa, there is need to problematize transformation. To do this, there is need to locate the discourse of transformation within the locus of political transformation. For this we need a political paradigm within which we pose our questions and which recognizes centrality of issues of redress and of struggle for strategic power and its location.

The questions therefore asked are:-

In what type of socio-political economic agenda is the discourse being located? (Nkondo)[6].
At what stage and under what historical conditions would we say transformation and transfer of power has taken place? (Ndzimande)[7]

What are the tensions and contradictions that currently exist which are likely to affect the process of transformation for example between:-

(a) achieving equity   vs   development
(b) democracy   vs   excellence
(c) quality   vs   quantity

WHAT PARADIGMS

What paradigms have influenced intellectual discourse in South Africa and have these taken into consideration gender as an analytical tool, or have they taken class, age, ethnicity and regional differences as factors that need to be analyzed together? In particular, has the discourse of transformation taken into consideration that people's relationship to the processes of change depends on their class, race, gender position and regional location?.

Apartheid experience has had differential impact on various aspects of our society. It has exarcebated many asymmetrical relations that already existed between groups and regions etc. before apartheid. It is therefore necessary that we analyse the complexity of inter-penetrating systems of social relations using various analytical tools.

GENDER ANALYSIS

Gender analysis will for example address the differential positions of men and women and the power relations between them; how these are structured by gender relations (historically embedded and under changing conditions) and the ideologies that shape, maintain and/or reproduce them. We all recognize that such an analytical tool will be wholly inadequate if it is substituted for another e.g. class and race analysis. But if for example the discourse of State and Democracy does not have a focus on gender relations, a democratic and a non-sexist society is not likely to materialize.

In this regard therefore, how do we define concepts such as the State, Nation, Citizen, National Boundaries and Territorial integrity so that they are engendered given our history and experience of:-

(a)   "migrant labour, within and without what has traditionally been conceived of as our "national boundaries".

(b)   bantustans

(c)   the struggle for liberation.

In a paper in which (Mamdani 1992)[8] examines the theory and notions of rights and the assumption that underpin these, he argues that because these notions and concepts are "derived" and they are not examined under concrete circumstances, they have tended to focus narrowly on citizenship rights, whose definition in themselves excluded a large number of propertyless people, women and socalled non-citizens. He suggests that a notion of citizenship be derived from membership of labouring communities. While this may allow us to think creatively in the

current conjuncture about constitutional arrangements that would cater for those whose labour contributed to the economic development of this country, the analysis is however not engendered. Given the problematic conceptualization of labour itself, what does such a notion imply for women of the male migrant labouring communities of South Africa. But we also need to go further and ask if citizenship rights are conferred, what in fact is the content of those rights for men and for women of these communities?

The manner in which Mamdani, takes the concrete reality of Africa - a land of migrant labour - automatically injects class issues into the discourse, and does not allow us to escape them. Such an analysis then assists us in not homogenizing women either. The notion of labouring communities, if engendered, makes a distinction in our concrete reality between African women of different classes; between African women and other black women; between African women and white women whose experience is not of migrant labour reality.

The contradiction is however, that the traditional cultural origin of the migrant labouring communities have imbedded in them asymmetrical gender relations and ideologies that reproduce these relations. To change these relations and ideologies is a formidable task. The problem however is that very often the discussion of these have been among those who have distorted views of these cultures viz. whites, urban African men and women. Some often romanticize African rural cultures and experiences or are nostalgic about positive aspects of their cultures and ignore the very oppressive aspects along age and gender of these cultures. Others have very distorted views e.g. what husbands are allowed to do or not do to their wives. For example wife battering is often rationalized as part of African culture by men. Yet African cultures are replete with evidence of mechanism of censure for a men who beats his wife.

The concrete experience of the liberation struggle poses very different political imperatives for black political leaders than for whites regarding notions of citizenship and non-sexism. Women in relationships with South African men as

well their offspring (and as vice versa) have had their rights to family life severely constrained by existing dominant notions.

The study of these cultures and experiences of the liberation movement has been dominated by those who have seen the cultural practices through western eyes. It is these studies that will shape the new dispensations to a large measure.

