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"The bigger the cake?": puzzling over equality 20 years into post-apartheid South Africa

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Social Equality Conference UCT

Jeremy Cronin
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Voting in South Africa’s first ever non-racial elections, April 1994
In the concluding eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx famously said: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point, however, is to CHANGE it.” Given our contemporary South African reality, I am inclined to add a twelfth thesis: “Since the end of apartheid, South Africans have failed to change the reality of extreme inequality – perhaps the philosophers, in various ways, can interpret why and... help to change it.”

It is 20 years since the formal end of apartheid – bringing hope that substantial strides would be made in achieving greater freedoms and equality for all South Africans. Yet post-apartheid South Africa remains among the most unequal societies in the world. Using the Gini coefficient measurement, measuring income inequality (where 0 is complete income equality and 1 is where a single individual receives the entirety of national income), our inequality levels actually increased from 0,64 in 1995 to 0,69 in 2005, improving marginally to 0,65 in 2010/11\(^1\). They are likely to have risen again since 2010/11. These are amongst the highest (if not the highest) Gini inequality measures in the world. In 2010 the highest income decile in South Africa received 50,6 percent of all national household income, while the poorest 40 per cent of households received a meagre 5,6 per cent.\(^2\) Income inequality in South Africa remains heavily inflected by both gender and race. In 2012, the median earnings for a white male were six times higher than for an African female. In 2012, the median income for an African household was under R3000, while for whites its was around R20,000.\(^3\)

Using a different measure of inequality (the Human Opportunity Index – HOI), a recent World Bank study on South Africa\(^4\), finds similar patterns. “In international comparisons, South Africa fares well on school attendance but ranks below most comparators on the HOI for completing primary school on time and access to safe water on site, improved sanitation, and even electricity. Trends suggest improvements, but the gaps with other countries are generally not closing.” (p.x)

The impact on the poor of these extraordinarily high levels of income and other forms of inequality have been ameliorated somewhat over the past 20 years through the general raising of the floor of absolute poverty by important social redistributive measures, notably a major increase in social grants. Social grants now reach over 16 million South Africans, or

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Statistic South Africa 2012, *General Household Survey*
more than a third of the population\textsuperscript{5}. However, these re-distributive measures are deployed into a systemic reality that continues to reproduce crisis levels of racial, gendered and spatial inequality. Moreover, the continued expansion of redistributive measures, notably social grants, now reaching three out of every ten South Africans, is held to be “unsustainable” – unless we “grow the cake”.

The end of apartheid in South Africa was expected to herald the advent of new prospects of freedom and equality for all, black and white. The negotiated settlement, the 1994 first-ever non-racial one-person, one-vote elections, and the 1996 Constitution passed by a democratically-elected constituent assembly led to the end of white minority rule. A non-racial, constitutional democracy in which all South Africans enjoy equal rights was established. So why have these important advances not resulted in a much greater degree of substantive equality for all? There are, of course, many reasons.

In this intervention I want to consider just one aspect of the problem – namely the conceptual. Have the ways in which South Africans – the new democratic government, political parties, key opinion-makers, voices in the broader public discussion – thought about and debated the question of inequality blocked an effective diagnosis of the actual challenges, and, therefore, effective policies and practical interventions? I propose to tease out the explicit and implicit assumptions about equality and a series of inter-linked concepts – liberty, redistribution, development, economic growth and the idea of a social contract. In fulfilment of my own presumptuous twelfth “Thesis on Feuerbach”, I will be calling, eclectically, on several philosophers for help along the way.

\textbf{Free at last!}

Immediately following the 1994 April elections, the African National Congress published a somewhat triumphant issue of its official journal, \textit{Mayibuye}. The cover featured a fly-past of air-force jets over Union Buildings (the seat of the old and incoming new presidency) on the occasion of the May 10, 1994 inauguration of President Mandela. The bold head-line proclaimed: “FREE AT LAST!” Inside, the journal’s editorial took up the theme: “\textit{The moment has arrived. Liberation. Real change. National Democratic Revolution. Call it what you may.}”

Note in passing that the editorialist is not entirely sure how to characterise “THE moment” – an early symptom of the set of conceptual challenges I hope to explore. The editorial then proceeds, with considerable but perhaps understandable hyperbole, to portray “THE moment” as the culmination of centuries of popular struggle:

“It is the moment that flashed through the minds of many a hero as they succumbed to the assassin’s bullet, the hangman’s noose and the torturer’s fatal blow...It was slow in coming. From the forbearers’ welcoming embrace many centuries ago which was returned with a suffocating grip. And the modest beginnings of mass action, armed struggle and
underground work. To the wrangles in the negotiating chambers and Third Force violence. And, at the apex, the attempted sabotage of the electoral process…”

In short, the text is anointing the MOMENT (and by association the newly elected ANC-led government) with the legitimacy of centuries of struggle. But then the text does a sudden U-turn, it moves from proclaiming the arrival of REAL CHANGE, the apex moment, to characterising what has happened as just another milestone on a long march.

“Yet we dare not forget in the din of the cry of success [as if the editorial were not part of making the ‘din’]...the march has been long and difficult; but we have only reached a milestone...The real battle, beyond pomp and ceremony and the symbolism of a new flag and anthem, has just begun.”

We have in the matter of a few sentences switched from celebrating “THE moment”, “REAL change”, to an effective denial of these very claims. We are now merely at the beginning. Could all that has happened in THE moment be little more than “din”, “pomp and ceremony”, the “symbolism” of a new flag and anthem?

