

The Spirit of Generosity: Power and Privilege in Politically Uncertain Times



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Thank you for inviting me to deliver this year’s annual lecture. I am deeply honoured to present this lecture on the event of the centenary of Helen Suzman’s life.

Since 2008, this annualised lecture has provided an instructive space to interrogate the liberal democratic values that were so central to Helen Suzman’s life and political contributions to South African democracy.

The intellectual tradition of such lectures hold at their core the complex matter of memory - owing their existence to the extraordinary lives of those whose names they bear.

Indeed, earlier this evening, we marked memory by honouring Helen Suzman with a postage stamp¹ that bears her image. It is a fitting tribute to a more deserving champion of basic human rights, whose contribution to freedom transcended South African and international borders.

When the name ‘Helen Suzman’ is invoked, a common image emerges: the silhouette of a woman, standing as a lone anti-apartheid voice in its parliament for 13 years – committed to intentionally and strategically campaigning against the dehumanising system of apartheid.

We think of the politician who audaciously declared: “I am provocative, and I admit this. It isn’t as if I’m only on the receiving end, a poor, frail little creature. I can be thoroughly nasty when I get going, and I don’t pull my punches”.²

We remember the liberal who presented an alternate (if minority) image of white South African ideologies and ethical morality through her actions, statements and way of being.

With wit, relentlessness and an unflinching determination, Helen Suzman is canonised as an ardent critic of her South African context. The *Hansard*, a verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings, is filled with accounts of her meticulously researched, assertively delivered and detailed remarks.

Suzman dared to speak truth to power. Such tenacity, with the knowledge of potential consequence and privilege by way of position, is no small contribution to our democratic freedoms.

A caveat must be stated:

The interrogative opening provided by lectures such as these, asks for engagement with a few facets of a complex life. Keeping in mind their limitations, by way of time and narrowness of focus, we are still required to acknowledge the complicated multiplicity of being existent in every one of us – the ‘multitudes’ that poet Walt Whitman notes we contain.³ As such, our efforts at canonising figures such as Helen Suzman are required to avoid the pitfalls of sanitising memory.

In the effort to ensure their significant contributions to liberation, and aim for clarity, these notable individuals become martyrs, saints, villains – outlined as archetypes without the rich texture of human existence. As President Nelson Mandela, himself afflicted with this reality, noted:

‘In real life we deal, not with gods, but with ordinary humans like ourselves: men and women who are full of contradictions, who are stable and fickle, strong and weak, famous and infamous.’

In considering her legacy, I am struck by the inextricably linked relationship between power, privilege and politics. All three were pivotal features of Suzman’s life, and remain in an inescapable, yet complicated relationship in our present and past contexts.

It is critical, in service of their commemoration, to draw depictions that allow for the full breadth of who these public figures were to be kept in focus, as we wrestle with the political and personal tensions inherent in the scope of any human life. As such, the historical tensions of the South African liberal perspective within the struggle context are unavoidable in considering the life of Helen Suzman, just as we celebrate her remarkable existence.

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Consequently, in identifying a site of focus in the life of Helen Suzman, I have entitled this evening’s lecture ‘*Generosity of Spirit: Power and Privilege in Politically Uncertain Times*’.

It unfolds through a consideration of five lessons that Suzman’s legacy provides, that intersect and inform each other. These are framed as:

- The value of critical consciousness;
- The central principles of liberal constitutional democracy;
- Consciousness of agency and collective action;
- The philosophy of humanism; and
- The importance and meaning of the self-determination of oppressed peoples.

How then, do we define the atmospherics of uncertainty within the present South African context – while always keeping in mind its global resonances?

The potential importance of this year in history must be briefly considered.

Variegated across history are instances that reveal themselves as defining moments.

It must be noted that a vast set of conditions and factors coalesce in the creation of the appearance of a watershed, or turning point. Given the present global realities, in once-considered stable and developing democracies, 2017 appears to be a historically significant year.

Perhaps in future, and with the nostalgic benefit of hindsight, we will look back at this year and see it as a time when the tide turned in favour of a return to the central tenets of democracy and ethical leadership. Or instead, it could constitute a moment in which we were collectively overcome by the waters of corruption, conceit, deceit and the most depraved of human attributes.

The hinge on which our interconnected local and global future rests, is the question of agency. This was a reality that Helen Suzman, and her contemporaries, never sought to shirk.

