

Wednesday, 30 March 2016

Building the South Africa of Nelson Mandela's Dreams: Memory, Reconciliation and Human Rights

Keynote speech: Bradley T. Frolick

Good evening comrades, friends and colleagues,

I am very precarious standing here before you and no, it's not because I was writing a semester test on the first day back but rather, it is because I had to enter the start of this 2nd academic term, with fellow human rights activists, by engaging with lawyers we had to obtain with money we do not have, to respond to the very university which professes to be committed to transforming itself from a bastion of apartheid to a transformative, world class institution of higher learning.

I, together with other student leaders have been consistently harassed and victimised by the University of Stellenbosch and it has now escalated to a level where the university has engaged in selective prosecution of key student leaders, without any basis.

I will therefore focus on what it is known as the "centres of knowledge production" and academic excellence or the intelligentsia, as we prefer to call it. You see, universities have become an isolated space where only those who are considered 'worthy' can actively engage and it is presupposed that the individuals who make up the space come in without any other hindrance, in essence it is a place far removed from the realities of the South African society. For too long, have we (collectively) allowed a space so critical to society to operate unilaterally and in a vacuum.

The notion that certain people are worthy to freely participate in a given space is reflective of a colonial mindset which structures society according to a lens of superiority.

To address the theme of today's discourse I would like to draw attention to the ordering: 'Memory, Reconciliation and Human Rights'. It sounds so lovely, almost as though it rolls off the tongue and far too often we commit an injustice as we would like to place those things which we have a desire for first and leave the difficult, substantive matters to 'sort itself'.

The notion of placing **reconciliation** before a proper comprehension of human rights (i.e. the Constitution) is hugely problematic and not least in that it places the founding values of our society as an afterthought but more acutely that our society is far-removed from what it is we "agree" upon are the foundational values of our country. Reconciliation is being increasingly

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contested as a façade as one group – the disposed peoples of South Africa, Black South Africans have done far more in terms of nation-building than our White counterparts.

The fact of the matter is we live in Africa and are the majority in South Africa yet, we still see “whiteness” being the level which must be attained. We experience black spaces in these very institutions of higher learning and those spaces are filled with emotional trauma, credible feelings of exclusion and a well of resistance and yearning for change – which has been highlighted in the past few years.

Memory, is a concept which remains pertinent and is not, as suggested a term which lies dormant instead, it is very alive and we as students, particularly as Black students are constantly reminded of the past which we never experienced but are in a position where we recognise subtle oppression and very crude overt oppression.

This is experienced in the lecture halls, where you are fearful of asking a question due to rejection of your accent or phrasing; within university residences where racist, Afrikaner nationalist initiation is imposed upon your body as a complete erasure of your very being and it is experienced when standing up for your rights – security companies are employed to criminalise you, brutalise and sexually assault you. It is an apartheid culture.

So memory, is lived and not something stored in a compartment which you reflect upon only when nostalgic.

Memory and Human Rights are inextricably linked as that which we have in our memory is experienced daily and manifests itself as an oppression on our being. The natural reaction of course, is resistance and the logical conclusion is a questioning of the place of reconciliation when that what is being fought for is just and protected in the Constitutional framework, which is the Human Rights we speak of while our White South Africans remain deathly silent.

The struggle is essentially decoloniality, as captured by the Latin American school of thought of Mignolo and Quijano, which interestingly enough has never been taught in my years of Political Science.

“Decoloniality is synonymous with decolonial “thinking and doing,” (Mignolo 2011:xxiv) and it questions or problematizes the histories of power emerging from Europe. These histories underlie the logic of Western civilization. Decoloniality is a response to the relation of direct, political, social and cultural domination established by Europeans (Quijano 2007: 168). This means that decoloniality refers to analytic approaches and socioeconomic and political practices opposed to pillars of Western

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civilization: coloniality and modernity. This makes decoloniality both a political and epistemic project (Mignolo 2011: xxiv-xxiv).”

Now, looking at the campaigns led by students all over the country it is indeed directly linked to human rights, a founding value of our society.

The call for an end to the exploitative practice of Outsourcing, is tied to dignity and the call for a change in the language policy is linked to the right to equality and section 29(2) of the Constitution. Unfortunately, it is Black students which advocate for these changes while only a few White allies join in our pursuit of a more just and equal society. This is because they are comfortable and worse many will go out of their way to ensure prosecution of these human rights activists because their comfortable space is being disrupted.

Memory and human rights must therefore be seen as one. Reconciling these two then would lead us to the attainment of the society we speak of. So long as reasonable and urgent demands of the oppressed are met with arrogance we can never have a functioning society – not at the university level and not at a national level either.

The failure to substantially change the patterns of ownership of the economy and land is an indictment on the fabric of our society. Indeed, it is all about power in this context and that power remains: White, Afrikaner, cis-het men who feel untouchable and that must be dismantled by none other than ourselves.

Identity Politics and intersectionality has been raised as a defining factor of the student movements – it is an extremely important factor and recognises that struggle is not singular and it recognises the emancipation must not only be of race but also of, gender, sexuality, class and ableist tendencies. However, I read an interesting piece by a Michael Rectenwald entitled “*What’s Wrong With Identity Politics (and Intersectionality Theory)? A Response to Mark Fisher’s “Exiting the Vampire Castle” (And Its Critics)*” here, someone who has been involved in the student movement will see similarities to how, in certain aspects intersectionality can be a bit problematic, as stated:

“The understanding and appreciation of individual difference is surely not a liability in itself, by any stretch. Nor does understanding and appreciation necessarily entail an individualistic ideological and political agenda. But because identity is the object rather than merely the starting point, the ends rather than only the means of collectivity, identity politics continually devolves into the articulation of the requirements for group membership, and thus, to the individual.”

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This is then where I want to **pause** and say that we should recognise identity and how some are privileged, in the lens of society, but remaining stagnant in the focus on those identities implies no progress. We should all, after recognising our privileges move forth and then remember the end goal being transformation and decoloniality.

In closing,

An understanding of our Constitution requires a dedicated civic education programme, which is seriously lacking. Linking social justice to every aspect of society by ensuring a module in social justice for the attainment of a degree should be mandatory if we are to accept that we cannot live without another and to do that, great and difficult changes must occur!

No matter if we are intimidated, victimised or criminalised by the corridors of white, Afrikaner power that is housed in Stellenbosch and its apartheid-bastion university we must ensure that we remain steadfast otherwise, the notion of nation-building and espousing Nelson Mandela's values shall remain a distant dream and increasingly, lost.