What the editorial might have said is that the April 1994 democratic elections and the May 1994 inauguration of a new president marked moments in an important breakthrough in an on-going struggle for liberation and greater equality. But it doesn’t. It veers from one extreme to the other, over-selling and then promptly under-selling the significance of the 1994 democratic breakthrough. Why?

There is a political agenda nestled within this U-turn, but the agenda is informed and provided with a rationale by a deeper conceptual framework dating back perhaps to the Enlightenment. It is the latter which will be of most interest here – but, since these things are intimately linked, before going directly there, let us proceed with the Mayibuye editorial as it uncovers its own ambivalent political agenda:

“Now, ordinary people will rejoice only at the sight of the foundation of the first of the million houses that have to be built over the next five years...Now is the time to make good the election pledge. In this regard, the words of a writer on the French Revolution [the reference is to Tocqueville] are instructive: ‘Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men’s minds.’ In June, allocations from the budget will be decided upon. A modest beginning can then be made…”

We have moved from REAL CHANGE to small change, from the heroic to the quotidian. The quote from Tocqueville gives the game away - the newly installed political elite will now have to manage down rising expectations. The concern of the editorial is to put the genie of popular activism back into the bottle. If 1994 marks a juridical-political break with apartheid it must also, so the editorial implicitly argues, mark a break with a previous era of popular struggle. Invoking the Tocqueville quotation, the editorial suggests that prior to 1994
popular forces in South Africa “patiently endured” their grievances, which is contradicted both by historical reality as well as the editorial’s own immediately preceding claims of centuries of struggle against injustice. After 1994, “ordinary people” now become not protagonists but spectators (“Now ordinary people will rejoice only at the SIGHT of the foundation of the first of the million houses that have to be built over the next five years…”).

From now on it is a question of a delivery-state implementing its technical managerial responsibilities – in short, the text has shifted the domain of the political from a liberation struggle to an inventory of state redistributive tasks.

But behind the demobilisation of popular forces agenda – what is it that provides the discursive rationale for the U-turn performed within the Mayibuye editorial? I noted that the front-cover of this celebratory edition of the publication had as its bold head-line: “FREE AT LAST!” It is improbable, however, that the journal would have proclaimed: “EQUAL AT LAST!” – even though the 1994 democratic breakthrough brought about degrees of advance for all South Africans in both freedom and equality (an equal vote for all adults, for instance). So why would “free at last” have a seeming plausibility, while “equal at last” would not?

Let me call my first philosopher to provide expert evidence. In Equaliberty: Political Essays Etienne Balibar argues that, while “liberty” and “equality” are conceptually different, “it is absolutely true that equality is practically identical to liberty, this means that it is materially impossible for it to be otherwise – in other words, it means that they are always necessarily contradicted together.”

For Balibar the problematic separation of equality and liberty, which he traces back to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, “feeds upon several ideas whose self-evidence is seldom questioned, in particular the idea that equality (or, more generally ‘real’ equality) is essentially economic and social...whereas freedom is above all juridical-political and institutional...at the same time there is another self-evidence or pseudo-self-evidence on which liberalism and socialism end up agreeing, even if they draw opposite conclusions – namely that the realisation of equality occurs through state intervention, since it essentially has to do with distribution or redistribution, whereas the preservation of freedom is connected to the limitation of this [state] intervention, even to constant defence against its perverse effects.”

This dichotomy, these contrasting assumptions about equality and freedom are also then mapped into the further assumption that equality is “an exclusively collective goal while freedom would be essentially individual freedom”. This leads in turn to what Balibar terms...

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6 Although note that even in the earlier passage the evocation of a heroic struggle tends to celebrate resistance fighters as heroic victims of the assassin, the hangman, the torturer – with the latter being the actual protagonists of history. The productive activism of a collective popular struggle tends to be elided.

the “fundamental paradox” – “the split between the discourse of the rights of man and that of the rights of the citizen.” This notion of the immanence and ontological precedence, the naturalness of freedom (Rousseau’s “man is born free”) still casts a long shadow into the present. It establishes liberty as a “birth right” outside of (and before) the social and political “contract” – it is essentially a “natural” right. This is why the formal, politico-juridical ending of apartheid could also be thought of as a RE-covery, a RE-turn, the return of the people to their original (natural) freedom. The very title of the official ANC journal, Mayibuye means “let it return”. Instead of understanding both freedom and equality as essentially rights of the citizen, dependent for their mutual advance, defence and consolidation upon a public, social, collective project, we have a problematic divergence with, as I hope to show, significant discursive and practical outcomes.

To map all of this schematically, we might say that we have a pervasive contrast dating back to the Enlightenment with the following embedded assumptions:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Equality</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
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<tr>
<td>Economic/social</td>
<td>“Natural” a “birth right”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires a state re-distributive intervention</td>
<td>Requires protection of natural individuals from state intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public/collective endeavour</td>
<td>Private/individual sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights of the citizen</td>
<td>Rights of the individual, “natural” rights anterior to citizenship</td>
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We are now perhaps in a better position to understand why for the majority of Mayibuye’s readers in 1994 the “FREE AT LAST!” claim might well have carried plausibility while “EQUAL AT LAST!” would not have. With the juridical-political status of the apartheid state abolished all South Africans were “free at last”, even if that freedom was severely constrained in practice precisely because of high levels of persisting inequality. For example the abolition of racially segregated settlements (“group areas”) meant that all South Africans could, legally, now live where they chose, but it was (and remains) an extremely limited freedom for the majority as a result of the exclusionary nature of the property market.

