

THE FIGHT FOR AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

*Towards Politics of Racial Harmony
and Equity in South Africa*



Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane

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**THE FIGHT FOR AN
EGALITARIAN SOCIETY:
TOWARDS POLITICS OF RACIAL
HARMONY AND EQUITY
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

TSOALEDI DANIEL TSOBEJANE



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, Mirika and Ramadimetša Thobejane, my nieces Mabatho Thobejane, Lebogang Thobejane, Dikeledi Thobejane, Mpho Mojela and Tshepho Thobejane. My brothers and sisters Mangope Thobejane, Nkhulu George Thobejane, Jim Thobejane, Selatole Thobejane, Johanna Thobejane and Tebogo Thobejane. My two daughters Katlego and Damaris. I pay homage to those combatants of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCMA), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC) who laid their lives on the altar of freedom to liberate South Africa.

PREFACE

The aim of this book is to highlight the role that the Black Consciousness Movement played in the transformation of South Africa from racial oppression to participatory democracy. The book also sheds some light on the plight of those political detainees who suffered under dictatorial regimes around the world. Chief amongst these are those who were tortured in prisons for their political beliefs around the world and particularly in South Africa.

It is so tragic that in this day and age, politicians in both developing and developed countries (North and South) still revert to barbaric methods of extracting information from political detainees. This has been witnessed by the way in which the American government was involved in the heinous torture of prisoners of war in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, and the famous “Ghost houses” in Sudan wherein political prisoners were beaten to death for opposing the government.

Torture can be traced back to ancient rulers who used horrific methods of extracting information from political despots and activists. Most of these victims were persecuted in the most horrific of ways. Popes and Cardinals used torture as a way of eliminating their rivals especially during the middle ages. Those who did not believe in the Christian faith were summarily executed. We are also told of the axing which took place in Britain in the 1540's and 1680's. Other methods include burnings in Spain (around 1515 until 1558), water torture, where the victim would be forced to drink water until the rupture of the stomach and then drowned, amputations (practiced by Moslems who still adhere to Shari'a law), gladiatorial combat in Rome (264 BC), which- hunts, whipping, guillotine, electric chair, gas chambers, firing squad, lynchings and lethal injections.

Genocide and ethnic conflicts are also twin evils of torture. This can also be compared with the conflict that raged between the Ushtashi (who are the Serb Monarchist Chetnicks) who massacred about 750000 Serbs during World War II. We are told of the Chetnicks who massacred Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Mention is also made of the Partisans who killed some 100000 people. All these internecine conflicts started around World War I after the founding of one Kingdom consisting of the Croats, Serbs and Slovenes (later called Slovenia). Yugoslavia consisted of Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Bosnia. Later the Catholic Croats resisted domination by orthodox Serbs. This led to untold acts of atrocities. Also, we cannot forget the holocaust that took place in Germany during Hitler's tyrannical rule.

These deep-seated conflicts are caused by, amongst others, cultural, religious and political differences. They also reflect interests that derive from an established cultural bond within nations and ethnic groupings. Cultural and political patterns of thinking as well as intransigence resulting from fixed mental attitudes about one's culture, religion, ideology, sentiment and collective memory play a predominant role in the conflicts that have become anathema in our modern world. One needs not look any further than the conflicts in Rwanda, between the Israelis and Palestinians and racial conflicts in South Africa, to realize that deep cultural and racial beliefs are fundamental in conflicts. I can arguably say that the US war on terror raging in Iraq and Afghanistan is largely caused by cultural and political patterns of thinking and specifically from sentiment and collective memory from the after-effects of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.

As a torture survivor, I am describing in this book, the pain and the emotional scars that are often associated with suffering during the ordeal that is accompanied by this atrocity, and how the victim can find solace and healing from it and continue to leave a meaningful life in society. There is also an analysis of the South African struggle for liberation as seen within the context of the Black Consciousness Movement of which I was a member before and after my detention from 1978 to 1994. The reader will note that the book is written in the form of a memoir. I endeavor to explain my particular involvement in this movement and the South African existential conditions that led the oppressed majority to become political activists and to lead uprisings that culminated into the release of political leaders from Robben Island prison and other detention centers in South Africa.

