

Nelson Mandela and the Unfinished Business of Identity Politics in South Africa

In writing about Nelson Mandela and Race one is necessarily writing about not just an individual but the politics of a particular age. I shall refer to this age as political modernism. Political modernism is of course underpinned by the principles of freedom, justice and equality. But more important than that modernism is characterized by the idea that human fate lies no longer in God or in the after-life, and that human beings have the capacity to shape their destiny through the exercise of reason. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor uses the concept of self-determining freedom to describe the modern revolution: “ this is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.”¹ This is not a rejection of God as such only that an awareness of any external forces passes through us as reasoning human beings. I shall return to the subject of religion later, suffice to say that it is this idea of self-determining freedom and reasoning that enables people to reject religions based on racial supremacy. Underpinning modernist politics is the idea that the world can be changed for the better through the application of science to solve social problems. The scientific revolution of the 17th century gave further impetus to the idea of self-defining or shall we say self-perfecting freedom. According to Hobsbawm the Industrial Revolution uprooted masses of people from their sedate if feudal rural environments into what he describes as “the onrush of modernity.”² In achieving its freedom in 1994 South Africa joined the other modernist revolutions such

¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, 1991, 26

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1789*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 109

as the English Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution.

In writing about Mandela one is necessarily also writing about the story of a generation of leaders. Mandela often reminds his audiences that the struggle was not his achievement alone. People mistakenly think he is just being modest, and so they nod temporarily and then proceed to individualize the struggle as if he has not said anything. I suppose such is our love and fascination with individual leaders. I personally believe in the power of individual leaders to the extent that I have been rightly accused of ignoring structural constraints on those leaders. But Mandela is being literal about the fact that he was not alone in struggle. Many people shaped the direction of that struggle. And so I will draw on their voices as well.

The best way I know to provide a critical analysis of the modernist approach to struggle is by juxtaposing it to the post-modern revolution of the black consciousness movement. The differences on race could not be any starker than that between Nelson Mandela's non-racialism and Steve Biko's post-modern turn towards a cultural politics of identity. Political modernism seems to have been limited to political and economic modernization, whereas the post-modernist politics of Steve Biko and the black consciousness movement forced us to inquire into the implications of tribalism, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of cultural identity for our political culture. Those cultural insights may be useful as we face down the ugly head of xenophobia in our country today. But as Mamphela Ramphele has noted, the black consciousness movement neglected to address the issue of gender.

The Age of Racism and its Aesthetic Discontents

The modernist age was also the age of racism. The spectre of racism has haunted world history for well over four centuries now. To be sure practices of racial inequality can be found in ancient Greece and other early societies. But as Martin Bernal notes in *Black Athena*: “it is generally accepted that a more clear-cut racism grew up after 1650 and that this was greatly intensified by the increased colonization of North America, with its twin policies of extermination of the Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans.”³ Elsewhere Ira Katznelson describes how ‘post-sixteenth century’ Europe extended its tentacles across the world through colonialism and slavery. The past five hundred years can thus be described in Eric Hobsbawm’s formulation as “the age of Euromegalomania” or what Cornel West calls the age of Europe.⁴

West argues that the very scientific breakthroughs that brought about modernism became the instruments for racial classification, particularly in the area of natural history and biology where there was a fascination with bodily appearance. Whereas racism in antiquity took a cultural dimension, modern racism rested fundamentally on a combination of natural history – the study of human and animal bodies- and biology. For some reason- at least inexplicable to us now- the Greek bodily form lay at the apex of beauty. And it is precisely because blacks occupied a marginal existence in Greek society they never became part of that classical aesthetic. West urges us not to underestimate “the role of classical aesthetic and cultural norms” in the emergence of modern racism, and

³ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, Rutgers University Press,...