**Reconnecting liberty with more substantive equality (discursively) via “redistribution” that is also imagined as a “return”**

In much South African discourse there is then a tendency to address discursively the equality/freedom deficit, by seeking to give freedom substantive content by re-connecting with equality through the evocation of two RE-words – “redistribution” that enables a “return” (or some other proximate notion for return) to what is “natural”, or “normal”. RE-distribution is imagined essentially as a RE-turn to (or of) some anterior state of harmony, a
RESTORATION of what has gone. But the nature and direction of the RE-turn is entirely ambivalent:

- Is it the return, for instance, of land, customs, cultures, even place names that have been dispossessed, marginalised, or suppressed?
- Or is it rather a “modernising” return to universality, the recovery of a global “normality”, as we exit from the “backward anomaly”, the “detour” represented by apartheid?
- Or is it, as it increasingly is 20 years into post-apartheid democracy, a nostalgia for a return to a mythical “rainbow miracle”, the heady days of “free at last”, the immediate post-apartheid years of the mid-1990s when South Africa was a global poster-boy?

These diverging inclinations often co-exist in the same speech, or text, as if they were all the same “return”.

Indeed it is interesting to note the proliferation since the early 1990s of RE-words in South African policy documents, legislation and the broader public discourse. Along with RE-distribution we have had land “RE-stitution”, national “RE-conciliation” (notably in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), “The RE-construction and Development Programme” (the ANC’s foundational 1994 election manifesto), “RE-storative justice”, Moral “RE-generation”, an African “RE-naissance”, and even the “RE-turn of South Africa” to a supposedly “happy family of nations”.

Most of these RE-words suggest, at least implicitly, that the new South Africa requires a RE-turn to better times, an impossible going back (or is it going forward?) to some pre-existing but mythical normality disrupted by several latter years of misrule by the ANC government, or a decade and a half of apartheid isolation, or four-decades of apartheid rule, or perhaps eight-decades of white minority rule, or even three and a half centuries of colonial domination. I do not want to be misunderstood to be dismissive of a reality to be found in all societies and particularly in those that have been afflicted by colonial oppression – a memory of and nostalgia for earlier social formations that were more egalitarian and solidaristic in many (if not all) respects than the prevailing possessive individualism of our times. But the proliferation of RE-words linked to the aspiration of greater social justice and equality has not always been very helpful in post-apartheid South Africa.

This is most obvious in the case of land RE-stitution and land RE-form. The absolutely correct rights-based emphasis on redress for those dispossessed of land, to reverse the devastating impact of colonial and apartheid land dispossession quickly runs into a tangled history. Are we returning land to the original inhabitants and if so who are they? How far back do we go in a complex history of occupation and displacement that pre-dates colonial occupation by millennia? How far back do we go in the European colonial period which begins in earnest in the mid-17th century? What are we to make of inter-ethnic African land displacement and
wars like the period of the Zulu mfecane/lifaqane (between 1815 and 1840)? How in a modern constitutional democracy do we conceptualise very different understandings of access to and use of land long preceding modern property law? How do we reconcile the contemporary land claims of “traditional” leadership to expand “kingdoms” on the one hand, with the democratic rights of black communities living in the same space today? I am not raising these complexities in order to minimise the overwhelming culpability and disproportionate impact of dispossession by European colonial and white minority rule regimes much of it genocidal in intent. But the critical task of restitution for land dispossessed and the wider imperative of land reform are considerably more complex than the idea of a simple return of land dispossessed might suggest. Even more importantly the notion of restitution needs to be complemented with an emphasis on:

- the democratisation and socialisation of land tenure in the former reserves/bantustans in which around one third of South Africa’s population (a majority women) still live as subjects and not full citizens, under a “traditional” patriarchal system distorted by colonialism and apartheid which, in the memorable formula of Mahmoud Mamdani “perpetuated not the force of tradition, but the tradition of force”; and

- urban land transformation – with over 60% of our population now urbanised and the percentage rising rapidly, the major social justice question in regard to land is no longer the restoration of rural/agricultural land, but the democratic transformation of town and city spaces.

Given all of these complexities, it is instructive to note that the majority of beneficiaries of government’s land restitution programme have opted for compensation in cash, rather than a return of land. The feasibility, sustainability and desirability of a simple return is well recognised by many.

More importantly, whether in regard to land in a rural agricultural context or the productive economy more widely, the association of redress/restitution/return with redistributive interventions has served to displace emphasis on the systemic features of the productive economy more generally. Emphasis has fallen on “more equitable redistribution” (not wrong in itself), but to the detriment of a programmatic approach to understanding and transforming the systemic features of the productive economy.

Much of this is embedded in the conceptual assumptions I noted when drawing upon the work of Etienne Balibar. In particular, the location of the struggle for equality in the column of public sector-led redistribution as opposed to the “growth engine” of the productive economy assumed to be fundamentally (and in essence) with the “private” sphere and beyond the scope of transformation. Let me now add further rows to the Equality/Freedom table:
South Africa – a “developing” nation

It is time to call my next philosopher to the stand – Doreen Massey. In fact she is a geographer, but like all good geographers she has a strong philosophical bent. In a recent interview, remarking on the current language used by those in mature capitalist economies, Massey notes:

“…we are often using a terminology of we are ‘developed’ countries, the countries behind us as it were, are ‘developing’…Now what that does is to convert contemporaneous difference between those countries into a single linear history. It’s saying that country over there – let’s say it’s Argentina a developing country, isn’t a country at the same moment which is different, but it’s a country which is following our historical path to become a ‘developed’ country like us. So in a sense we are denying simultaneity, the multiplicity of space that I want to insist on, a turning all those differences into a single historical trajectory. Now that has a lot of political effects…the most important one is that it says there is only one future…that way of turning space into time, turning geography into history is a way of denying the possibility of doing something different. If we take space seriously as the dimension of multiplicity then it opens up politics to alternatives.”