Through public dialogue and events, it has become clear that ours is not an unblemished society. Considering the local dimensions of this moment in political history, the South African reality is fraught with interwoven successes and failures.

The historical fault lines of South African life are still divided along race, class, creed, sexual orientation, gender and ability. These divisions are insistently and increasingly revealing themselves in countless discursive and material ways.

The meaning of such revelations requires understanding the local and global dimensions of the founding promise of our country's democracy.

As South Africa made its transition from an Apartheid state to one founded on lofty democratic principles enshrined in our Constitution, the nation and society was presented as a potential paragon of change.

The nation carried the hopes of the global community who anticipated that we would provide the world with the ultimate instructive example of good governance and progressive policies based on human rights, proving oppressive histories could be overcome by resolute commitment to unity. The combination of ethical leadership and democratic institutions, it was thought, would act as midwives to a new way of being. This did not come to pass.

In being fair, the burden on our collective shoulders was too heavy a weight to carry—the expectations too high to fulfil in absolute terms.

In being frank, those charged with power – in numerous sectors – have failed to live up to the oaths of office, terms of business and moral consciousness attached to their positions. Our present is not one unattended to by human hands; we are simultaneously charged with keeping those in power accountable. Responsibility is, therefore, at once individual, collective and multidirectional.

As such, the first aspect of Helen Suzman's legacy that I seek to draw attention to is *the value of critical consciousness*. A quintessential part of her legacy is the functional value of intentional, measured and actionable critique.

The Dominican American author Junot Diaz provides a useful way to frame the beneficial function of criticism. When asked whether his work – which reflects a 'grimmer' depiction of American history, has made him love the country any less, he answered:

Why should it? I've always thought that you don't love a country by turning a blind eye to its crimes and to a problem. The way that you love a country is by seeing everything that it's done wrong, all of its mistakes, and still thinking that it's beautiful and that it's worthy.'

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Diaz frames his fundamental responsibility as a citizen around the acknowledgement of both American shortcomings and his own privilege – purposed towards making the country ‘a better place’.⁴ Here, again, we see the intersection of privilege, position, politics and power.

Those who view critique this way seek to ban books; doggedly pursue dissenters within their ranks; and ultimately desire the silencing of critics. They manipulate the language of democracy and the power of their position, utilised as mandates to their stifling strategies.

Premised upon this mode of understanding the functional value of criticism – I wish to briefly consider two ways in which we frame critique on our shores. The first challenges any disagreement through the erroneous use of democratic rhetoric and institutional power; the second appeals to the idea of a more perfect past, pervaded by a determined pessimism.

Criticism is purposed towards reinforcing our ability to self-critique and therefore self-correct.

There is a certain attitude to critiques of the South African present that is fundamentally undemocratic in nature. Primarily located in corridors of power, across sectors, its ethos goes against the idea of informed discourse that is central to Suzman’s legacy.

Within this frame of thinking, challenges to the use and abuse of power are viewed as unpatriotic acts. Critiques are made malleable, reformulated as attacks and condemnation of person, party and state – separately or simultaneously. In such minds, love of country is demonstrated by the absence of critique and acceptance of the status quo.

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Such formulations, fail to see the immense value of critical analysis. They neglect to account for the way it can assist in shaping our state, through hewing at every feature that does not align with our Constitutional vision when an assessment of our present is purposed towards a realisation of our founding ideals. They fail, if one could phrase it in this manner, the Diaz test in which functional critiques are born of a desire to improve present conditions, arrive at a better future and restore the vision we officially founded on the 27th of April 1994.

The second critical attitude I would like to draw attention to is one that frames every aspect of our present in solely negative terms. It too, pervades multiple sectors – but is located in more diffuse sites of power. Such perspectives conform more to criticism than analysis, failing at self-reflection and existing for their own sake.

These approaches seek refuge in the past, with a dogged refusal to recognise the successes made in our democratic era. They are curiously unaware of their repetition of colonialism and apartheid’s vocabulary and grammar of being – viewing the past as a greener pasture and even adopting its symbols. Their assessment of the present is one that still spins on the linguistics of ‘us’ and ‘them’. These attitudes are found wanting when searching for any measure of Suzman’s political objectives, to make South Africa ‘a better place’, for they reside not in the present, but in a romanticised past.

