

Populism and Nationalism: Implications for South Africa



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Leslie Dikeni takes a theoretical journey through the history of both populism and nationalism in South Africa that looks deeply at the ideological underpinnings of these political trends. Dikeni looks at the different streams of thinking on these trends and tracks their ideological development in the South African context. Finishing with a look at the modern era and the trends that are evident in our current politics.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay, is to examine two theoretical concepts that contemporarily have an impact on the South African social, political and development discourse namely populism and nationalism. In so doing, to take into account international events that have structurally influence this discourse in the country.

Of importance here, is to develop an understanding of how different social actors with power (state and non-state actors) translate and give meaning to these concepts within the South African development discourse. Thus, taking into account that concepts do influence and shape societies. In so doing provide a theoretical analyses that will provide a paradigmatic shift from the current one.

My approach, will be to connect both theory and praxis. The assumption being, that theoretical and pragmatic issues, and activities are closely interwoven so much that one cannot have one without the other.

Key to this process, is an attempt to answer the question: What are the historical and methodological basis of the existence of these concepts? In other words, to understand their origins and how they were constructed. This with the view to understanding how over the years they have shaped and reshaped societies in different ways.

My starting point, is that, both the concepts of populism and nationalism have been at the centre stage of political debates since the 1800s by various different nation states. In South Africa the discourse has been with us since the birth of the liberation movements.

It finds expression, amongst different social actors operating at different levels of society today , e.g. the local (or micro), regional (or meso), and national (or macro) level. The actors involved are: different state actors, different political parties (with different ideological perspectives e.g. left, right and centre left), advocacy groups, the media with conflicting ideological point of views and perspectives.

An important actor, amongst these actors is what I previously dubbed as the Celebrity Intellectuals (see Dikeni, 2009) who seek to gain face and not to lose face. Of importance here, is their use of political phrases in a populist and fashionable way. This they do by offering us media soundbites of the day on television and other media outlets. All their ideas are informed by ideological theory and not practice informed by reality.

Theorising Populism

From a sociological perspective (and also as defined by other social scientists) populism is generically used to cover a variety of political phenomena. There has been considerable debate of whether it is a movement or an ideology, or whether it exists at all.

Canovan (1981), identifies three forms of populism and provides many examples of leaders from different countries in the world who are proponents of a populist cult. These are:

- *Populism of the Little Man* describes the political orientation of small proprietors such as peasants, farmers and small businessmen who support private property and cooperation between small producers, but are wary of big business and government. Typically, this populism decries “progress”, whether it be urbanisation, industrialisation, or the growth of monopoly capitalism, which it sees as leading to moral decay, and calls for a return to past eras. It disrupts politicians and intellectuals and may lead people to support either direct popular democracy or strong leaders who share the populist ideology. Examples include the agrarian populism of the American Populist Party in the 1890s, the European peasant parties and the Canadian Social Credit Party of the early twentieth century, and the non-agrarian populism of the post-war Scottish National party (in its early years) and the nineteenth-century Norwegian Left.
- *Authoritarian Populism* describes charismatic leaders who bypass the political elite to appeal directly to the people, often utilising reactionary sentiments. Examples include fascists such as Hitler, and right wing leaders such as Charles de Gaulle.
- *Revolutionary Populism* describes the idealisation of the people and their collective traditions by intellectuals who reject elitism and progress. This leads to a rejection of existing political institutions in favour of the seizure of power by the people, or in favour of charismatic leaders who claim to represent the people. Examples include the Russian populists (Nardodniks), intellectuals who during the 1860s claimed that socialism could be achieved without first going through capitalism, by building on existing peasant communes, and the later support of fascism among certain European intellectuals. Furthermore, populism cannot be fitted easily into the conventional frameworks of political analysis. It may be either right-wing or left-wing, or neither. It is often reactionary, calling for a return to traditional virtues, but some populist leaders, such as Juan Peron in Argentina, have worked for social and economic modernization and eschewed reactionary rhetoric. Nor is it possible to identify a definite pattern of social and economic conditions under which populism occurs; particular types of populism are not systematically related to particular social classes nor to specific economic circumstances.

Furthermore, populism cannot be fitted easily into the conventional frame works of political analysis. It may be either right-wing or left-wing, or neither.

This theoretical and analytical frame work, by Canovan helps us to discern and identify some common features of populism. Populism is a distinctive form of political rhetoric that sees virtue and political legitimacy residing in the “people”, sees dominant elites as corrupt, and asserts that political goals are best achieved by means of a direct relationship between government and the people, rather than being mediated by existing political institutions.

Understanding Nationalism: Paradigm Lost Paradigm Regained

The debate on the concept of Nationalism in South Africa and elsewhere in the world is one that we have been chewing for a long time and has since gained ground. In South Africa and within the continent at large, and especially after the liberation of the colonies (though having gained ground) it was lost for some time. This occurred after the liberation of most African Countries from colonial rule.