As post-apartheid South Africans we should certainly “take space seriously”. Apartheid (building upon the segregationist policies that preceded it) was, after all, integrally associated with spatial engineering, both at the wider national level and down to the microspaces of “whites only” park benches and bus seats. Apartheid (apartness, separation, segregation) was not a term applied to the system by its opponents, it was proudly self-named by the architects of the policy. But it was never simply about racial exclusion – it was also always centrally about exclusion and the simultaneous inferior inclusion of the black majority. In the first half of the 20th century this dialectic of exclusion and simultaneous inferior inclusion was primarily articulated around two spatial realities – industrial hubs centred on extractive mining and “native reserves” (later Bantustans). South Africa’s abundant mineral resources were (and are) largely deep-level. Mining has only been economically viable because of the combination of significant technical capitalisation through significant flows of foreign direct investment and armies of unskilled and semi-

<table>
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<th>Equality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Private sector/civil society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistributive responsibilities</td>
<td>Productive capacity – “engine of growth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory role</td>
<td>“Free market”</td>
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skilled “cheap” labour. The labour was “cheap” because the cost of its reproduction (child-
rearing, care of the sick and the elderly) was borne by subsistence farming in the “native 
reserves”, whose primary output and source of cash incomes was the annual export of 
hundreds and thousands of migrant workers to the mines. This was not just the 
simultaneous presence of “difference” (mining centre/native reserve), it was a systemic 
articulation linked to a system of production, a relationship that continued to reproduce the 
two spaces as a core and a periphery. In the South African liberation movement this 
articulation was sometimes referred to as “internal colonialism”, or “colonialism of a special 
type”.

By mid-20th century the productive carrying capacity of the reserves was seriously under 
strain. The World War II years had also seen significant secondary industrialisation and 
growing black urbanisation. Apartheid (introduced as the official policy of the National Party 
which won elections in 1948) can be seen as a relatively successful, four-decades long 
perpetuation, in the face of new realities, of the earlier internal colonial articulation 
between mining centres and reserves. The apartheid regime sought, on the one hand, to 
preserve this articulation by sustaining the marginal productivity of the reserves through 
land-care and agricultural extension work, and the strengthening of patriarchal 
subordination of those in the reserves - with the consolidation of the repressive Bantustan 
apparatuses. However, greater focus now shifted to urban forced removals and the mass 
construction of peripheral urban black family housing in townships, developing a new form 
of labour migrancy – daily migrancy – that perpetuated the simultaneous exclusion and 
inferior inclusion of the black majority.

Interestingly, one of the ways in which the apartheid regime sought to legitimise its policies 
was to describe them not just as “apartheid”, but also as “separate DEVELOPMENT”. Massey 
is quite right to insist that “turning space into time, turning geography into history” has the 
tendency to displace the simultaneous presence of difference. The apartheid regime was all 
about asserting, cataloguing, entrenching and preserving contemporaneous “difference”. 
But by invoking the notion of “separate development” it was beginning to turn space into 
time, two “separate developments” in the same space but in different “racial” times along a 
single linear trajectory of evolution. This move dis-articulates the causal link between 
development in the core and under-development in the periphery, “white South Africa” just 
happened to be “more advanced”.

But if a causal link (related to the organisation of productive activity) exists in this “internal 
colonial” relationship between the entrenched and reproduced poverty and inequality of 
the rural reserve and peri-urban township on the one hand, and growth, development and 
wealth in the industrial core, on the other, what about the “external” relationship between 
South Africa (or Argentina, to invoke Massey’s example) and the “developed” geo-political 
North? Is the South less developed because the North is more developed, and vice versa? If 
this is the case, then Massey’s advocacy of alternative development paths becomes entirely
relevant – and such alternatives would, presumably, need to involve anti-systemic measures, dis-articulation, relative de-linking in order to ensure that the South breaks out of a cycle of reproduced under-development. On the other hand, if the difference (which is to say, amongst other things, the inequality) between the global North and South primarily has to do with the virtues of the former and the backwardness of the latter, then the solution to global inequalities, that is to say a relative lack of development in some parts of the world requires strategies of “catch-up” and “integration”.

South Africa’s “return to the family of nations”

Unfortunately “catch-up” and “integration” have featured largely in the imaginary of post-1994 South African discourses on development. On February 5, 1999, in his last state of the nation address to parliament, state president Nelson Mandela looked back over the previous five years with justifiable satisfaction. Following the April 1994 elections, the newly elected government of national unity had rapidly set about consolidating democratic institutions, and parliament had abolished discriminatory laws, introducing a raft of new legislation. In 1996 a progressive Bill of Rights and Constitution were adopted. This was the context in which Mandela could tell parliament:

“For a country that not many years ago was the polecat of the world, South Africa has truly undergone a revolution in its relations with the international community. The doors of the world have opened to South Africa, precisely because of our success in achieving things that humanity as a whole holds dear.”