A critical consciousness must note, as Danish Philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, remarked that “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”⁵

Any apprehension of the contemporary South African reality, that seeks to understand the relationship between past and present, must resist any attempts at epochal neatness. The break between historical eras, between the ‘new’ South Africa and the old, will not be clean.

Just a week ago, the courts found that Ahmed Timol did not commit suicide, but was murdered.⁶ The past is still being resurrected, the future still being shaped.

To return to the promise of complete societal renovation that was hoped for the South African state, academic Peter Vale notes:

Instead of the country being held up to the world as an example of successful ‘transformation’, it might well be regarded as a microcosm of a world unable – perhaps unwilling – to deal with old social pathologies like race, class, and nationalism or even newer ones like the environment, or gender relations, or a post-capitalist world.⁷

How, then, do we meaningfully address these social pathologies, in service of the second aspect of Suzman’s legacy: **the central principles of liberal constitutional democracy** founded in the dream of an equal South African society?

The Constitution provides a vision of the South African dream, as imagined in the 1990s.

The American poet Langston Hughes oft-quoted poem, *Harlem*, asks:

‘What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?’

We have now found that a disavowal of the past is not a construction of the future because ‘the past we inherit and the future we create’.

What, then, of the South African dream?

We have now found that a disavowal of the past is not a construction of the future because ‘the past we inherit and the future we create’.

Our Constitution founds the Republic of South Africa on the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of a wide definition of human rights and accompanying freedoms.

It is rooted in non-racialism and non-sexism.

It establishes a state based on the supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law. Universal adult suffrage, a national common voter’s roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government are institutional prerequisites.

By design it is meant to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness underpinned by the principle of judicial review.

It demanded then, as it does now, a radical transformation of every aspect of South African life.

Yet given how apartheid sought legal dominion over families, intimate relationships, places of work and residence, friendships, ways of gathering, speech and art, it is in some ways understandable – yet still lamentable – that our society and state have not realised the conditions required to make the Constitution and its liberal ideals a living document.

Suzman's campaign against apartheid in parliament was inspired by liberal ideals in the universalist sense, against the power and privilege embedded in racial order.

Yet it bears stating that these ideals are not without their own tensions that played out in struggle history and remain with us.

Pallo Jordan makes the critical distinction between liberals and liberalism. He argues that while the former refers to 'an organised political current', the latter defines 'a modern political value system'.⁸

Jordan maintains:

"The victory of liberal democracy in South Africa is paradoxical because its midwife was an African nationalist movement with a history of a troubled relationship with liberals but which had nonetheless consistently defended basic liberal democratic principles. It was the parties associated with that movement that upheld the universalist vision at the core of the liberal democratic tradition during our constitutional talks."⁹

A broad cross-section of the South African citizenry has been jolted out of their complacency and apathy, and is presently taking up the mantle of 'visionary agency'. We are becoming alive to the all too real possibility of the failure of politics to singularly usher in a new era.

Dedicated to a counter-vision of South African society, the dream that Suzman and many other comrades pursued in the midst of internal differences was one rooted in basic liberal ideals: freedom, equality and universal human rights.

In the post-apartheid frame, however, the ways in which we have regressed from this promise, from the dream of a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa is regrettable.

Consequently, the question as to how we realise our strategic goal still finds itself without a clear-cut answer. This requires that instead of turning away from uncertainty, we embrace its lessons – viewing this as a moment to reframe our vision of society. Collective action and responsibility is required.

Here enters the third aspect of Suzman's legacy: **consciousness of agency**.

A broad cross-section of the South African citizenry has been jolted out of their complacency and apathy, and is presently taking up the mantle of 'visionary agency'.¹⁰ We are becoming alive to the all too real possibility of the failure of politics to singularly usher in a new era.

Given the historical exigencies of our state, inequality shapes power, privilege and agency.

Our world is organised by multiple forms of power which exist as architecture and influences agency. Power defines what it means to be human and informs every aspect of daily life. It is inescapable and political, and must be understood as such, if we are to address the uncertainty of our present through collective action.

Many commentators often present Helen Suzman as though she was fundamentally alone. While she was the only member of the Progressive Federal Party with political representation for over a decade, Suzman was joined by an extra-parliamentary mass movement of millions. Her significant contribution was like a rivulet that decanted into the mainstream movement of resistance. Thus, when conceiving of agency, we move from the individual to the collective level.

