

OPINION

Suttner: Debating NDR

'National', 'democratic', 'revolution' are concepts, but do not have fixed meanings, says Raymond Suttner

THEORY is important not just to philosophers but all of us, because how we understand our world enables us to direct our actions in a manner that is most fruitful and more likely to achieve results we seek. The words "national", "democratic" and "revolution" are concepts, that is, ways of making sense of our world and advancing liberation. But these do not have fixed meanings for all time and we can argue over how we comprehend them.

The notion of NDR evolved over decades in the history of the ANC and SACP. The theory and strategy that is embodied in these words would never have developed and remained relevant had they not derived from people's experiences and signified meaningful ways of remedying the problems they faced. That is not to say that NDR or any one of the words remains without problems today. Nor does it mean that what some people say comprises implementation of the NDR needs to be accepted.

The important thing about theories, strategies and tactics is that these should not be left to scholars or political leaders but be part of a generalised debate. In such discussion it may be that NDR is discarded or reconstructed, in order to increase its relevance.

When the ANC was formed in 1912, it depicted itself as embodying a national vision, trying to unite separate peoples who had been defeated in colonial conquest as distinct chiefdoms. It sought to build one people, in fact only African men at that stage, in order to combat the racist laws, notably concerning land that the white Union of South Africa was already enacting.

Over the years the notion NDR came to comprise the strategy and tactics employed from the mid-20th century to combat a combination of oppressions and exploitation that black people experienced. The notion of NDR entailed combining resistance to both national oppression and class exploitation and avoiding either a class reductionist or race reductionist mode of understanding and strategising, that is explaining everything either by race or class.

Over time NDR also incorporated gender in an undeveloped way without fully unpacking the problem of patriarchy.

Considering NDR today, the words national and unity were historically very important, joining people from all oppressed sections of the population and a range of classes who suffered under apartheid and those whites who opposed apartheid and actively struggled for freedom.

It unified the oppressed while narrowing the base of the apartheid ruling bloc, which gradually lost support as resistance intensified.

After 1990 we need to re-examine these



GUARD AGAINST: The word "national" cannot be used to deny people the right to organise around a range of interests, says Raymond Suttner.

Picture: CREAMER MEDIA

notions. The word "national" is now linked to "social cohesion", deriving from conservative social philosophies. What does it mean for rights of distinct social interests to be organised and different identities to find self-expression outside of this social cohesive national identity?

Who decides on what is patriotic and the character of the nation which must be cohesive?

We have seen the outrage expressed by the ANC about the civil society conference. The thrust of the objection was that the ANC sees itself as representing the nation. It does not in fact recognise the relative autonomy of Cosatu and the total independence of other institutions which are not part of the tripartite alliance. The government and ANC leadership are audacious in demanding an invitation!

In the course of struggle the ANC saw itself and was designated (together with the PAC) as the sole and authentic representative of the people, an important step in delegitimising apartheid. On the other hand, what this may be taken to mean is that the liberation movement embodied the nation long before elections – and elections merely confirm that. That may be why Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe places little weight on elections.

The word "national" cannot be used to deny people the right to organise around a range of interests. The ANC may enjoy majority political support but it is not a broad social organisation, concerned with distinct sectoral issues. Others must be free and encouraged to organise on these questions.

Equally, we must guard against any notion of the "national" being used to suppress identities that are in no way unconstitutional.

At Polokwane the strategy and tactics document claims respect for diversity, but different identities must feed into a broad national identity. Whatever the ANC leadership considers to be regionalism and ethnic "chauvinism" will be stamped out wherever they "rear their ugly heads".

Why is that? Who decides on that broad identity? People have the right to constitute themselves, independent of the "national".

The word "democratic" is also not obvious in its meaning. Experience has shown that democracy can mean more than the vote, but also mean participatory (as the National Economic Development and Labour Council is supposed to be) and various forms of direct, popular democratic self-empowerment. Popular democracy found expression in the 1980s, but sometimes with various abuses, after older comrades were arrested during

the State of Emergency.

The notion of democracy, like national, is an evolving concept which can be enriched in its meanings over time, as our understandings were enriched during the people's power period when crime control and other elements were dealt with on a community level. One of the most notable places of popular power was in Port Alfred, where broad representatives united to ensure that popular action was used to regulate community concerns and prevent abuse. The word democracy and the object of realising democracy, is never finally realised, but is a continual process of broadening, deepening and empowering.