The great challenge is that blacks in general and women in particular must be engaged in constructing the knowledge which shapes transformation discourse. Black women of all <u>classes</u> and <u>ages</u> in different regions must be involved. In African society, age plays a very important role in structuring all, especially gender relations, but it has been ignored in our analysis. Yet this would be crucial in analysing mechanisms for affirming democratic rights of especially migrant labouring communities.

REGIONAL IMBALANCES

The concrete realities of South Africa reflect regional imbalances and asymmetrical relations between and within regions - e.g. Northern Cape and Western Cape; Northern Transvaal and Southern Transvaal; the Orange Free State vs Natal and Goldfields vs Rest of Orange Free State; Border and Eastern Cape vs PWV. etc. A most common refrain among both blacks and whites of the OFS, Northern Cape, Border, Northern and Eastern Transvaal is that Resources are located in the PWV, Western Cape and Durban. The historical origins and the structuring of these relations have been studied by the left. Studies by Wolpe and others that focused on different modes of production assisted us in theorizing the structural relations between the socalled "modern" and "subsistence" sectors. Ruth First focused on the economy and the very manifestation of these relations in the concrete reality. Mike Morris and others focused on struggle and process. Much criticism of this work has been that: it is too abstract - does put flesh and bones on the "structure" and that it is not engendered. Further that, notions of struggle are "western" and are not liberatory for those engaged in struggle and that black scholars (Matsepe, Ndzimande and Vilakazi)[9] have fallen prey to these hegemonic

views and portray the oppressed, women and marginalized, as victims rather than as agents infused with a fervour and with their own consciousness.

Be this as it may, what are the challenges posed for us today by the concrete circumstances of regional imbalances as reflected in for example:-

(a)   The Vaal Triangle which is a reflection of the major demographic shifts that have occurred in South Africa. The current population estimates are three (3) million people. The majority are relatively young, unemployed and uneducated; and poor; and recent arrivals. They are trapped in Sebokeng, Boipatong, Zamdela and Sharpeville.

(b)   The communities of Phola Park/Thokoza/Vosloorus in the Transvaal and Kayalitsha in Cape Town are recent arrivals in their areas and ascribe their migration to the deteriorating economic situation in their areas of origin which are a result of this asymmetrical development of regions.

(c)   The Gold Fields - Kroonstad area, has also seen dramatic demographic growth with consequences to disastrous proportions for marginalized youth especially.

These areas have been the flashpoints of violence, after it first erupted in Natal. Within these areas violence has been experienced especially in the most socio-economically depressed sections. There is therefore evidence of the class location of the violence. (See H. Vilakazi, 1990, CASE 1992)[10]

Given also the fact that much of the violence in South Africa today centers around hostel dwellers, whose history and experience of "non-citizenship" and inhumane social existence, have structured their self perceptions as well as perceptions by others of them, what does Mamdami's new notions of rights imply?

We cannot therefore omit, ignore or under estimate the violence from the delivery of a democratic society in South Africa. The contradiction in democracy is that it

has been seen on one hand as an outcome of violent struggle whereby the powerless, voiceless, oppressed etc. affirm their "rights" "legitimacy" etc. On the other hand it has also been seen as a means of eliminating differences. In South Africa, the black majority's perceptions of democracy are shaped by knowledge that Democracy and Slavery have historically not been seen to be mutually exclusive, at home or abroad. Notions of democracy in the current discourse of transformation does not seem to address the "national question". Unless it is perceived that there is a linkage between the democracy and the national question, violence on the part of the African majority is likely not to diminish.

Affirmation of the majority via regional/sectoral development which specifically brings qualitative difference in lives of the majority people, in especially these violence torn areas, will be important in the transition period. Hostel dwellers and communities must perceive this development.

But rural development which focuses on the needs of the rural workers is as important. The cry of rural dwellers was very loud and clearly articulated in recent conferences on marginalized youth. The connection was made between education (especially that occurring under the farm school system) the drought and its impact on social structures like the family and the physical and psychological health of rural people. Regional perceptions are that the urban problems receive the attention of this mass democratic movement while lip service is paid to regions with large rural sectors. The education, health, rural development and environmental sectors of the mass democratic movement must investigate the paradigms they use to see how these address regional and rural problems.