While there is surely much of value underpinning this statement, the discursive elements at play are not nearly as self-evident as they might seem. Notice how it is “South Africa” and not the “apartheid system” that is deemed to have been “the polecat of the world”. Yet, ironically, it was Mandela’s own organisation the ANC that campaigned hard and long internationally, from its inception in 1912, to condemn and eventually to isolate (and it was never a complete isolation) white minority rule in South Africa. In the 1960s and early 1970s Mandela, not the apartheid system, was labelled a “terrorist” in the leading capitals of western democracy. What Mandela is essentially celebrating here is the integration (re-integration) of South Africa into “the world”, whose doors have now (re-)opened to “us” because of our achieving “things that humanity as a whole holds dear”. I will leave aside, for the moment, the universalising assumptions here which begin to assume a world without difference or contradiction.

In practice the principal beneficiaries of this opening up to the world have been South Africa’s major private corporations (particularly in the mining, energy and finance sectors). Besides the internal apartheid core/periphery articulation noted above, from the beginnings of industrial mining in our country in the late 19th century another (an “external”)}
core/periphery relationship was forged. South Africa (which only came into constitutional existence in 1910) was increasingly integrated into a global productive economy – but as a semi-periphery, an exporter of largely unprocessed minerals. Once more we have a pattern of subordinate inclusion. South Africa partially broke with this subordinate productive economy inclusion in three periods of relative de-linking from the developed North – during the two World Wars (1914-18 and 1939-45) and, ironically, from the late 1970s and through the 1980s as a result of anti-apartheid economic and financial sanctions. In this latter period, with their surplus bottled up within South Africa, the major mining and related corporations increasingly diversified surplus into other sectors of the economy – manufacturing, forestry, agro-processing, logistics. This was good for job creation and indirectly contributed to impacting positively upon inequalities in our society (and indeed the growing strength of industrial trade unionism). However, with the end of apartheid and with sanctions lifted, the mining houses have tended to disinvest out of these upstream and downstream sectors, focusing once more narrowly on mineral exports. At the same time there has been a massive leakage of capital out of South Africa (estimated to be around 20-25 percent of GDP over the past 20 years) through dual listings on foreign exchanges (mainly London and New York), dividend payments, tax avoidance, and disinvestment, much of it illegal. The impact of this on employment and on crisis levels of inequality has been dramatic.

This is not the place to develop these economic arguments further – the point I am trying to make is, however, that once again concepts that have acquired the status of common-sense, need closer interrogation. The assumption that “integration”, “modernisation”, “catching-up” with the developed North is the royal road to local development and via it greater levels of equality within our society and between ourselves and the developed North has not been borne out by reality.

Growth is frequently seen as both the means to catch up and integrate with the developed North, and integration is seen as the means with which to achieve such growth. This brings us to the next problematic concept:

**The growth fetish – the bigger cake**

South Africa’s National Development Plan states:

“Only by reducing poverty and inequality through broadening opportunity can the country achieve real unity. The country has much more to gain if a win-lose debate shifts to a win-win debate, focusing simultaneously on growing the cake and redistributing it.” (p.416).

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The official parliamentary opposition party, the Democratic Alliance expresses a similar view: “if we are to open up opportunities for all and create a prosperous, inclusive society, the pie needs to get bigger so there is more to share.”

Clearly we have returned here to the dichotomy noted at the beginning – a productive sphere (growth) and a redistributive sphere (where developmental objectives like “opportunities for all” an “inclusive society” and “reducing poverty and inequality” belong). But what if the productive sphere is precisely what is actively reproducing poverty and inequality, and what if its runaway dynamic outpaces worthy redistributive efforts? I will park this question for the moment and ask another, but related question: What do we mean by “growth”?

From the context of both the National Development Plan and Democratic Alliance statements (and numerous others in a similar vein) it is clear that the “growth” alluded to here is “growth” as measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) metric. But what are we measuring when invoking GDP? I now call to the stand two economists, one of whom was always a philosopher, Amartya Sen, the other has been driven into philosophy by the crisis of his own discipline, Joseph Stiglitz. These two Nobel economic laureates (along with Jean-Paul Fitoussi) were commissioned by the French Government to examine the appropriateness of the GDP metric in assessing economic performance and social progress.10

Their report begins with the pertinent observation that “what we measure shapes what we collectively strive to pursue – and what we pursue determines what we measure.” (p.10) The authors then organise what they call “the case against GDP” into seven basic areas:

1. Distribution – GDP does not tell us how growth is distributed at the household level. The example they cite is the US where GDP has more than doubled over the past 30 years, while median household income grew only 16 percent.
2. Quantity versus quality – GDP measures the quantity of traded goods and services, but not the quality. Money spent on gambling is just as “good” as money spent on books. Traffic congestion contributes to GDP by increasing the sale of petrol.
3. Defensive expenditures – GDP does not distinguish between expenditure that positively increases human welfare (university tuition, for instance), and “defensive expenditure” such as cleaning up industrial disasters or military spending.
4. Real economic value versus borrowed and speculative gains – GDP tells us nothing about the sustainability of economic activity. Financial services add to GDP regardless of whether they are allocating capital to productive investment or fuelling gigantic asset bubbles with speculation.

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5. The depletion of natural resources and ecosystem services – GDP ignores environmental problems. Economic activity that depletes natural resources (mining in South Africa) is just as valuable, by GDP standards, as economic activity using natural resources sustainably.

6. Non-market activities - GDP tells us nothing about the value generated by non-market activities – in the household, in the public sector, in civil society, and in the broader ecological systems. In Third World countries this is a particular problem since much activity takes place in the “informal” economy.