Helen Suzman used the privilege of a parliamentary seat afforded by power attached to identity – which then granted her a degree of agency, towards liberation.

In the post-apartheid climate, power and privilege are in complex formation.

While still generally conferred along historical clefs, the existence of growing public platforms and a more diffuse allocation of power among the burgeoning middle and upper social classes provides greater opportunities to speak out, effect change and address the failures of the democratic state. Simply put, we are called to use our privilege towards the upliftment of all.

It cannot be untangled from the final aspect of her life that I seek to draw attention to: the tensions between using privilege while acknowledging oppressed people's right to self-determination.

A question emerges: how do we rally and mobilise a unified South Africa to shift the present condition?

Disagreements by way of identity, ideology and experience have made the realisation of South African unity a difficult objective to achieve. As Fidel Castro writes in 'My Early Years' 'Like religious faith, political belief should be based on reasoning, on the development of thought and feelings'. The 'reasoned discourse' that underpinned Suzman's approach to discord, which allows space for disagreement, is only possible when we take as our starting point, the realisation of a common humanity.

A progressive humanism asks that we emphasise our universal rights to freedom, equality and justice, without dismissing the particularity of our experiences. It asks that we go beyond ourselves, and consider our destinies held in common, and our futures as fundamentally linked. A divided South Africa, therefore, is asked to see itself as connected. A seeming paradox emerges. While South Africans, of many kinds, know that the present is untenable, moving forward, through unity, is difficult to conceive of and realise precisely because difference is pervasive.

The central principles of our belief systems are called to stand for the values embraced by people like Helen Suzman. She identified these as 'simple justice, equal opportunity and human rights. The indispensable elements in a democratic society - and well worth fighting for.'¹¹

While Suzman was once condescendingly referred to as a "sickly humanist",¹² I can think of no greater compliment than to be found a fitting match for such an aspirational ideal.

Humanism provides the fourth instructive lesson from the life of Helen Suzman and her contemporaries. It cannot be untangled from the final aspect of her life that I seek to draw attention to: **the tensions between using privilege while acknowledging oppressed people's right to self-determination**. Consequently, I will not attempt a neat separation of these facets of her legacy.

Throughout the liberation struggle, activists from various backgrounds differed on numerous matters. In Suzman's case, this most distinctly included the issues of sanctions and the use of violence.¹³ We must be wary, however, of historical revision

that wishes to attach the present ‘way of seeing’ to the past’s set of circumstances.

As John Berger notes:

‘Our specific points of difference no longer exist because the choices to which they applied no longer exist. Nor will they ever exist again in quite the same way. Opportunities can be irretrievably lost and their loss is like death’.¹⁴

Still, there were ways in which the borders placed between South Africans – both physical and legal – were overcome by a shared opposition to injustice. This provides an instructive lesson to our present divisions: a way to work towards a common cause.

Quoted in Suzman’s autobiography ‘*In No Uncertain Terms*’, Nelson Mandela once remarked on these shared ideals:

‘A wide gap still exists between the mass democratic movement and your party with regard to the method of attaining those values. But your commitment to a nonracial democracy in a united South Africa has won you many friends in the extraparliamentary movement.’

Often, those in positions of leadership negate the possibilities for self-determination, becoming consumed by a project of self-preservation. They relate to those structurally prevented from positions of power and privilege as if they are minors.

In Suzman’s life we see the ability to transcend political difference. Remarking on this, Nadine Gordimer commented:

[But over the years I have observed – that when people are in trouble, she has been the one they have appealed to. She is the one everyone trusted]...Suzman never refused anyone her help, that I knew of. No matter how unpleasant or hostile the individual’s attitude to her and her political convictions had been.¹⁵

Considered in chorus, these quotes generate two aspects of agency and power that are related.

The litmus test of liberal principles is the question of self-determination, as opposed to the paternalism that is often present when thinking about the condition of oppressed peoples. This is not a gift that should be bestowed. It is a basic human right. Often, those in positions of leadership negate the possibilities for self-determination, becoming consumed by a project of self-preservation. They relate to those structurally prevented from positions of power and privilege as if they are minors.

The attitude of oppressed masses and mass democratic leaders of the struggle was born of a belief that liberation required taking full charge and responsibility for their own being. Part of realising this aim, involves strategic mobilisation of degrees of privilege.

To this point, I phrase one example.