This is a compelling book to read especially by those students interested in African politics and the role that the Black Consciousness Movement continues to play in the reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa.

However, I do not claim to have done a sterling work in documenting the history and the particular struggle waged by this democratic movement. I am sure that more books will be written by those scholars who continue to fill classes and lecture rooms in their quest to understand the vibrant ideology of Black Consciousness as it was espoused by Steve Biko and his comrades.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could not have been possible without the help of my friends and comrades who encouraged me to pen down my experiences as a human rights activist in South Africa. The Black Consciousness philosophy, however doxyfied and ill conceived by the youth in today's socio-political landscape in South Africa, has come to stand for so many things that it is imperative to spell out why I write about it in conjunction with other radical ideologies that emerged especially during the 50's and 80's respectively.

I acknowledge the works of Bantu Steven Biko, the honorable Minister Mosibudi Mangena, Mr Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Mr.Lybon Mabasa, Mr.Striny Moodley, Dr.Saths Cooper, Mr.Peter Jones, Dr.Gomolemo Mokaе, Zithulele Xindi, Vuyiswa Qunta, Peter Jones, Strike Thokane, Dr.Nchaupe Mokoape, Nkosi Molala, Imraan Moosa, Mpotseng Kgokong, Rev.Leputu, Don Nkadimeng and the other revolutionaries who wrote extensively on this philosophy. Their writings offered a radical break from the school of thought represented by neo-liberalism within the South African context. These theorists were able to offer a modern consciousness that was to revolutionize black people in every nook and cranny of the country.

Reactionary politics do not tolerate sharper critiques and paradigms that emerge from the downtrodden and voiceless people. Black Consciousness in South Africa was scorned and labeled "some form of reverse racism" by its detractors and reactionaries alike. I acknowledge the help of my brother, Selatole who did not bother me while I was busy writing this manuscript. I cannot forget the warmth of my sisters, Johanna, and Tebogo.

Three years ago, I published a book titled "A deeper wound: The South African/Azanian struggle for liberation. The book told the story of our revolution in South Africa especially from the perspective of Black

Consciousness. This book attempts to address the same topic from a different point of view. Some of the chapters in this book are somewhat a rehearse of what I have written about in the past. I thank those who encouraged me to look at the subject quite differently. Those who come to mind are Prof. John Higginson from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (USA) and Prof. Pitika Ntuli from the University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa.

I acknowledge the help and support of Francina and Rantjawe Mahlangu, Mr. Benny Shirindza, Nelson Babedi, Miss Thaka Nkabane, Rev. Dr. Mankekolo Mahlangu-Ngcobo, George Mahlo, Sanele Mncadi, Mbalenhle Mabaso, Linda Ngoma, Lumka Mgqolazana, Senzo Mdlalose and Nobuhle during my stay in Baltimore, Maryland.

FOREWORD

Twentieth century South African history and politics have been marked by intense conflict. This conflict still manifests itself on racial and class lines within the country. In this text, Dr Tsoaledi Daniel Thobejane is trying to bring about a Black perspective on the writing and narration of what led to the formation of what can be referred to as contemporary South Africa. The text is biographical and historical. He is looking at black resistance politics in South Africa and also does a brief overview of international politics as compared to South Africa. As a South African who grew up in a township, and living in the United States of America, Thobejane feels bound to give a personal view of international relations especially with the role of America under President George Bush (Jnr) in the Middle East.

The background to his perspectives unfolds in the Limpopo Province around Mokopane in the Waterberg (Mmotong) district. Mokopane is the recent name given to Potgietersrust, a boer settlement that emerged in the 1850s when Afrikaners resisted British colonialism and imperialism by 'trekking' into the interior. The myth of the empty land as advocated by Afrikaner historiographers was shattered when the Ndebele under Mokopane resisted Boer encroachment into their area in the siege of 1854 in which a number of Ndebele were killed in a cave that has become a tourist attraction.¹

In 2005, the Limpopo Provincial government unveiled a statue of chief Mokopane for the role he played against colonialism.² The area has been declared a world heritage site for its historic importance but also for its wealth

¹ Afrikaners talked of *Makapan(Mokopane)s'gat(hole)* but this naming has been seen to be derogatory hence the change.