7. Social well-being – GDP mostly does not track indicators of social well-being like rates of poverty, literacy, or life-expectancy.\(^\text{11}\)

Closely related to the commonplace understanding of “growth” as GDP is the question of “work”, and what constitutes “real work”. As part of the South African government’s response to persisting crisis levels of structural unemployment (currently just over 25 percent in the “narrow” definition of unemployment), there has been a significant expansion of a wide range of public employment (“public works”) programmes across several sectors – infrastructure (labour intensive rural road maintenance, for instance), environment (for example, the clearing of invasive alien plant species threatening water resources and grazing), social (communal food gardens, or home-based care directed at households in distress, including child-headed households in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic), etc. In the past five years these programmes have provided over 4 million “work opportunities” of varying duration to participants who were paid wages/stipends set at a basic minimum wage level (currently R71 per day). The work opportunities are desperately sought after in many communities, as they provide some income relief to poor households. In other words, the programmes have an important redistributive role. To varying degrees they also provide work experience and exposure to some skills training for those who have often been in long-term unemployment. This provides prospects of graduating into “formal” employment or self-employment.

Even more significant for the purposes of the argument here, the programmes produce new value through the assets created or maintained and through services provided. In other words, they also have a productive impact. But because these are not traded assets and services, there is very little measuring and assessment of these new values. One study on the environmental programme suggests that the Working for Water programme, in clearing 2 million hectares of invasive alien plants, may have saved the country as much as R400bn in water resources, and prevented the loss of 71% of grazing. However, none of these

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\(^{\text{11}}\) There is now a growing literature critiquing the GDP metric, with similar if not identical issues raised. A useful short critique is Lew Daly & Stephen Posner, *Beyond GDP. New measures for a new economy*. Demos, 2011. See also Lorenzo Fioramonti, *Gross Domestic Problem. The politics behind the world’s most powerful number*. Zed Books, 2013. Thomas Piketty’s substantial (and runaway publishing success), *Capital in the twenty-first century*, Harvard University Press, 2014, is also relevant here. Its main focus is to debunk the notion that capitalist economic growth necessarily leads in the medium- to longer-term to greater degrees of equality.
contributions are measured in our GDP accounting, all that is measured is the budget allocated out of the fiscus to these programmes, the bulk of which goes to paying stipends/wages to the participants. Through the conventional economic lens, therefore, these programmes are classified as essentially “consumption”, the re-distribution of increasingly large slices out of a limited fiscal resource – the “cake”. The possibility that the programmes might actually be making a significant productive contribution to the “cake” by way of new or maintained assets and services becomes invisible, even unthinktable. And this, in turn, leads to the claim that while the programmes might be useful – they are unsustainable in the long-run and can, at best, be temporary and contra-cyclical.

If the GDP metric is so flawed and if there is a growing body of research (coming, it should be noted, from a diversity of ideological perspectives) that seriously question the value of GDP – why has GDP not been knocked off its hegemonic pedestal? The answer is that there are powerful forces with a vested interest in maintaining GDP as the gold standard for measuring economic well-being. I am not suggesting there is a conspiracy in this matter, rather that social location (or let us call it class position) makes the GDP measure appear to be common sense in some quarters, and those so located wield significant discursive power in the media, in the academy, and in society in general. Their common sense becomes common-common sense. Powerful and profitable mining corporations in South Africa are unlikely, for instance, to be easily able to imagine, let alone concede, that the 20 percent that mining contributes on average to South Africa’s GDP (around half of which directly) may in fact be outweighed by the negative impact of the extraction (and un-beneficiated export) of non-renewable mineral resources, not forgetting the huge health and environmental damage (like acid mine drainage) that mining operations cause. Are the mining houses in South Africa growing the cake or diminishing it? Our GDP statistics say “growing” – a different common sense might claim otherwise.

The hegemony of the GDP fetish reflects powerful interests and their spontaneous worldview. This is why, while rational argument and debate is certainly part of what is required to de-throne GDP from its pedestal, it is unlikely to be sufficient. An alternative hegemony that is conceptual but also social, political and economic is required. Which takes us back to Marx’s Eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: it is not just a question of debating our interpretations of the world, we have to change the world in order to consolidate a different (amongst other things) interpretative hegemony.

The disappearance of the political

When, as we have seen, Nelson Mandela in his last state of the nation address invoked “our success in achieving things that humanity as a whole holds dear” – he was undoubtedly referring partly to “sound economic policies”, but primarily to the achievement of a liberal democratic politics that, certainly in the 1990s, was widely assumed to be a shared universal
value. Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the “End of Ideology”\(^\text{12}\), someone else, jokingly, declared that all “isms” had now become “wasms”. In the immediate context of the 1994 negotiated transition, South Africa was held up as the poster-boy for how things should be done, and a sanitized, commoditised version of what actually happened was scripted, along with a global media-driven canonisation of Mandela.

There were always conservative international voices who dissented against the assumption of the “universalisation” of liberal democratic values, arguing - as Samuel Huntington did, for instance - about the inevitable “clash of civilisations”\(^\text{13}\). For his part, Robert Kaplan wrote:

“...the West’s victory in the Cold War...many believed would bring simply freedom and prosperity under the banners of ‘democracy’ and ‘free markets’. But just as after World War I and World War II, our victory has ushered in the next struggle for survival, in which evil wears new masks.” (p.xi)\(^\text{14}\)

Kaplan appears to locate “evil” particularly in Africa: “Africa may be as relevant to the future character of world politics as the Balkans were a hundred years ago...Then the threat was the collapse of empires and the birth of nations based solely on tribe. Now the threat is more elemental: nature unchecked. Africa’s immediate future could be very bad.” (Kaplan 2000, p.18 – my emphasis).