⁴ Hobsbawm op.cit, 169

the role played by writers, scholars and artists in propagating those norms: “the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, Greek ocular metaphors and classical aesthetic and cultural ideals constitutes the essential elements of modern discourse.”⁵ But look at the metaphors West uses to describe the extension of this modernist fusion to racism, if only to demonstrate its repugnance: “the idea of white supremacy is a major bowel unleashed by the structure of modern discourse, a significant secretion generated from the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, and classical aesthetic and cultural norms. Needless to say the odor of this bowel and the fumes of this secretion continue to pollute the air of our post-modern times.”⁶

And so even though racism is classically the subjugation of black people by white people- its invention taught people how to differentiate and discriminate on a number of other fronts. To paraphrase John Hope Franklin racism is the original sin that taught human beings how to discriminate simply on the basis of bodily appearance. It is the seed of bodily classification planted in sixteenth century Europe that makes Hitler’s Germany and Rwanda possible. This phenomenon became particularly intense in the mid to late nineteenth century as politicians sought to organize communities, many of which were newly liberated from empires, along linguistic and religious lines. The desire to construct purist states still persists including among sections of the rightwing Israeli population. It is also that history of aesthetic differentiation that makes it possible for ordinary South Africans to discriminate against and even kill foreigners on the basis of their bodily appearance.

⁵ Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 75

⁶ *Ibid.* p86

Prefiguring a Modernist Non-Racial Society

Modernist national liberation movements such as Nelson Mandela's ANC provided a powerful counter-image of society to that provided by the racial and ethnic chauvinism imposed on Africa by Europe. Mandela himself may wish to be remembered for all the other things he has done in his life after active political life. Mainly this has been the charitable work of the foundations that have been established in his name. These will no doubt be recorded in history but mostly as a footnote to the bigger narrative of his role in the fight against racism. His speech from the dock during the Rivonia Trial became an inspiration to oppressed people inside and outside South Africa: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." The idea of an individual publicly declaring that they would die for what they believe was new to the ears of many. Throughout history people fought wars as collective communities and nations. But the idea of an individual dying for a cause explains why someone like Cornel West would compare Mandela to Jesus and Socrates. In 1977 Steve Biko suffered the fate Mandela had seen for himself in 1964.

Mandela and the ANC's modernism showed through the alliance with the white Congress of the People that racist liberalism could be overcome for a more racially inclusive alternative. More than any other liberation movement in Africa this model provided an example of how a multi-racial and multi-ethnic response. Later, and after much criticism of multiracialism as an affirmation of racial differences, Mandela's ANC adopted non-racialism. The concept of non-racialism is relatively new in the political discourse of the ANC- going back only to the 1970's and 1980's. But whether one prefers multiracialism or non-racialism what these movements sought was something that was "the opposite of the ethnically and linguistically homogenous entities which came to be seen as the standard form of the nation-state in the west."⁷ And thus by the time Nelson Mandela is ready to lead South Africa into a rainbow nation, there is enough of such a precedent in the discourse and practice of the ANC and its allies. The model of the multiracial broad church that had animated bodies such as the United Democratic Front became the rainbow nation in the post-democratic era. Mandela was joined in this by Archbishop Desmond Tutu- who, I would argue, is as much a child of the Enlightenment as Mandela.

The Political and Intellectual Crisis of Modernism

One of the basic tenets of progressive political modernism is the idea that political progress consists in movement away from all manner of primordial identifications. Non-racialism was seen as the ultimate modernist transcendence of racial, ethnic and tribal differences. Or as the late Mozambican leader Samora Machel put it: "for the nation to live, the tribe must die." Mandela is anti-modernist to the extent that he