² The invitation to contribute the foreword to this book came during the week before the function.

in mineral resources. This historic linkage is important in the sense that the young activists of the 1980s and the 1990s's actions were taking place within the context of a tradition of struggle by the downtrodden masses of their people against all forms of oppression and exploitation.

The development of racial capitalism in South Africa provided a base in which all the cities in the country were structured in such a way that townships formed part of the labor reserves and were, in most cases, on the outskirts of towns. Mahwelereng Township is one of the labor reserves that Thobejane is describing in his text. The black working class from the township and surrounding areas forms the central part in the development of the political economy of the town although not acknowledged as such by racist whites. These townships are also noted for their squalid conditions, a dominant feature of urban poverty in the modern South Africa.

The striking features of the townships of Mahwelereng and Seshego(outside the city of Polokwane) form an interesting part of the public history of the region with their street names. The names of the heroes of the liberation struggle and community leaders have found recognition in both townships as compared to the city centres with names of the leaders of the colonial era with the exception of the Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki avenues. The book goes into detail about how the activists in the township earned the recognition in public consciousness with local and national leadership. Amongst the others are Makompo Kutumela, Dudu Madisha, Onkgopotse Tiro, Steve Biko, Muntu Myeza etc.

The apartheid state became more brutal as a number of cadres were maimed, killed or exiled. Some of these atrocious actions were carried out by the Lebowa police as noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (that the homeland regimes of Lebowa and Venda were brutal to the extreme.).Thobejane himself carries scars of this brute force after having lost an eye. The challenges of being a survivor of the atrocities while fellow cadres were massacred continue to be a worrying factor as portrayed in the text.

The author makes a deep introspection on the role and contribution of Black Consciousness cadres in South African society as a whole. The banning of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress in 1960 paved the way for the emergence of a formation that championed the interest of the black masses. Race became a rallying point in a society that was structured along racial lines but by the late 1970s, class became integrated into the body politic of South Africa. A number of townships in the former Northern Transvaal in particular Mahwelereng and Seshego became the bases

from which the BCM ideology found fertile ground to flourish especially in the early 1980s.

However, by the late 1980s the dominance of the BCM came under serious challenge with the formation of the United Democratic Front which took the Northern Transvaal by storm. With a lack of political tolerance many people were killed in the political conflict which followed.

Thobejane has been and continues to cherish the unity the oppressed groups should have. However, the split within the BCM in the country is a worrying issue to him throughout the text. This split has also brought about serious implications to the Azanian People's Organization in its claim of speaking for the black masses.

This situation became more evident with the 1994 elections in which the BCM had some suspicions because of the involvement of the National Party and its surrogate homelands parties into the negotiating process towards the democratization of the country. The continuous 'boycott of elections' seems to have disadvantaged the entire Black Consciousness Movement in the long term. Some leaders of the movement have joined the government. The movement is lamentably (and numerically) under-represented in parliament.

The other serious challenge facing the author is the notion of class in the new South Africa. The process of transition is seen to have given the small black elite the opportunity to amass wealth at the expense of the poor. Thobejane seems to have taken the challenge from the novelist Milan Kundera's advocacy that the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. If this challenge is taken seriously, South Africa would be enriched by the experiences of the people who lived through the turbulent periods of colonialism and the anti-apartheid struggle. This should be seen as an encouragement and a challenge to other aspiring black writers to write down their experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

A transitional phase from apartheid rule to non-racial democracy in Azania/South Africa left confusion within the ranks of the black oppressed masses. People were not sure whether they were witnessing a genuine shift from oppression to liberation in the country, or just a trade off of concessions between liberation movements and the ruling class of the day. There were some activists who were questioning whether South Africa was entering a neo-liberal settlement and its antecedent neo-colonialist rule. Organizations went to extremes in their endeavor to authenticate themselves on the oppressed and exploited people. Some of these organizations did not hesitate to suppress those movements that echoed a different political viewpoint. The year 1989 has been characterized by a lot of disturbing events in South Africa.