Writing from this deeply racist (and Hobbesian) perspective, Kaplan nonetheless provides a pertinent critique of the liberal canonisation of the South African democratic transition:

“The abundant coverage of South Africa’s impressive attempts at coming to terms with the crimes of apartheid serves to obscure the country’s growing problems. There is a sense of fear in such celebratory, backward-looking coverage, as if writing too much about the difficulties in that racially symbolic country would expose the limits of the liberal humanist enterprise worldwide.” (ibid. p.78)

On the left, there has been, of course, a long tradition of criticism of “liberalism” and particular of its conflation of “freedom” with “free markets”; of liberty with global trade liberalization; and the reduction of rights to those of possessive individuals (including corporations invested with a legal persona) at the expense of collective rights (like the right to self-determination of colonially oppressed people). But much of this left criticism has been vulnerable to the legitimate allegation that it suffered from a democratic deficit itself,

\(^\text{12}\) Francis Fukuyama, 1992, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, NY


\(^\text{14}\) Robert D Kaplan, 2000, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the dreams of the post Cold War*,

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that instead of enabling in practice a consolidation and surpassing of liberal democratic values, it encouraged a falling behind these democratic advances. The collapse of the Soviet bloc at this time contributed to both the triumphalism of the Fukuyamas and confusions, denialism, and uncertainty in many quarters of the left.

It is in this context that I have found the work of Chantal Mouffe particularly helpful. At the heart of her writing is an endeavor to defend a pluralist democratic politics precisely by rescuing it from the illusions of a universalism transcending ideology, beyond conflict. Mouffe critiques the attempts to establish democratic politics purely in the realm of rational discussion and consensus-making, while drawing a veil over the constitutive impact of power. Her work also focuses critically on the role of the constitution of an “us” and a “them” in politics.

“Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’. The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established. The crucial issue is to establish this us/them in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.”

What does this mean practically? In a pluralist democracy it means establishing a minimum framework (a constitution, perhaps) of agreement that transforms erstwhile enemies into legitimate antagonists, but among whom there are still irreconcilable differences, and who will disagree even on the interpretation and implementation of the founding constitutional principles, for instance. This results in what Mouffe describes as a “conflictual consensus”. This does not mean that compromises are not possible, indeed they are part and parcel of the political process, but “they are only temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation in which it is impossible to satisfy everybody.” (ibid.). In other words, democratic politics creates the space for democratic contest and disagreement in contrast to:

“the typical liberal perspective that envisages democracy as a struggle among elites, taking place in a neutral terrain, thereby making adversary forces invisible and reducing politics to an exchange of arguments and the negotiation of compromises.” (ibid.)

Here too we encounter a redistributive approach not just to the role of the state, but to political engagement itself. Mouffe argues that the danger of this model of democracy that seeks to obliterate the adversarial us/them relationship is that, far from actually abolishing antagonism, its effective de-politicisation of public life creates a void that is likely to be filled by all manner of negative phenomena. At the more benign end of the scale there is public disillusion, electoral abstention, and the reduction of politics to the obsessive media coverage of scandals among the palace elite. At the more serious end of the scale there is the likelihood of the eruption of antagonism in the form of intolerant ethnic, xenophobic, religious or demagogic dogmas rooted in non-negotiable, anti-democratic fundamentalisms.

15 Mouffe 1998 p.16
As we have noted, in SA the aspiration has often been to displace antagonism through the imaginary construct of a “we” that is so all-encompassing there is no longer a “them”. The “enemy” we are frequently told is no longer the apartheid system (or monopoly capital, or imperialism), but poverty or inequality, for instance. This is exactly how Trevor Manuel, former minister in the presidency for planning, envisaged the core task of the National Development Plan (NDP). “The first task of the National Development Plan is to unite all South Africans around a common programme, of all our people around the common goal of fighting poverty and inequality…”  

But what does it mean to declare war on poverty or inequality? It effectively obscures what lies behind, the systemic realities that reproduce poverty and inequality. This, in turn, obscures the question: What social forces have an objective interest – regardless of subjective sentiment - in the perpetuation of those systemic realities.  

**Back to the 1990s - a renewed social contract**

The National Development Plan (NDP) was published in 2011 under the title “Vision 2030 – Our future, make it work”. While it contains many important sectoral programmes and insights, its overarching objective takes us back to the sentence we have already quoted: “The country has much more to gain if a win-lose debate shifts to a win-win debate, focusing simultaneously on growing the cake and redistributing it.” (p.416).

The engine for addressing poverty and inequality is GDP growth, and the condition for achieving this growth is a “win-win debate” that leads to a national consensus on GDP growth and its redistribution. And this is the context in which the NDP resurrects that vintage political philosophy construct – a social contract. There is a considerable circularity in the overall structure of the NDP - a society living in harmony with itself, in which all are trusted by and trustful of each other, is both the intended 2030 outcome of the plan and the condition for achieving this outcome in the first place – enter the aspiration to construct a new social compact.

In setting up its argument in this regard, the NDP first defines social contracts in general:

> “a social contract...at the core is an agreement among individual people in society or between the people and their government that outlines the rights and duties of each party while building national solidarity.” (my emphases, p.475)

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The status of the conjunction “or” is unclear – are these essentially the same kind of compact, or are they two different kinds of compact? They surely ARE different. However, the NDP shows no hint of an awareness of this difference. But it quickly becomes even more unclear when it begins to elaborate on the kind of social contract/compact it aspires to be. Having told us that social contracts are at core “among individuals” (Version One) and/or “between the people and government” (Version Two) – it then begins to advance itself more or less explicitly as the basis for a third version of a social contract – a stakeholder contract. This third version is what the NDP describes as “a social compact... [in which] all stakeholders buy into a clearly articulated vision” (p.475).

