

IN MEMORY OF DR NEIL AGGETT

A Memorial Lecture at Kingswood College Grahamstown

DRAFT ONLY

We do well in our country to critically examine our history and the stories of our heroes and heroines. It is a story and history that at times we ought not to be proud of, and at others it is a story that has brought out the best in so many of our people. It has been a story of endurance and fortitude, of critical engagement and refusal to live by a false consciousness. Like in all societies history brings out light and shadows, and does not always explain adequately social phenomena and human conduct.

Neil Aggett is among that band of South Africa's heroes of the struggle against the evil of apartheid. I have read all the tributes to him and I have found no penetrating explanation as to how he came to model his life in a particular counter-intuitive and counter-distinctive manner. Steve Biko was a dear friend and comrade. He was murdered by the security police in my own city in Port Elizabeth, by the same people who had detained me and interrogated me at the same time in the same place, but never did get to kill me as they did to him. I spent long hours with him in intense discussion and debates. Even with the benefit of many years of study and reflection I do not believe that I have come to any explanation as to how he "chose" a path of defiance and revolution, and the clarity of vision of an alternative society.

I also knew Rick Tanner, philosophy lecturer at the University of Natal, banned together with us in 1973, and assassinated in his home where he had been under house arrest. He claimed to have been a non-believer but brought up in a Catholic home. His beliefs and intellect combined nonetheless made of him a very intense examiner of justice and its claims. He wrote the SPRO-CAS book, THROUGH THE EYE

OF THE NEEDLE more to search the depths of his own being and to examine how a just society develops.

Nelson Mandela is another. His LONG WALK TO FREEDOM has become a classic. It tells more about his rural environment, the traditional society and the values instilled in one by one's upbringing. But does that explain his speech of sturdy defiance at the dock at his trial in 1964? Does that explain the clarity of his vision and the commitment to sacrifice even his life for it to be achieved? I do not think so.

The story of Neil Aggett is surely known to this school. It is commendable that the school holds these memorial lectures every year. The lectures serve two functions. One, they tell the story of the life and times of a former learner at the school whose critical intelligence defined his life and destiny. Two, it also tries to understand what is the character-formation shapes the lives of the ordinary. He was an ordinary school-boy, from an ordinary family. Even the fact that they were a family of immigrants from Kenya was not out of the ordinary. White South Africa was by and large a society of immigrants and settlers. His family, like all families that can afford it, wished the best for him. He went to one of the best schools of his time and attended the best university there was. He qualified in medicine, served in hospitals in the public sector. Even that not so unusual as there were no private health clinics like they have now become an eloquent statement in our day of the collapse and distrust of the public health care system in our country by those who need it most, the poor. But something happened. It must have changed the course of his life. It is in search and understanding of that moment that we can live our lives and commit to avoid the pitfalls of history and the tragic circumstances that ended the life of one so young and so visionary.

Many of us, of course, do that from time to time. We study the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer executed by the Nazi regime for his conspiracy against Hitler. His *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and his writings on theology and ethics show a way of engaging with difficult issues of faith and action, and to live in a church and society

that seeks to conform to rather to confront evil and unjust, and unjust structures of society. It is not a matter of passing interest that some of the most revolutionary heroes of our time were medical doctors: Edward Schweitzer, Che de Guevera, Frantz Fanon, Neil Aggett, Steve Biko, Meles Zenawi the recently deceased Prime Minister of Ethiopia, although the latter two dropped out of medical school to pursue their liberatory agendas. Is there something in medical studies perhaps about understanding human life its origins, its health and disease that causes medics to make that jump from medicine to revolutions? I do not know.

One thing I believe to be true, though, is that all actors that have changed the course of history have acted in a rational manner. I am not suggesting by rational that they went into a laboratory and undertook some experiments, or that they were researchers who studied human phenomena. I believe that they were rational in the sense that they made deliberate and sensible decisions that were thought through. They may not have understood in advance that a particular course of action would lead to inevitable and deadly consequences. They knew that they had to conduct their lives and their being in a manner that made sense to them at a particular time. They were not just seeking to please others. They acted out of conviction. In the understanding of a philosopher like Alasdair McIntyre, an individual's reason for doing something can be the cause of action or belief. In other words, on this notion, reason precedes belief or action. One begins by being curious about one's circumstances and proceeds to seek to understand and to change it for the better.

If reason and rationality are important determinants to human action how then do we explain the choices that humans take? In some ways choice is the exercise of human freedom *a la* Amartya Sen. But what and how we choose is influenced by our moral codes, our intellectual curiosity, that multitude of phenomena that are embedded in our consciousness, and which at times we take for granted, as Jürgen Habermas explains.

Some years ago¹ I came across a book review by well known feminist author Monica Furlong, of two books by Russian activist Irina Ralushinskaya, *Pencil Letter* and *Grey is the Colour of Hope*. These were poems she wrote and for which at the age of 28 she was sent to prison for “anti-Soviet agitation”. Ralushinskaya had been appalled by the life under Soviet rule that was inhuman “heartless, mindless, madness and lies” and that shaped Russian society. The poetry was made up of her prison writings years published after her release from prison. Irina paints a picture of life under Soviet communist rule living in fear like mice. But then there is a dissident mouse who bemoans the lot of a mouse that must live in fear of the cat in the cat’s house, but does something about it, and values freedom from fear never to return again:

All my mouse life to live in fear

For a crust or two...

