

Recalling 1910: A bridge too far

2010 is not simply the year that South Africa hosts the soccer world cup. It is also 100 years since the founding of the Union of South Africa. It has been 100 years since South Africa emerged as an entity in terms of international law. It is 100 years since the boundaries of the country were fixed. It is 100 years since a single, sovereign state has ruled over a contiguous territory (not forgetting the nominally independent Bantustans of Bophutatswana, Ciskei and the Transkei). It is also 100 years ago that South Africa emerged as an artefact of British Imperial conquest.

Yet nowhere has this centenary been recalled in official functions or capacities. Is this a mere oversight, a function of how preoccupied South Africans are with preparations for the coming soccer spectacle? Or is something more significant at work? Does it tell us something about how modern South Africa situates itself relative to the past?

Over the last several years the pace of memorialisation has increased in South Africa. If the early years of the transition were clearly focused on the future (reconstruction and development), in parts of the government and the ANC there has been a collective turning back. All sorts of renaming projects are underway or have been completed. Pietersburg became Polokwane in 2005. Louis Trichardt is now called Makado and Potgietersrust is now named after a pre-colonial king, Makopane.

What past do these names remember?

Often name-changing in South Africa serves a corrective function: to re-populate the public landscape with the names and figures of a black population largely erased, Pieterneef like, from South African *mise en scene*. This is certainly the intention, for example, behind the renaming of Hans Strijdom Drive. The official Johannesburg press release explained: "At the march on 9 August 1956, where women were protesting against the pass laws, one of the significant slogans was "Malibongwe!" which means 'let it be praised'. This meant "Let women be honoured and praised" and not oppressed by the extension of pass laws to women. The famous song of that time pays tribute to the bravery of the women who said "Strijdom, you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder, your laws will be crushed. The laws enacted by Strijdom have indeed disappeared, and the renaming of Strijdom Drive is a tribute to the role played by women in the struggle for democracy"¹.

It also serves to unsettle or even subvert clichés and/or stereotypes. Consider the ingenious renaming of Hendrik Verwoerd Drive in Randburg. In June 2007 it became Bram Fischer Drive. Fischer was an Afrikaner aristocrat, the son of the last Judge President of the Orange Free State and grandson of a prime minister of the Orange River Colony. He committed himself to the struggle against apartheid; both as a lawyer in the defence of Nelson Mandela during the Rivonia Trial and as a communist leader. He received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967. What we are asked to recall here



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is nothing less than an alternative history of Afrikanerdom than that associated with the 'architect of apartheid'.

Sometimes, however, the names of towns or streets or places have not so much been changed as transcended. In a manoeuvre made possible by the peculiar geography of apartheid cities and towns, new metropolitan areas or districts include historically white towns and black townships, often retaining their original names. Yet both locations are incorporated into a new municipal authority that is given a resplendent democratic-era title. Consider, for example, Pretoria, the name of the capital of Paul Kruger's Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek. Later it was the administrative capital of apartheid South Africa. Today, Pretoria has the same municipal status as the townships with which it has been incorporated. The whole goes under the name of the Tshwane Metropolitan Council.

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The name Pretoria survives to designate an area within the new metropolitan authority. Here the past is not erased or repressed. Rather it is invoked as an element, a part of a new, united whole, whose meaning and significance is transformed in a genuinely transcendental symbolism. This is an elegant restatement of the Freedom Charter's opening declaration: South Africa belongs to all who live in it,

black and white. In this constellation, equal citizenship is granted, not simply to the physical beings that inhabit the land of South Africa, but even to their pasts and their histories. The spatial juxtaposition of names recalling diverse (and usually violent and antagonistic) histories in a bounded whole (Tshwane) has another surprising effect. Pretoria alongside Soshanguve alongside Mabopane alongside Atteridgeville etc renders their histories simultaneous and equivalent. That is, they become elements of a common history. What the TRC failed to do, some of South Africa's new name-constellations achieve, subtly and elegantly.

This is why current (failed) efforts to erase the name Pretoria altogether are as much about historiography as they are about politics. They are claims on what should be remembered about the past and how. In this sense there has been a distinct shift in the tone and direction of the political discourse. Why would elements of the ANC government wish to forget "Pretoria"?

At least since the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki, there has been growing ambivalence about the character of 1994 and its relationship to the future.

We get a sense of this uneasiness when we re-read an important essay from 1997, asking precisely the question above. "How do we understand April 1994?" Pallo Jordan asked in a paper prepared for the 50th ANC National Conference. Jordan's chief concern was with the 'national question' by which he meant the degree to which "South Africans share a common patriotism and a common vision of the future of their society"². Of chief concern for Jordan was the "material basis of white racism"³. A cornerstone of the ANC's non-racialism, that which distinguished it from say the Africanism of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), was that racism was not explained in terms of the peculiar psychology or culture of whites as individuals. It reflected, rather, the way that capitalism had developed in a colonial setting and the institutions created to sustain those productive relations.⁴

What did 1994 represent on these terms? “The ANC,” Jordan writes, “had to make a number of distasteful concessions to the old order in order to secure the beach-head of majority rule in 1994. These were made with the implicit understanding that the main thrust of movement policy would be to consolidate that beach-head and employ it to lay the foundations of a truly democratic society”⁵.

In other words, on Jordan’s terms, national unity was delayed as long as racism continued to be institutionalised – in both apartheid institutions (that arose to support the productive forces) and in the structures of the economy (colonial capitalism). Therein lay both the disappointment of 1994 and also its promise. “Distasteful concessions” were made to the white minority regime, such that institutionalised racism survived. In 1997, however, Pallo Jordan was hopeful that the bridgehead that the democratic breakthrough represented, could be progressively advanced and expanded.

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Thirteen years later there is an intemperate atmosphere in the ANC suggesting that such optimism is over. When Julius Malema and the ANC Youth League moot nationalising the mines, it reflects a more generalised frustration with the terms of 1994, even with the constitution and with democracy itself. This is not simply a clash between nationalists and ‘leftists’ in the ANC. There is a genuine radicalisation happening in the African National Congress, as all sorts of repressed or forbidden thoughts increasingly find expression.

I wonder if something of this mood is not at work in the public silence about 1910. When 1994 looks less and less like a bridgehead to the post colony, there is surely no desire to be reminded of the imperial birth of modern South Africa. It invites a cynical retort, *plus ça change plus ça reste la même chose*.⁶

NOTES

- 1 Press Release on the Renaming of Hendrik Verwoerd Drive and Hans Strijdom Drive, 14 July 2007.
- 2 Jordan, 1997
- 3 Jordan, Affirmative Action, Corrective Measures and the Freedom Charter
- 4 Jordan, Towards Solutions
- 5 Jordan, Affirmative Action, Corrective Measures and the Freedom Charter
- 6 The more things change, the more they stay the same.