The challenge for the liberation movement such as the ANC is how not to separate the political movement from social movements and grassroot aspirations. Because their opponents will in fact have vested interested in this separation.

RACE, CLASS, ETHNICITY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The interconnectedness between regional demographics, race and ethnicity poses

yet other development challenges for the solution of the national question. For example perceptions that resources are located in and focus is placed on PWV, Cape Town and Durban have the consequence of associating these areas with specific racial and ethnic groups. Whether such perceptions are correct or not is not important. What is important is whether they are widely held and if they have serious political consequences.

Cape Town is an area where redistribution of resources and affirmative action may be seen to benefit so-called coloured people. The historical legacy of the preferential labour practices which favoured this group over Africans and the experiences of the different groups have structured their perception. Class similarities between the groups, are blunted by the fact that the African professional middle class, experience under Apartheid was closer to that of working class Africans than their coloured counterparts*. The differential class perspectives may be emerging within the African and Coloured communities but the contextualization of the problem in the political discourse has been muted.

In Durban the same problem is with regard to Indians. The convergence of race and class among the blacks in these regions allows for a reproduction of some differences, under changed conditions. The improvement in the last two decades of the education status of Coloured and Indians and the simultaneous deterioration of education among African exacerbates the problem. Given the importance socio-economic status plays in determining access to education, and given the importance of education as a factor in social mobility, reproduction of the old racial order will continue unless drastic intervention is made.

The ideological consequences of the demographic location of Coloureds and Indians in Wester Cape and Durban and PWV under apartheid, have serious political consequences, that cannot be ignored. For example, foreigners and returning Namibians from the North were very much struck by the dominance of so-called coloureds as employees, in the various sectors of the economy. While consciousness of locals had been structured by this reality, those from outside

were very uncomfortable in this reality. But mechanisms for engaging in the debate around the national question had not been set in motion and were absent in the political discourse. The challenge is for the discourse among progressives to take up this debate and contextualize it in the transformation discourse and the political policy process. Ignoring it during this period is simply to postpone the inevitable. Race and ethnicity are a reality that cannot be wished away. Avoiding the discussion will simply allow others whose agendas may be to sow disunity to engage in it, with disastrous consequences for building a united, democratic, non-sexist and non-racial society.

The great challenge is how to do this especially in this period of transition to avoid the national question raising its head as vicious python after negotiated settlement.

CONCLUSION

Affirming the majority character of the society assumes a recognition of differences in sectors of our society. These differences have historical origins and may be deeply embedded in culture, ideology and values. The only way transformation of society can occur is that operationalization of democratization and affirmative action must address the aspirations of the black majorities rather than a small black minority.

The paradigms we use to analyse our problems must not focus on the abstract but on the concrete reality as it affects the majority population. This assumes the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, ethnicity and regional location as these impact on individuals and groups and their ability to shape, participate in and benefit from democratization and the transformation process. One major challenge is the development of such appropriate paradigms.

FOOTNOTES

1. Marla Singh: "The politics of University Transformation" Paper delivered at **UDUSA** conference, Durban Westville July 1992.

2. Jacque Depelchin: "Adjustment with a Human Face or Apartheid with a Human face". Paper delivered at **CODESRIA** General Assembly Dakar, Senegal, December 1988.

3. For a review of the literature see the **NEPI** papers by Mpume Sikhosana: Emerging Alternative Education And Training Policies And Their Implications For Affirmative Action In Human Resources Development and Debbie Budlender: Human Resources Development and Gender Affirmative Action.

4. Ibid

5. Mayibuye No. 1991 P. 20

6. Issues raised by him at the **UDUSA** conference, Durban Westville, July 1992

7. Raised by him at the **UDUSA** conference, Durban Westville, July 1992.

8. Mandani M.: Paper delivered at the **CODESRIA** General Assembly, Dakar, February 1992.

9. Matsepe Casaburri I.: On the question of women in the South African Struggle in African Journal Political Economy No. 1, 1986.

   Ndzimande

   Vilakazi H.:

10. Vilakazi H.: Ibid

11. David Everatt: "Consolidated **CASE** Study on the Reef Violence"