After the release of political leaders from detention, some people saw it their business to go from house to house warning those people who did not affiliate to their political organizations not to espouse a different political ideology, unless they wanted to face the anger of "freedom loving people". Those who were stubborn and steadfast to their political principles were made to flee their homes by these marauding political hordes. Many activists chose to seek refuge in countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, Lesotho, Botswana, Europe, USA and Canada for fear of their lives after receiving threatening telephone calls and letters from the regime of the day and other organizations that purported to be fighting for the liberation of South Africa. When Dr. Nelson Mandela, a retired President of South Africa, was released from jail, the country was caught up in a euphoria that was characterized by political intolerance from all parties in the country. A cult was built around him such that he symbolized victory for the oppressed masses. This was a bad period for those who were members of either the

Azanian People's organization or the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania which were then branded as the third force that needed to be annihilated. People believed that liberation was around the corner, and that only one party could bring this corner about inspite of the fact that the entire Black nation was struggling on a daily basis to bring about a democratic dispensation. It is a noted fact that many educationists and political activists who did not belong to either of the afore-mentioned organizations left the country in search of a better life somewhere else, and to also influence African governments and other countries around the world to boycott South Africa because of its racist practices. One such gallant son of the soil is the late Prof.Eskia Mphahlele who tirelessly struggled while abroad, to bring the cancer of racism in South Africa to its knees.

To this date, the socio-political indicators point to the fact that economic liberation in South Africa, though imminent, is still a far-fetched phenomenon especially to the working men and women. There are still some stark polarizations between the haves and the have-nots, working class and middle class families, as well as white and black people. The majority of black people do not have safe drinking water. One needs not go any further than their surrounding villages to witness this. It is mostly black people who live in shacks and are malnourished. Many of our children are indeed mentally stunted because of these harsh economic realities. At the root of these realities is the fact that the government of the day chooses to endorse a neo-liberal economic policy that militates against the economic needs of the majority. It is easy to argue that since we have a majoritarian government; it should be the one that sets the template for socioeconomic development and that we should no longer accuse the exploitative nature of the system of capitalism. Rather, we should lay our economic perils at the doorsteps of the ANC, as it happens to be the ruling party. But this is a myopic way of looking at the socio-economic and political realities in South Africa. These are as follows: The persistence of the harsh conditions in our townships and villages proves that neo-liberal policies will never deliver to the destitute. On the contrary, the state will always be protective of monopoly capital for as long as capitalism holds sway.

The state is in full support of neo-liberalism and capitalism (as witnessed by the signing of GEAR policies that advocated for privatization). Since only the few will continue to own the means of production, this means that the ruling party will always beg for resources from big industries rather than fighting to socialize the means of production that can help in alleviating the untold suffering our people are undergoing. The recent bail-out plans by the

US government in its resolve to save its ailing economy clearly shows the importance of nationalism in the process of resuscitating an economic slump and the staving off of recession.

Neo-liberalism is a theory and practice that sets itself on a contradictory path with socialism or Marxism. The gluttony and greed by the U.S. CEO's or capitalist order, has seen the country's decline to the worst economic recession since the construction of neoliberal policies by Paul Volcker¹ and Jimmy Carter as from 1965. These policies have been endorsed by one US President to the other, until President Barrack Obama was left with no option but to urge the congress to pass a bail-out plan, by way of state intervention to the ailing economy, to most banks and companies that were bankrupted by corporate greed and Capitalism.

The US economic crisis of 2009 is not the only stagflation that hit the country recently. This also happened in the 1970's. Today, many countries in the world are experiencing an economic crush or meltdown due to the failed policies of neo-liberalism (or, shall I say, Capitalism). States and governments around the world are forced to intervene by way of economic bail-out plans in order to prop-up the capitalist economic order. For the resuscitation of their markets, they are forced to introduce socialist mechanisms that have been rebuked in capitalist countries.

Neo-liberalism has seen an upsurge in inequalities on wages and salaries around the world. It is argued that the top 1 % of income earners has since doubled with the advent of neoliberalism. In Russia, there was a high polarization of salaries between the poor and rich especially after the announcements of "Perestroika" and Glastnost" policies by Mikael Gorbachev. These inequalities have been repeated in China, Mexico and Eastern European countries. It can be further argued that neoliberalism is only interested in the restoration of power to the smallest economic elites around the world.