But, as we turn to page 476 we discover that “ALL stakeholders” (Version Three A) are just three stakeholders (Version Three B) - business, labour and government. The NDP is proposing itself, in short, as the basis for a tripartite agreement. As the text makes clear, it is essentially a deal between labour and business mediated by government. Once again, by the way, we return to the dichotomy of a redistributive state, on the one hand, and the productive economy (formal sector workers and business) on the other. Labour agrees “to accept lower wage increases than their productivity gains would dictate” and “in return, business agrees that the resulting increase in profits would not be taken out of the country or consumed in the form of higher executive remuneration or luxuries, but rather reinvested in ways that generate employment as well as growth.” (p.476). The role of government is to monitor compliance on the deal and to act as a mediator, and to smooth the way for a continued buy in from labour and business, through re-distributive interventions that lower the cost of living for workers through “implementing a social wage” and by reducing the cost of doing business for business (providing necessary infrastructure, for instance).

But the unannounced slippage between Versions One and Two, the further slippage between these two and a social contract of “all stakeholders”, and then the slippage between “all” and “three” stakeholders” disguises the effective exclusion from this proposed deal of millions of South Africans who are not “government” nor “business” or “labour” – not least the 35 percent of working age South Africans who are unemployed.

The 1994/6 negotiated compacts and the present

At the heart of the NDP’s confusion here (and it is perhaps a central confusion) is the mistaken assumption that the “social contract(s)” (to use the term provisionally) of 1994/6 can be replicated now to address our persisting socio-economic crises of unemployment, poverty and inequality. The NDP is arguably correct to observe that: “The settlement that was produced through the negotiations in the 1990s and the Constitution...were [sic] effectively national compacts.” (p.475) (Note, in passing, the discordance between the singular noun “settlement”, which is the subject of the sentence, and the plural verb “were” – a symptom perhaps of the confusion as to whether Versions 1 and 2 of a social compact are the same thing, or two different things?)
The elections of 1994 might be seen as an implicit Version One compact – an overwhelming majority of individual adult South Africans, black and white, participating in a one-person one-vote election constituted themselves as a “people”, as a new non-racial “we”, fellow rights-bearing citizens – regardless of how they/we actually voted. And the 1996 adoption of the Constitution through an elected Constituent Assembly (the product of the 1994 elections) might be seen as a Version Two social compact, an agreement on the rights and obligations of government and the newly constituted we-the-people, the South African citizenry.

But we need to understand the very different character of a democratic, constitutional settlement and a plan of action to overcome the crises of unemployment, poverty and inequality embedded in a reproduced legacy of socio-economic under-development. In the early 1990s, the balance of forces in SA (and internationally) was propitious for fostering a very broad-based national South African consensus on a non-racial constitutional democracy. The objective conditions for replicating the same broad-based (or even tripartite stake-holder) national consensus to address our systemic crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality do not exist.

It is a point illustrated neatly if anecdotally in a recent exchange between the former minister of mineral resources Susan Shabangu and the CEO of Gold Fields, Nick Holland. In her address to a mining conference in Perth, Australia, Shabangu invoked the spirit of the NDP’s proposed social contract. She called on mining houses investing in SA to “moderate the rates of return” they sought. She based her call on an appeal to shared moral values: “Investors must realise they have a responsibility to the country and cannot work to a bottom line that has no heart or soul at all. They have to understand there are various socio-economic needs of the various partners. If investment will not improve the quality of lives – and recognise that workers need to live decent lives – it will not be able to bring stability to SA.” Nick Holland’s response was brutally frank: “Investors are not emotional about where they invest. If the rate of return they require is not there, they will not invest in that country.” (“Shabangu, Gold Fields CEO clash over mine returns”, Business Day, August 29, 2013)

The attempt to reduce the protagonists of socio-economic transformation in SA to a bland, conflict-free “we”, or to three “stake-holder” partners involved in a win-win discussion inevitably runs into a reality check and a wall of rejection. Chantal Mouffe has captured this precisely when she writes critically of the attempt to reduce the realm of politics to the attempt always to “create the conditions for a ‘rational’ consensus”:

“To envisage politics as a rational process of negotiation among individuals is to obliterate the whole dimension of power and antagonism – what I call ‘the political’... To negate the
political does not make it disappear, it only leads to bewilderment in the face of its manifestations and to impotence in dealing with them.”  

This is also the bewilderment that I believe now besets South Africa in the face of the persistence of deep-seated inequality twenty years after a major democratic breakthrough. It is a bewilderment that is, in part, linked to a chain of seemingly self-evident concepts designed to address inequality that have often taken us further away from understanding, and therefore acting upon, the actual crisis of inequality. It is a chain of discursive moves in which:

- we begin with the aspiration to achieve liberty and equality for all; but
- liberty gets disarticulated from substantive equality; which is followed by
- the attempt to re-think a connection between the two by relocating the drive for equality as, essentially, a state-led redistributive task out of a private-sector led growing of the cake, by pursuing
- the road of universalising notions of “development”, “growth”, “liberal democracy” and “social compacting”, that
- return us to a state of liberty bathed now, at least discursively, in substantive equality.

It is a perfect circle that, nonetheless, fails to lessen our practical bewilderment as crisis levels of inequality persist out there in reality.

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