The word "revolution" is used by some in order to signify militancy as opposed to those who may use less extravagant language, and more cautious and patient in building organisation and developing practical implementation methods. Revolution is not a dangerous word. It need not mean violence, and can be achieved incrementally by a series of gains over time.

We need less "revolutionary phrases" and more about structural reforms that are transformative. We must not counterpose evolution and revolution, understanding that substantial social and economic transformation may be achieved gradually as well as in significant moments.

Revolution needs to include a process of elimination of patriarchal relationships, not merely women entering male constructed institutions, important as that has been, but transforming a range of structures and cultures to empower women. It means that the public/private divide which sees women cast as homemakers even if they are in the public domain, needs to come up for challenge. It is partly through this divide that on-going domestic violence is "justified".

Patriarchy also operates in treating heterosexuality as the only natural way of pursuing sexual relations. Flouting constitutionalism, the right of freedom of sexual orientation is under attack, even in South African representatives' vote in the UN condoning extra judicial killings on grounds of sexual orientation.

Advancing emancipatory goals may be through enriching our own empowerment and implementation of national democratic revolution, if it bears meanings that advance inclusive dynamic and transformative politics.

Professor Raymond Suttner is a former ANC, SACP and UDF leader, political prisoner and underground worker. His new book, *KwaZuma and Beyond*, will be published by Jacana in 2011

TRIBUTE

Men who earned respect

By Monde Tabata

IN THE past month, we have seen the untimely passing of remarkable people. We lost Moss Qomoyi, Phakamile Mamba and then Soto Ndukwana. It is a great loss and a tragedy for our society.

These individuals may not have known each other and there may be nothing that links them together on the surface. Indeed, Moss was born and grew up in De Aar, Phakamile Mamba was a child of Zimbabwe in Mthatha and Soto was a proud native of Qoboqobo.

I had the privilege of knowing all of them and for me, they represented the things I regard as characteristic of what I consider the intrinsic values of the Eastern Cape people.

Mamba was a warrior, set on en-

sureing the land of the people of Zimbabwe was restored to them. For him there were no half measures. He wanted the land restored before any business with outside investors could be concluded. I often thought he was short-sighted because investment is nomadic, but as a child of his people, he had his finger on the pulse of his people.

I had every reason to be disillusioned with his approach. After all, our company had won the right to build a casino resort in Mthatha and we were scuppered by the land claim. I hoped to persuade him and his committee to consider a dispensation. I did not win but I left with immense respect for the man and indeed his committee.

Mamba was well-informed, articulate, forceful and a smart player. His knowledge of the restitution law was awe inspiring and he kept

a copy of the Land Restitution Act in his pocket.

Many may not have agreed with his approach but he offered much that we ought to admire about those who carry mandates.

Moses Qomoyi was an interesting character in a different way. He was a man of bluster, abrasive and almost at all times ready for a fight, polemical fights that is. Moses boasted about being an educated person, about his exposure to Europe during the exile days, the people he met and how he overpowered them in argument. At all times, he won the debates. I am sure many will remember his calls to SAfm in the morning on the open lines, taking on Blade Nzimande, Vavi and others.

Our first encounter was unhappy. We did not like each other and I can't think why. All I can think is

that because we were both short by stature, we suffered from the fabled short man syndrome. Many of our mutual friends in King William's Town could not fathom our dislike for each other. It took the late Mbulelo Ntshinga to bring us together and Moss later graciously invited me to his wedding. Just to ensure that all was well, he mentioned during his speech we were now friends. Two weeks before he died we met at the airport and he told me his business was going well. We parted and indeed Moss represented the kind of arrogance that Eastern Cape men are known for in the rest of the country. Fearless and self assured. Moss could have been a great role model to many young people in the Eastern Cape, now he is gone.

Soto Ndukwana was what in the Eastern Cape was called "indoda". Soto was all dignity in the way that we understand it. What I liked most about Soto was that he proved that you could hold impeccable political credentials and still be humble.

What always fascinated me was his love for Qoboqobo. In the early days before many of us discovered that you could work in Johannesburg and keep a home in the Eastern Cape, Soto was on the East London bound plane on route to Qoboqobo.

Many will not know that Soto once established an organisation to develop boxing and give the boxers the best in their trade. He was furious that eventually boxers had nothing to show for their years of work. He wanted to change that. As a consequence of this, he discovered a young man Michael Canham from Buffalo Flats, who later served our country in Europe and US.

With their passing from this world I thought I should share these memories of three young Eastern Cape "boys" who I am sure made an impact on others' lives. These were some of the best of our building blocks in our country.

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