The creation of the homeland system superimposed jurisdiction that saw people living in these areas excluded from the rest of the country. We cannot accuse those people, who in their day-to-day lives had to function and exist within the framework of the homelands, created in spite of themselves, with complicity in the oppressive system.

Realising the potential for subversion of the system, the African National Congress approached leaders of the homelands with a simple request. They were asked to use the limited political space created by their position within the homelands to

preach the message of unity of the African being. The purpose of the creation of the homelands, we must remember, served to deepen divisions along ethnicities – which we still contend with today. The responses from homeland leaders were varied.

The South African polity, within this era, was structured such that it excluded black people from power – except within the homeland system and urban councils. White South Africans, like Suzman, were privileged to have both the franchise and the ability to participate in official political structures. The purpose of framing this example speaks to one downside of boycott as a weapon of struggle – as in particular instances, we are called to use the limited space, and privilege, available to us.

“At least one Afrikaner should make this protest.”

Connected to this point, privilege can also be used to strengthen unity among like-minded people – who exist in different positions of power. Two leaders, Bram Fisher and Ahmed Kathrada, who held privileges attached to their racial classifications, exemplify this approach.

Born into a powerful Afrikaner family, Bram Fisher could have easily chosen a life of privilege and reached the apex of political power. Initially a nationalist, Fisher was later radicalised while at Oxford College, where he embraced a communist world outlook.¹⁶ This outlook would later see him immersed in the struggle against apartheid – arrested, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

In a statement from the dock, he said: “At least one Afrikaner should make this protest.”¹⁷

Ahmed Kathrada embodied similar values. At the conclusion of the Rivonia Trial, Kathrada was only convicted on one count. Thus, many within the legal fraternity believed he could have appealed his life imprisonment. Kathrada chose not to, emboldened with the firm conviction that all should suffer the consequences of apartheid’s injustice – as privilege should not allow some to be exempt from the brutality meted out to the less privileged.

In closing, as human beings we must be defined by ethical morality – which would enable us to be opposed to injustice, wherever it might manifest. Like Suzman, we are called to play our part in the creation of a more humane world, where we can relate to each other as human beings and not categories of persons, arranged in hierarchies of being.

Emboldened by Suzman’s indomitable spirit, we are called to dare to reimagine a different South African future, in favour of an inclusive and universal dream for the future of humanity. From the 36 years she spent in parliament to her prison visits, Helen Suzman reminds us that visionary agency is possible, that we are able to envisage alternate prospects in the face of devastating realities.

As I noted in the State of the Nation address of 2009, Helen Suzman was ‘a truly distinguished South African, who represented the values of our new Parliament in the chambers of the old.’

In striving towards a realisation of a better future suffused with liberal values, it is evident that the intersection of power and privilege call for us to each mark where we stand, politically, morally and ethically.

Present times require that we use our positions of privilege to effect change, in the spaces where we hold influence – from classrooms to boardrooms, parliament

to political rallies, written texts to radio, sporting codes to performing arts and organised stakeholders of the nation at large.

In the words of Nobel prize-winning author, Toni Morrison, commenting on politically uncertain times: ‘There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear’.¹⁹

Whether by our hands or through our reticence, South Africa is being shaped and the future is at stake.

Thank you

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.postoffice.co.za/philately/2017/helensuzman.html>
- 2 <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/helensuzma323833.html>
- 3 http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm
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- 5 <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/sorenkierk105030.html>
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- 7 Vale, 2013: 5. Adolescence and Anger. Accessed: <https://thesiseleven.com/2013/06/03/issue-115-april-2013-between-adolescence-and-anger-the-new-south-africa-nears-twenty/>
- 8 <https://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Liberals-liberals-and-liberalism-20150429>
- 9 <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2012-11-22-disdain-for-liberals-is-not-because-of-intolerance/>
- 10 Njabulo Ndebele used this term in the 10th annual Helen Joseph lecture. Accessed: <https://www.njabulondebele.co.za/2016/09/they-are-burning-memory/>
- 11 <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/helensuzma323835.html>
- 12 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/02/world/africa/02suzman.html>
- 13 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/02/world/africa/02suzman.html>
- 14 Introduction by John Berger to *The Necessity of the Art* by Ernst Fischer
- 15 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-01-30-the-lone-ranger-helen-suzman-legacy-revisited/#.Wfr85I-CzIV>
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- 19 <https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>