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1789*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

challenged modern racism and its tribalist discontents.⁸ And yet Mandela is also quintessentially modernist- a child of the enlightenment by virtue of the missionary institutions in which he received his early socialization. An essential element of progressive modernism was that it was the responsibility of the educated elite to provide leadership to the masses. Petition was the dominant form of political action. This is how one of the great men of early black history DDT Jabavu expressed the civilizing mission of church and education: “it is our belief that with the spread of better understanding in Church and college circles the future of South Africa is one we can contemplate with a fair degree of optimism in the hope that Christian influences will dispel illusions, transcend the mistaken political expedients of pseudo-segregationists and usher in a South Africa of racial peace and goodwill.”⁹ ANC founding president, John Dube, cautioned that unless the government changed its policies then “herein lies a fertile breeding ground for the hot-headed agitators among us Natives, who might prove to be a bigger menace to this country than is generally recognized.”¹⁰

There was a decided shift in political tone with the rise of young militants such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in the 1940’s. These younger leaders did not have time for the polite petitioning of their predecessors. For starters they were not afraid of jail, and, as stated earlier, they were unfazed by death. They substituted mass campaigns for the petitions and ultimately ended up adopted armed struggle as the means to the end of political freedom. However, their militancy did not necessarily signal a philosophical break with political modernism. Their historical mission was to bring about a non-racial

⁸ It should be said though that even though Mandela rejects political tribalism he still remains attached to his traditional heritage as a chief.

⁹ DDT Jabavu, *The Segregation Fallacy and Other Papers*, Alice, 1928

¹⁰ John L Dube, *The Clash of Colour*, Gubbins Library, Durban, 1926,

society and they did that to the best of their abilities. The politics of cultural differences were for another generation. That would be the generation of Thabo Mbeki, or what has sometimes been referred to as the class of 1942.¹¹ However, that generation would prove to be just as incapable of transcending the limits of the political framework of modernism inherited from their fathers.

Nativism and Tribalism

Throughout Mandela's term as the first president of a democratic South Africa there was a growing sense among black militants that a more militant politics was needed to confront a resistant white community. While I would count myself amongst those who insisted that South Africa confront the continuing problems of race, I became increasingly perturbed by the cynical direction that this racial radicalism began to take. Increasingly such discourse had more to do with political power than addressing the problem of racism in society.¹² Just as the rise of racial nationalism had created an environment for other forms of hatred in Europe, the re-racialization of South African politics was accompanied by a re-ethnicization of political competition in the ANC. Suddenly there was open talk about the "Xhosa Nostra" that controlled the levers of political power. Apparently dissatisfaction with Xhosa dominance in the ANC goes back to exile- when some ANC leaders even mobilized against Oliver Tambo's

¹¹ Mbeki, Chris Hani, Pallo Jordan, Jacob Zuma were all born in the same year 1942. In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell writes about how factors that have nothing to do with individual genius contribute to the emergence of certain individuals – and not others- as leaders. Time of their birth is one of those factors. Mbeki and his peers would have been at the ripe age of eighteen at the time of the declaration of South Africa as an independent republic and at the formation of Umkhonto weSizwe.

¹² I have analysed Mbeki's legacy in *To the Brink: The State of Democracy in South Africa*, University of Kwazulu Natal, 2008.

leadership on that basis.¹³ After Tambo died of a stroke he was replaced by Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, both of whom are Xhosa.

The tribal politics came into the open in the contest between Mosuia Terror Lekota and Steve Tshwete for the chairmanship of the ANC in 1997. But that would not be last of it. Even Mandela himself had expressed concern at the perception of Xhosa dominance of the ANC. And this is the reason he would have preferred Cyril Ramaphosa to succeed him. Ramaphosa was of course beaten to the job by Thabo Mbeki. It would be difficult to imagine the cosmopolitan, de-tribalized Mbeki playing into tribal politics- besides the fact of his mother being Sotho. But there were reports in the period leading up to Polokwane that Mbeki all of a sudden began to get in touch with his roots. In his book, *Dream Deferred*, Mark Gevisser describes how Mbeki shunned his village, saying it was the last place he would visit in all of South Africa.¹⁴ But as the elections for the leadership of the ANC intensified- particularly in the Eastern Cape- Mbeki saw it necessary and important to go back home for a traditional ceremony.