He who has tasted freedom

Will never return to the house of a cat (my italics).

Monica Furlong then comments that for such change makers the object was to “live as if freedom, justice and love are facts in a place where they scarcely exist. They must live their convictions to believe in their efficacy. By contrast to behave as if lies are unimportant or the lives of individuals are worth little is to ... ‘live the nightmare’.” I believe that those like Rick tanner, Steve Biko and Neill Aggett knew that to be human meant that they had to live in the freedom they believed and never compromise their own humanity by succumbing to fear and appropriating the irrationality that engulfed society.

A recent study has found that “whether it is a dictatorship or a democracy: better-educated citizens tend to have a better government” (US National Bureau of Economic Research). It goes on to say, for example, that where there are higher levels of education one tends to find recorded higher levels of corruption. The

¹ “The Path of holy disobedience” The Guardian, Friday June 3 1988.

reason, it is posed, is that “educated people are more likely to complain about official misconduct, report crimes or misbehavior by public officials...”

But is that true? In our country there are high levels of expectation, high levels of corruption, mediocre levels of education and generally bad public services. Yet, South Africans complain, they express themselves in the Talk Shows on Radio; they toyi-toyi against government’s perceived failure of ‘service delivery’ and against corrupt officials. That, of course, is at the superficial level. The dynamics of such are many and varied. What is proffered, as a view, however, is that there is a breakdown in trust in political life, and communities can no longer be taken for granted. But the very same complainants then go on and elect the same people, or the same party to government. How discerning and sophisticated are South African voters, therefore? In the end the futility of protest is caused by the emergence of a patronage society. You know the right person, you belong to a certain group or speak a certain language or you complain you are either coopted or isolated. That, I suspect is the experience of democracy in the Zuma Administration. What, I suspect, that does is that it predisposes people to live in fear and apprehension, or to kowtow to lies, to buy favours and act in a manner contrary to their expressed beliefs. Such politics is toxic, corrupted and corruptible.

I recall that many of us who lived through the 70s and 80s were drawn to the work of philosopher Herbert Marcuse. His masterpiece for us was *The One Dimensional Man*, a classic that every activist those days read and re-read. It was a social and philosophical critique of society, probing into the dimensions of society we take for granted, and understanding how those manipulate the mind and generate a way of thinking that is pre-programmed. He argued that

One-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and the purveyors of mass information. Their universe of discourse is populated by self-validating hypotheses which necessarily and monopolistically repeated become hypnotic definitions and dictations.

Marcuse argued that this caused “a false consciousness which is immuned against falsehood” and becomes a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior.

This rational critique of society and the messages it sought to reinforce in every possible way had to be resisted. Marcuse conceived of an authentic being as one in whom all irreconcilables are reconciled, and in whom the total thought-world becomes reconciled, or dissected and engaged. He goes on to say that what exists is not obviously or *a priori* rational but must be brought to reason. Reason is an expression of freedom because reason would be meaningless if one did not have the means, the freewill to act according to one’s judgments and insight. Reason therefore is a “critical tribunal” and is a tool to criticize and challenge existing norms.

The logic of this Marcusean critical theory is that, first one must *see; judge* and *act*. In other words, one must see with an inner eye and fix the spotlight on that which causes dis-ease in society. Understand it, and reflect on the causes thereof. Second, one would then consider the possibilities for change and look at different scenarios or view the world differently; and thereby, three, to challenge the prevailing ideology and undermine its rational foundations or claims thereto, and finally to find lasting solutions and strategies for action.

I have the idea that in our society today we are being subjected to competing one-dimensional theses. One is that of the ANC and its allies that treats with suspicion and with hostility any ideas or processes that do not reinforce their own stereotypical view of reality. Therefore, Zapiro and the *Spear*, and indeed it would now seem these days even Julius Malema, must be silenced, banned, imprisoned. The truths that they seek to present to the people of South Africa must be suppressed and we, the people, have no intelligence to determine for ourselves what judgments we can make about the works of art, of political satire and the so-called, ‘anti-revolutionary’ opportunism of Malema or indeed the justice of the pronouncements of counter-revolutionary judges!

It is not the fact that we indeed do have a President and Head of State who was charged with rape, was investigated for serious crimes of corruption and who proudly purveys as his trademark his propensity to surround himself with a multiplicity of wives. The cases were made to go away to the shame of the NPA and the President's moral conduct is a matter for public record. That is the truth that the ANC needs to address and what that says about the quality of leadership the party offers to the people of South Africa. This year is the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the African National Congress. What we have seen month-by-month is the revisionist sanitized history being presented by no one else but Jacob Zuma which has become the uncritical party story-line that is boring, rather than an honest evaluation of history, from which lessons may be learnt. The story of liberation must be told warts and all because it is a human story, often sad and tragic, but never unusually inspiring. It has failures and it has successes. It has high-points and low-points. Yes, we must celebrate that the efforts of so many from all sectors of society brought us to where we are today. Truth is like that it belongs to all, and to none.