In explaining what neoliberalism entails, Harvey (2007)² asserts that it is a Utopian project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of

¹ Paul Volcker was appointed as Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board by President Jimmy Carter in 1965 when the US was experiencing inflation.

² According to David Harvey (A brief history of Neo-liberalism, 2005), neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. Neoliberalism has in short, become a hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the

international capitalism or as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites(Harvey D,2007,p.19). Neoliberalism rose after the realization of challenges that were faced by capitalism(what was then called threats to values of civilization by capitalist historians, economists and philosophers(as alluded to by Harvey).

The struggle against exploitation is waged internationally. Therefore, there should be a concerted effort from the struggling masses to link with other progressive movements to steer this struggle forward than to rely on organizations whose rhetorics are informed by a socialist epistemology and yet grounded on capitalist praxis. This is confusing especially to trade unions that espouse socialism. Privatization in this country has become the order of the day. It is an open secret that the ANC and its break-away party called Congress of the People or COPE never advocated for socialist transformation. Therefore, they cannot, *mutatis mutandis*, be accused of abdication on socialism or communism. Most of the leaders from the alliance believe that the socialist mode of production died immediately when the Soviet Union crumbled.

Rampant greed under the guise of Black Economic Empowerment cannot be ignored. While the constitution of the country speaks of the right to ownership, it does not explain how to set in motion the empowerment of those who are on the periphery of economic development. Black entrepreneurs find it difficult to rise above the level of Spaza ownership³. They don't even think of owning a big industry. Genuine economic development can only be realized when the government starts to clearly set an agenda for the improvement of the livelihood of our people in villages and townships. Development has to do with the educational system that emphasizes scientific knowledge, technology, democracy and values that are centered on the production of a better world. Global capitalism does not have a human face. It cannot be hoped that it will usher in these virtues to the people still trapped in poverty. A genuine discourse based on democracy, economic development, and gender equality, amongst others, should be encouraged especially within the ranks of the oppressed people.

common sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. Harvey asserts that the process of neoliberalism has entailed much "creative destruction", not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers, but also of divisions of labour, social relations, and welfare provisions

³ The word "spaza" comes from the Zulu word "UkuPhazamisa" meaning to confuse. Spaza shops, therefore, mean something unreal. Black people need real economic development; and Black people are the ones who sell fruits and vegetables on the busy streets of Tshwane, eThekweni, Cape Town, Mokopane or Polokwane.

Based on the above, the book seeks to expose the nature of racial capitalism in South Africa. The ideologization of the struggle of the black people and their socio-political milieu is firmly discussed especially within the realms of Black Consciousness.

It is so tragic that in a country where Black people are in the majority, they are still struggling for self-sufficiency and cultural emancipation. They are always defining themselves in other people's cultural backgrounds. How can the government allow affirmative action whose sole purpose is to integrate Black people into a Euro-centric cultural background? Why should we copy the American system of Black affirmation in South Africa when Blacks in this country do not necessarily need to be affirmed as they are the indigenous owners of the land? Who really gains from this system? These and many other questions are explored in the book.

Chapters one to three narrate a story of the youths who grew up under racism and how they managed against all the odds, to make it into adulthood. There is also a brief narrative of the process of politicization in South Africa and in particular how I was conscientized and later became a political activist who was inspired by leaders such as Bantu Biko. Chapter three also emphasizes our daily struggles against the forces of repression especially in Limpopo region, and Mahwelereng township in particular. Chapter four seeks to explain how the masses were mobilized by liberation movements to rebel against Bantu Education and racial capitalism. Chapter five introduces us to the nature of torture that was meted out to political activists around the world. Chapters Six and seven narrates the vicissitudes of life in South African prisons and my experiences as a political prisoner in Nylstroom prison, situated in Mogalakwena region in Limpopo (South Africa). Chapter eight takes us through definitions and meanings of Black Consciousness in South Africa. The Black Consciousness Movement has had many alliances and cooperation with other liberation movements in South Africa. One such movement is the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania. Chapter nine clearly spells out this cooperation as well as resolutions taken by these movements towards the launch of the patriotic front.

The book concludes by postulating a way forward in the betterment of the lives of the economically marginalized people in South Africa and proffers strategies that can be employed by the government of the day to usher in a truly democratic and egalitarian system of governance.