The most public and flagrant display of tribal politics was when supporters of ANC president Jacob Zuma put “100% Zulu-boy” T-shirts. Ironically it took Mangosuthu Buthelezi- who had played tribal politics for decades under apartheid – admonish the ANC and Jacob Zuma about the dangers of tribalism. The politics of ethnicity have also emerged strongly in running political battles between the ANC’s African and Coloured constituencies in the Western Cape. Even prominent political ANC figures such as Allan Boesak – who has since joined the newly-formed Congress of the People-have complained about the problems of affirmative action for Africans in the

¹³ For a detailed discussion see Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba’s *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the SACP in Exile*, James Currey, 1992

¹⁴ Mark Gevisser, *Dream Deferred*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2007

Western Cape. Elections in that province have become nothing more than an “ethnic census”¹⁵ on which party will get the Coloured vote. But why would tribalism and ethnicity easily rear their ugly head in the progressive modernist organization such as the ANC?

The Answer’s Dalliance With Tribalism: Was It a Necessary Evil?

The answer to the above question lies in the awkward embrace that the ANC had with tribal politics. One of the interesting aspects of the Freedom Charter is that even as it expounds a universalist doctrine it nonetheless still holds on to the idea of national groups. In his essay in *Reflections in Prison* Walter Sisulu explicitly acknowledges the inroads that the apartheid system made into differentiating among different groups in the black community. He sees this as a political manouvre of divide and rule: “let the black groups see each other as threatening each other’s position, isolate the different segments of the black people, drive them apart, detract their sights from the common enemy.” And yet Sisulu argues that the struggle pivots around African people: “the liberation of the African people is a necessary condition for removing the oppression of all other national groups. This is not the case if the liberation of any one or several of the oppressed minority national groups is characterized as the pivot.”¹⁶ It could be argued in the ANC’s defense that this was indeed the reality – the African people received the brunt of

¹⁵For a discussion of elections as “ethnic census” see David Horowitz, *Horowitz DA Ethnic, Groups in Conflict*, University of California, Berkeley. 1985

¹⁶ Walter Sisulu, “We Shall Overcome!” in Mac Maharaj (ed) *Reflections in Prison*, Zebra Press, Cape Town 2001, 71

apartheid and because of their numbers were better positioned to lead the struggle. But it is the very same strategic thinking that led the ANC to accept Mangosuthu Buthelezi and the homelands as potential struggle sites.

Ever the brilliant strategist Sisulu points to the contradictions that the Bantustans will ultimately pose for the apartheid government, and urges his comrades not to abandon its people in those Bantustans: “cutting ourselves from the people in the Bantustans would amount to playing right into the hands of the enemy. We have an alternative to offer to the people in these areas. We shall be able to offer it if we accept the reality of the political ‘independence’ of those Bantustans and set out to utilize every means available to expose the contradictions that make their independence unreal and show them that their futures lies not in cooperation and friendship with the white racists but in supporting and assisting the liberation movement.” He argued that “within the Bantustans there exist forces that sympathise with our goals. One of our greatest mistakes is to see in every man and woman who works within these apartheid institutions an enemy of the revolution”¹⁷ Sisulu was strategically prescient indeed as the example of the role played by Bantu Holomisa in the Transkei would attest. The fall of the Transkei had a domino effect as the Ciskei and other homelands began to fall like a house of cards. There are indeed many junctures in the history of the struggle where trade-offs were made. In some cases those trade-offs were inevitable but lingering questions remain: the transition from black consciousness organization building in the 1970’s to mass mobilization in the 1980’s probably hastened the crisis of the apartheid regime, and yet we ask ourselves if we could not have avoided the internal violence and loss of innocence of our young people. The negotiations with the apartheid regime brought about the democracy we now

¹⁷ Ibid. 89

enjoy, and yet we continually ask ourselves if we should not have fought longer. The recognition of homelands as sites of struggle probably hastened the ability to mobilize African people and get everyone on board- both inside and outside of the homelands but the question lingers about whether we could have done more to deal with tribalism. This may come across as what the Americans call Monday night quarter-backing- but that may be useful in preparing players for the next game.