The debate seem to have emerged again within the 21st century and has taken different forms, having been given different meaning and interpretations by various social actors involved in the political development of the continent (e.g. different political parties, different intellectual groups and individuals and state and non-state actors).

Of relevance here, is how such a debate shaped the historical, political, social and developmental trajectory of South Africa today and in the future.

Hence, in broadly paraphrasing Thomas Kuhn (1970) on the *Structure of the Scientific Revolution*: we lose paradigms, yet we still regain them. Hence my attempt to regain the discourse and/or re-theorise the concept of nationalism with the aim of finding a better understanding of it for the contemporary South African political and social discourse.

Subsequent to these events Nationalism became closely associated with movements for self-determination against imperialism and colonisation in the Third world (where we belong).

My point of departure, is that, a glimpse at the historical theoretical data (18th or 19th hundred century) in this regard shows that by the end of the 19th century in Europe (where the concept originates), after the Napoleonic period, and during the emergence of national movement which coincided with the nation

states there. Furthermore, a growing number of social theorists during this period (See for example, Smith, 1971, Davis 1978 and Gellner 1983 for further reading of these theorists) assumed that nationalism would decline and would be replaced by internationalism and cosmopolitanism. Suggesting that:

- The growth of trade would undermine particularistic differences between societies;
- Conflicts would be expressed through class rather than national ideologies; and that
- The working class would develop a commitment to international socialism.

The events of the First World War thwarted or rather shattered these theoretical assumptions. In that, during the war there was very little working class opposition to a war fought on nationalist principles.

Subsequent to these events Nationalism became closely associated with movements for self- determination against imperialism and colonisation in the Third world.

There are two major dominant schools of thoughts on the theory of nationalism that have for a long time held the centre stage on the debate. Though different; they

are similar and have one thing in common. That is, their “deterministic” economic approach and “homogenisation” of different social groups in different societies to the interpretation and analytical use of the concept.

Furthermore, they seem to insist that nationalism and/or the emergence of nationalistic movements is only propelled by external forces for economic exploitation of internal groups.

In their view nationalism is a form of reactive politics against colonialism in societies where traditional modes of social organisation have collapsed as a result of social changes introduced by external colonialism. Thus, for these schools of thought nationalism is associated with political extremism and xenophobia. Of importance here, is the social homogenisation of all national groups in the colonies.

Briefly described, without having to go into detail about the different ideological stand points of these two schools of thought: They are the on the one hand, the liberal school of thought which tends to obscure the positive political merits of national movements within the Third World, which have achieved self-government and some measure of social development.

Both theoretical models of these schools of thought are tainted by deterministic linear and externalist views of the concept of nationalism.

To this school, the blame (amongst other things) is squarely laid on capitalism; which it claims, through its uneven development, creates profound regional imbalance. With peripheral regions driven to embracing nationalist politics to secure a more equal distribution of wealth.

On the other hand, is the classical Marxist approach to nationalism that sees it as bourgeoisie ideology, because it serves the interests of the rising bourgeoisie in its opposition to other class forces in society. Also to this school, national struggle was a special form of class struggle, often referred to as ‘external class struggle’ that is conducted on the international rather than the national level.

In short, and as evident in both schools of thought (in my view) though holding different deterministic ideological points of view on the concept of nationalism still share some commonalities in their approach. And despite their obvious differences in ideology and theoretical trapping, these schools of thought on nationalism contain paradigmatic similarities. Both theoretical models of these schools of thought are tainted by deterministic linear and externalist views of the concept of nationalism.

As was eluded to earlier on elsewhere, in this contribution and in paraphrasing Thomas Kuhn and, that is, we lose paradigms and yet at a certain point in historical scientific thought processes we regain them.

The debate on nationalism in history also evolved and the old paradigm was replaced by a new one, leading to a new period of normal science amongst social scientists. In short, some form of consensus (free from ideology) emerged on the discourse on nationalism amongst social scientist. And that is, despite empirical complexity, nationalism has the following general features:

- It is based on the demand that governments should share the same cultural identity as the governed;
- As a result cultural nationalism, which seeks to preserve or recreate the national heritage through, for example, the revival of a language in Africa, prepares the basis for political nationalism, which seeks self-determination and political supremacy;

- The development of modern systems of mass communication facilitates the dissemination of unifying nationalist ideologies;
- Nationalist ideologies have a strong appeal to subordinate classes by providing them with some economic protection against non-nationalists, but the content of the ideology is typically developed by marginal intellectuals – black intellectuals, for instance, excluded from white educational establishments, were drawn to nationalism;
- Nationalism is, in the twentieth century, associated with de-colonization and the economic development of the Third World societies, and with the struggle for regional equality within existing capitalist societies.

Populism and Nationalism in South Africa

Implications of Nationalism

My analyses lead me, to argue that the South African theoretical discourse is composed of all three theoretical models of nationalism discussed above. And that, the current political and social events taking place in South Africa will show that we have both the Marxist school of thought and the liberal school of thought discussed earlier here. Whose theoretical models of the concept are tainted by linear and externalist views on nationalism.