Our society today is not without failures that must be confronted and solutions found. That failure is not just the failure or fault of apartheid however evil the apartheid system may have been. I would hope that we have learnt lessons from it rather than, as I sometimes observe, appropriating the faults of apartheid and blessing them with the language of right, as in majority rules, and minorities must just accept it. A great deal of the failure in our society today is of our own making. It is a failure of our own making for which we must take responsibility. If we continue to elect leaders without vision or possess the basic competences of understanding the dimensions of democratic rule as so many of our local government councilors at least, and many others in parliament are definitely deficient, or an executive that does not inspire confidence. We must blame nobody but ourselves for the tragedy of our education system, a collapsing health care system, a bloated but inefficient civil service, pervasive crime, and corruption that has become endemic. That is because we have not only elected a government without any intelligence collectively to

understand what must be done, and to draw on the resources of the entire society to fix what is wrong, or that has run out of ideas or lacks the moral capacity to govern for the benefit of others. We have a government trapped in ideological blinkers, but also that believes and behaves like it is unaccountable to no one but to itself and those who are likeminded. And so we are now being told that we must expect to simply endorse this failed leadership. In the interests of party unity! The result can only be continued chaos, growing inequality, burgeoning unemployment, an endemic poverty trap, and all of the social evils that have become characteristic of much of our society.

The other one-dimension is that characterized by AfriForum, and its ubiquitous Kallie Kriel and his ilk. They are the ones who will manipulate every aspect of the law because they believe that white people (especially Afrikaners) are the most deprived of their rights in this democracy. They will therefore hoot and coo about freedom songs, misrepresent and manipulate statistics to give the impression that the most oppressed and discriminated against in this country are white people, especially the white poor. Sadly our President from time to time falls under their spell and they unearth some white communities living in dire poverty. What they would have us overlook analytically is that white people in our country remain the most privileged and that the structures of Afrikaner greed remain largely in tact. Their project is to maintain the privileges of the status quo ante even in the democratic dispensation. Let us face it, our country had sooner rather than later, address the problem of poverty and unemployment and deprivation for all citizens regardless of colour. No country that boasts an unemployment rate of 40% and rising would be as smug as our government is, or as unmoved by the plight of the poor, or to shamelessly proffer a social grants system as an end in itself without even a notion of a developmental purpose. Indeed, the Archbishop of Cape Town recently rightly noted that a country that treats its workers and poor communities the way we do is ripe for revolution, and Zwelinzima Vavi warns of a ticking time bomb that will engulf us all.

Our government is in no hurry to deal with these matters. It is amazingly complacent. There is no sense of crisis or political will to deal with urgency with the pressing social and economic issues of our day. Instead it is reported that public resources are being manipulated to enrich the few, and to build a monument to Jacob Zuma's presidency by establishing a new town on Zuma's doorstep in Nkandla. And through it all, this nation is fast asleep.

Even in the area in which we boast some progressive intent, the rights of women, even to the point of sacrificing our arguably best performing minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma to Addis Ababa, we fare very poorly. In a recent survey of the G20 countries by Trust Law, a news service operated by Thomson Reuters Foundation² South Africa has lost respect. The Report was published ahead of the G20 Summit in Mexico. South Africa overall comes 16th. We have been focusing on numbers – 50% women must occupy seats in parliament etc, rather than paying attention to the ordinary and daily lives of women – home and family life, violence and sexual abuse, quality of life, work opportunities, education and training, freedom, safety and security, and give example of moral rectitude and loving relationships by the leaders of our nation. Somehow we do not seem to think it matters that the messages we give to society as a whole do not speak of our commitment to women, but to exploit for sexual pleasure. No wonder our society has become so fixated by sex! The Traditional Courts Bill and the normalization of polygamy are presented blandly as protective of our Constitution, instead of affirming our constitutional justice system and act against the abuse of especially women in our traditional courts systems.

What then, has Neil Aggett's and others' deaths achieved? I believe that they have provided this nation with the Constitution that is worthy of their sacrifices. It is an instrument that exudes hope for our country. It recognizes that we are a multi-dimensional society and that our critical consciousness is the best defence against the irrationality of power. It presents us not with a ready-made, off-the-shelf society,

² The Globe & Mail, Wednesday June 13 2012

but one which, with eternal vigilance, we must defend and construct daily. It represents an aspiration towards a society founded on values. These values are set out in memorable words:

Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms (Section 1(a)).

It would seem to me that the entire structure of government should be about galvanizing resources to achieve this Constitutional objective. Only when we have achieved that, or only as we are progressing towards the realization of that ideal, would the deaths of the likes of Neil Aggett not be in vain. In other words 1994 must never mark the end-point of our quest for true humanity, or what as I said Marcuse calls “the Authentic Being”, but rather that we should be critically and rationally engaged to achieve a transformation that must take place through political practice guided by critical theory and transformative and moral action.

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