The Limits of The Modernist Developmental Paradigm

Some years ago I was a graduate student at Cornell University and got to be good friends with Martin Bernal. Through our conversations Bernal got to know that I subscribed to the radical cultural politics of the black consciousness movement. Given his own work in *Black Athena* Bernal was partial to the politics of black consciousness. And so when the Reconstruction and Development Programme was announced Bernal sarcastically remarked that it looked like we had gone beyond the 1970's to the 1950's in terms of our approach to development. I was also concerned at the time that the country's development paradigm- particularly the notion of service delivery- was predicated on a conception of citizens as consumers. In the words of Partha Chaterjee the people were increasingly seen as "empirical objects of government policy, not citizens who participate in the sovereignty of the state."¹⁸

When Mbeki first came up with the idea of the African Renaissance there was a general excitement amongst former black consciousness activists. There was a possibility that we could return to the politics of consciousness raising (conscientization) that had once been the hallmark of the liberation movement. Unfortunately the renaissance soon

¹⁸ Partha Chaterjee, 1998, 16

became yet another one of those elite projects around which the president's best friends gathered. After two or three conferences in Sandton nothing was to be heard of the African Renaissance again. Instead it mutated into a project called the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)- yet another project for economic modernization. As with political modernism the idea was that if Africa modernized its economy then this would somehow lead to the reduction of the continent's problems. According to some scholars this thinking has its roots in the seventeenth century idea of development as human regulation. Central to this process was the standardization of diversity of human life under the rule of the state. In his brilliant book, *Seeing Like A State*, James Scott describes how the modern state invented surnames, cadastral maps, scientific forestry and taxation systems to regularize "a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format."¹⁹ Alan Mabin has described this approach to development as "the left-modernist idea of the state as an instrument for reconstruction."²⁰

The difference between the RDP's modernism and Mbeki's neoliberalism is the latter's use of the culturalist politics of the African renaissance, amounting to what Patrick Bond has described as a politics of talking left and walking right. Mbeki's nationalist project coexisted with a worsening of the social project- high levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality and HIV/AIDS. When the xenophobic violence erupted much was made of the competition for resources as the main factor behind it. But the violence also exposed the failure of both the political and developmental dimensions of the idea of South Africa as the avatar of progress.

¹⁹ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998, 3

²⁰ Alan Mabin, "Reconstruction and the Making of Urban Planning in 20th Century South Africa" in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic (eds.), *blank_Architecture, Apartheid and After*, NAI Publishers,

The Post-Modern Alternative: The Insistent Voice of Black Consciousness

The word post-modern is a tricky one because it can easily be taken to mean a radical rupture with the modern era- for who could quibble with freedom, justice and equality. And who could quibble with the wonders of reason, science and technology. And who could argue with the desirability of development. So there is much of the modern in the post-modern. What post-modernism attempts to do however is to signify “a deep authority crisis in knowledge, a kind of demonopolizing of science on truth and reality in the marketplace of ideas. It raises the prospect of a plurality of epistemic authorities on truth and reality...”²¹ And this is exactly what black consciousness represented – not only a revolt against political and economic injustice but a rejection of what Biko called the totality of the white power structure. Black consciousness came as a shock because it rejected white liberal modernism – in other words, the idea of freedom, justice and equality as defined by white people. For the first time there was a national movement whose focus turned what West would call the normative gaze of whiteness in on itself.