There is evidence, in the various actions of some members of the alliance (partners) movement that indicates a return to old ideas of narrow nationalistic thinking, tribal thinking and narrow homogenising definitions of identity.

The Marxist school of thought

Examples of these are the South African Communist Party (SACP) and its leading alliance partner the African National Congress (ANC) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that subscribe to a Marxist school of thought (this not excluding the splinter groups from COSATU. This school of thought has historically held this position (pre and post the advent of democracy) and arguably is still holding this

world view. However, the current political events in the country indicate that a social and political shift has emerged from its historical theoretical stance today.

Without having to deal in depth with the disturbing political and social events (what others refer to as catastrophic) within the country today.

There is evidence, in the various actions of some members of the alliance movement that indicates a return to old ideas of narrow nationalistic thinking, tribal thinking and narrow homogenising definitions of identity.

These ideas find expression in the various statements they often make in the media (print and otherwise), some policy documents and sometimes in parliamentary debates. The many policy theoretical bubbling concepts (e.g. BEE, Affirmative Action and the many charters) developed to seek to deal with racial inequalities and yet at the same time having to come to grips with identity questions miss the point and often turn out to be decisive at a cultural and economic level.

The often downright critique and racial labelling of other members of the minority groups belonging to this movement when (As we have seen in the case of the late Ahmed Kathrada amongst others) critically theoretically engaging on policy and/or any other conceptual discourse affecting this movement is one other such example. Of late we have seen this tendency playing itself out between a former minister and a current minister in government.

And indeed shouting down of others who seek to advance the non-racial project (as often done in Parliament) as Un-African (when they are black) is another short coming that is narrow in theoretical and conceptual thinking.

The liberal school of thought

The liberal school of thought led by different political opposition parties within government. Dominant here, being the leading opposition party the Democratic Alliance (DA) with other smaller minority parties. Connected but distinct from this group, are far right groups like the Freedom Front, Afri-Forum and others.

As already mentioned elsewhere in this piece, this school of thought obscures the positive political merits of of national movements within the so called third world , which have achieved self –government and some measurers of social development.

To this school, the blame (amongst other things) is squarely laid on capitalism; which it claims, through its uneven development ,creates profound regional imbalance. With peripheral regions embracing nationalist politics to secure a more equal distribution of wealth.

The recent tweets and/or statements by the Democratic Alliance’s Premier of the Western Cape on colonialism and racism are a good affirmation of this liberal theoretical model of nationalism.

This liberal externalist and myopic view on nationalism, therefore suggests that nationalism is a form of reactive politics against colonialism in societies where traditional modes of social organisation have collapsed as a result of social changes introduced by external colonialism.

The social scientific perspective

These are contrasted by a specific group that is by character free from ideology and thus; has adopted social scientific and/or differing perspectives on the discourse. This group draws support from the different South African political parties, amongst academics and some civil society groups.

Implications of Populism

Following Canovan’s description and analytical framework of analysis on the political phenomena of populism. The dominant form of populism that exists in present day South Africa is that of a revolutionary populism. And that is the idealisation of people and their collective traditions by intellectuals who reject elitism and progress. Which leads to the rejection of political institutions in favour of the seizure of power by the people, or in favour of charismatic leaders who claim to represent the people.

Examples in South Africa would include political parties and advocacy groups such as the Economic Freedom fighters (EFF), the Decolonisation Foundation, Black First Land first (BLF), Black Management Forum (BMF), Afri-Forum and other members of opposition parties. Of importance here, are some members of the ruling party (e.g. the current president of the Party) that seek to claim the voice of the people. Of evidence to their myopic rhetoric are the various populist theoretical bubbles that they feed the citizen. Of importance here is that, these concepts have

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no theoretical and methodological basis of existence and hence they are theoretical bubbles. These theoretical bubbles are fed to the citizen via the media (with various ideological interests) for the public to consume. To illustrate my point, the statement by the current minister of Water Affairs who was quoted as saying “when the rand falls we will pick it up...” is one such glaring example. Furthermore, concepts like Radical Economic Transformation, White Monopoly Capital and sometimes a very generic interpretation of decolonisation that clearly are used by these populists for their own interests and not for the advancement of society.

Indeed, and that is, we are at a very critical turning point in South Africa where old orthodox ideas must give way to new ideas on the conceptualisation of the South African development trajectory. Populist theoretical ideological bubbles are very far from helping in this regard.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this essay I have tried to pull together the various theoretical and conceptual models of the concepts of nationalism and populism, and discuss their implications for South Africa. An attempt here, was to try and develop an understanding of the historical and methodological existence of these concepts. In so doing, I call into question the euphoria of new populist theoretical strategies for its political social development trajectory.

And, finally, I stress the need for the development of sensitizing concepts, more flexible, more flexible frameworks of analysis and more treatment of the voices and practices of social and political civil society actors that include the ongoing transformation and interpenetration of external models and experience.

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