The issues the movement addressed were as political and economic as they were cultural and existential. The movement came of age at exactly the same time that social movements around the world were rejecting political modernism. Many were disappointed by what modernism had brought about in the name of progress in Germany and the Soviet Union. From feminist movements to environmental movements to indigenous people’s movements there was a general questioning of the idea of progress – or at least as it was defined by a patriarchal, racist Eurocentric culture. Thus we begin to

²¹ West, op.cit. 68

see the emergence of new identity movements – some of which become important political parties. This is how Manuel Castells described the environmental movement: “if we are to appraise social movements by their historical productivity, namely, by their impact on cultural values and society’s institutions, the environmental movement of the last quarter of this century has earned a distinctive place in the landscape of human adventure.”²² The operative word is “cultural.” For this was exactly what distinguished the generation of Nelson Mandela from that of Steve Biko - with the latter emphasizing the cultural politics of identity as the mode of struggle. West expressed this cultural dimension of politics in his classic work, *Race Matters* thus: “people, especially poor and degraded people, are also hungry for identity, meaning and self-worth.”²³ This was hardly the language of Nelson Mandela and his generation.

Rejection of Bodily Appearance

The black consciousness movement rejected the idea of the existence of national groups as articulated in the Freedom Charter. The movement rejected the definition of black people as Africans, Coloureds and Indians and offered a political definition of blackness that was less about bodily appearance and more about political consciousness. By the middle of the 1970’s the movement had conjured a political rebellion that stretched throughout the country in alliances that involved “African”, “Coloured”, and “Indian” students, particularly in the Western Cape. The strife between Coloureds and Africans in the Western Cape today is an indication of how far the country has moved away from the politics of solidarity cultivated by the BCM. The movement also

²² Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell Publishers, 110

²³ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, Vintage Books, 2001, 20

completely rejected the homeland system. In an essay titled “Let’s Talk About the Bantustans” Steve Biko described the Bantustans as “politically, the biggest fraud ever invented by white politicians.”²⁴ In that essay there is not even a hint that the Bantustans could serve any useful purpose at all. Instead of seeing contradictions that could open space for political organizing, Biko sees those contradictions as a possible source of confusion in the black community, leading black people “to believe that something great is about to happen.” He continues: “at this stage of our history we cannot have our struggle being tribalized through the creation of Zulu, Xhosa and Tswana politicians by the system.”²⁵ In the final analysis he dismisses the Bantustans as “sophisticated concentration camps where black people are allowed to suffer peacefully.”²⁶ It can indeed be argued that the ANC was strategically correct in identifying the homelands as sites of struggle. But there is something about the resurgence of tribalism that makes one long for the cultural politics of black consciousness.

The black consciousness movement was also to be set apart from the ANC by its particular approach to religion. As stated earlier, the founders of the ANC were also prominent religious leaders. Their hope was that Christianity would open the hearts of their white brethren to the suffering of black people. The black consciousness movement saw religion as an instrument of control – or what Marx called the opiate of the masses. In an outright attack on one of the pillars of modernism Biko problematized Christianity as follows: “No nation can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt

²⁴ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, Picador Africa, 2004, 92

²⁵ *Ibid.* 95

²⁶ *Ibid.*

by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against then there begins to be something wrong in that relationship”²⁷

The difference between Mandela’s modernist emphasis and the post-modern emphasis of the black consciousness movement was not only in the substance but also in the instruments that the respective movements relied on to spread their message. The arts were central to black consciousness in a way that they never were in the modernist politics of the ANC. Poetry, novels, drama, fine art represented the new frontier of political organizing. To that extent the black consciousness rebellion is similar to the Romantic revolt against Enlightenment scientism in the 19th century. One is not here arguing that the ANC did not have a cultural wing but this does not become a significant part of that movement until the influence of BC.

The arrival of freedom did not resolve the identity problems that have always beset black political life – the problems of identity that preoccupied Steve Biko. Freedom has coincided with a disappearance of what Kirstie McClure calls the politics of direct address. This is "a quotidian politics"²⁸ in which individuals and communities changed their identities through horizontal, solidaristic relationships with each other. While the ANC may have succeeded in bringing about liberation, it never saw its political practice as that of transforming people’s consciousness. While the two are no doubt linked the transformation of consciousness extends beyond the moment of liberation. It extends to the way people see themselves and see themselves in relations to others in the post-

²⁷ Biko op.cit. 64

²⁸Kirstie McClure, " On the Subject of Rights:Pluralism,Plurality and Political Identity in Chantal Mouffe (ed) Dimensions of Radical Democracy,Verso, London, 1992

democratic period. The black consciousness insight was that we can make and remake our political identities in direct communication with each other when the times call for it.

One of the ironies of the South African experience is that a great deal of effort has been put towards repairing relationships between blacks and whites. This is no doubt attributable to the modernist struggle against racism and the role Nelson Mandela has played in fostering racial reconciliation. It is however precisely because the great modernist struggle of the twentieth century was focused on transforming white society to change its behavior that there was little attention to the needs of the black political community. Mandela did not expend too much energy on building a similar culture of reconciliation in the black community. This is not to say that Mandela did not intervene to stop violence in places such as KwaZulu Natal. And as Wole Soyinka brilliantly demonstrates in his memoirs, Mandela was the only leader amongst his ANC colleagues who was always willing to engage with Buthelezi when the latter threatened to derail the transition.²⁹ Mandela has also played an important role in mediating international conflicts, and played an important role in the Burundi peace process. But internal reconciliation is not Nelson Mandela's political legacy. Neither would it be Thabo Mbeki's- quite the contrary. The eruption of xenophobic violence would have been a wake-up call to political modernism of the ANC- to the idea that freedom, justice and equality constitute the sum total of human progress. At the centre of these conflicts seems to be the existential challenge of identity- of what it means to be Zulu or Xhosa or South African and African.

²⁹ Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*,

Towards a Post-Racial Cultural Pluralism

Let me conclude with a rather controversial proposition. Thanks to the efforts of Nelson Mandela and his generation racism is not the most insistent problem facing South Africa or the African continent – Robert Mugabe’s insistence notwithstanding. Racism remains a problem but the xenophobic violence should convince even the most race-bound amongst us that something else is afoot in our nation. There are still unresolved existential questions that, if unaddressed, could see us descend into the spiral of tribal and ethnic violence that has plagued other African societies. The great insight of the black consciousness movement was the accent it put on these existential questions of identity. The politics of direct address or conscientization that they employed should not only perform the negative function of preventing conflict but the positive function of creating healthier relationships amongst groups of people. Scholars such as Farai Chideya have argued that race will increasingly be only one among many forms of social differentiation and social struggle. These discussions have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa in the light of the increasing class differences within the black community. The social differentiation between the black elite and the black poor has frightening implications for social order. But this is more than an economic differentiation that can be explained in class terms. It is as if there is a section of the society that cannot be integrated into the mainstream of the body politic. The elite have thus become culturally alienated from the communities from whence they came. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes how the lumpen proletariat enter and occupy the centre of the historical scene: “So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals throw themselves

into struggle like stout working men. These classless idlers will by militant and decisive action discover the path that leads to nationhood.”³⁰

The emergence of Barack Obama as the first president of the United States has created the hope that America may have entered a post-racial era. Indeed, the election of a black president would have been thinkable in the United States only a decade ago. And so, yes, something epochal has happened in the United States- the closest that America has yet come to the Mandela moment. But what bears keeping in mind is that this does not mean the disappearance of race from American politics only that race is not working its way through the American body politic like it did a generation ago. Times do bring change. In the words of Frank Rich – there are new game changers in town and they consist mostly of the young people who mobilized for Obama. Many of them are the young people of mixed race that Chideya describes but many are just ordinary black and white kids who in the words of Barack Obama are neither embracive nor in denial about race- they simply work through race. In South Africa we have to work through race – while recognizing that as racism recedes a new form of identity politics will emerge to fill the vacuum of hate. For this identity politics we will need more than just political modernism, we will need the whole array of cultural instruments that Biko and his peers utilized to fight back the beast of existential insecurity.

³⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1968,p89