

Sacred Cows and the Idea of Political Economy in Southern Africa

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, AUG 5 2015

"Hands up all those who remember Political Economy?"

"Mmmm...not many it seems."

This fictional exchange on an idea that once was at the centre of conversations over the liberation of southern Africa, says much about the ways in which the vocabulary of politics has changed over a decade. It illustrates that keywords and key-phrases are not stable: the word freedom, for instance, has been colonised by the notion of the "free" market, just as political economy has been by eroded by new thinking on the relationship between politics and economics.

These shifts in meaning explain, I think, why the Left struggles to find a language that can counter the narrative of neo-liberal policy making that offers public discourse a limited range of options. Because this is so, the political challenge of our times is to critically rediscover terms that have analytical authority and reinsert them in the hope of freeing-up a different kind of politics.

The notion of political economy in the southern African context explained the multiple layers of interdependency – political, social, economic, environmental – that characterised the social relations in the region: it pointed the way to a post-sovereign politics – a region without borders could flourish because its people shared a common social imaginary, to borrow a helpful term from the political philosopher, Charles Taylor. But in today's policy-speak, political economy in southern Africa seems to make no sense at all. As a result, the searching out of new and imaginative solutions to mounting regional problems – like the running political sore in Lesotho: a failing state surrounded by a giant neighbour – are reduced either to the grand diplomatic gesture or the empty phrases associated with governance. Using these approaches as points of entry, politicians and bureaucrats rely on an understanding that the central and determining idea in regional interstate-relations should be the notion of national interest.

If reports are to be believed, this concept appears to have much exercised the attention of South African President, Jacob Zuma, and his colleagues recently. To explain: purportedly drawn up by DIRCO, the country's foreign affairs department, a policy document on the theory, practice and implications of South Africa's National Interest has been discussed by Cabinet, but it is now under embargo.

As a result of this kind of thinking, the great hope that a post-sovereign southern Africa was possible – which had coursed through the struggle to end the burdens of colonialism, minority-rule and apartheid – are considered passé these days. This is because it is believed that there is no alternative to the dictum that economic might is always right, while social justice...well, that, too, is best left to the forces of the market.

As this new "common sense" has taken hold, self-interest – which is a code name for private greed – has replaced the idea of the "regional good" – a notion that stood at the epicenter of the belief that things could be different in southern Africa when apartheid ended. But why was this thought possible thirty years ago, though it is considered to be impossible today? A short detour into the history of ideas helps to answer the question.

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Drawing on the global enthusiasm that both fed into (and drew upon) the Fall of the Berlin Wall, there was an understanding that the region's political geography could be reconfigured in a pan-African direction. This impulse was driven by the recognition that southern Africa's people had not only struggled for their own freedom but, especially because of apartheid's destabilisation strategy, had sacrificed much in the cause of ending apartheid – the *sine qua non* for regional peace, prosperity and order. As is plain, then, this thinking was underpinned by the idea of social solidarity or, if you prefer, the common regional good.

But the rise of interest-driven policy-making in the post-Cold War years rendered any such hope as outdated, old-fashioned, even obsolete. Instead, it was systematically argued, co-operation across the region's borders would have to rely on tried and tested ideas – one of which was national interest, and the other was multilateral diplomacy. It is important to stress, especially at a time when all are encouraged to topple colonial statues and jettison Western ways of thinking, that both of these notions (and their everyday practice) are products of 19th Century European thought.

The idea of National Interest was first enunciated by a two-time British Prime Minister Lord Palmerson (1784-1865) who encouraged the people of that island to understand that their state – indeed, their Empire – could have no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent national interests. The second idea, multilateralism, has its roots in the deliberations around the 1815 Congress of Vienna. As the name suggests, multilateralism implies a set of two or more countries acting in accordance with a set of mutually-accepted principles and routines – what today policy-makers might celebrate as “good governance”.

But here's the rub – a rub which reinforces the importance of political economy as an idea to be refurbished and reinserted – southern Africa's history and its sociology make pursuing policies determined by national interests and multilateralism difficult, if not entirely impossible.

Understanding this was the intellectual and political gift of generations of political economists – like Neville Alexander, John Saul, Dan O'Meara and Dot Keet – who drew on the ideas of Marx and other radical thinkers. Applying this to the region, they argued that the social lives of southern Africa's people could not be confined to the tidy world of sovereign-centered politics. Rather than being neatly charted by a series of individual national histories, the real story of southern Africa (the political economists showed) was of centuries-long merger, mingle and mix.

In the region, this pan-African political condition was not the exception, it was the rule: indeed, it was the very essence of social life! It was the creation of sovereign borders that was the real exception to regional life and livelihoods of people.

As the historian Charles van Onselen shows in his new book, *Showdown at the Red Lion*[1], the discovery of diamonds in South Africa in 1867 onwards, and of gold twenty years later, increased the access of the ruling class to technologies of control. These boosted the capacity for the surveillance of individuals and, with advancing techniques of violence, they could secure (but could not fully settle) national borders.

Unsurprisingly, the apartheid government understood this: the very policy of destabilisation, which was based on the American idea of forward projection of violence as a means of defence, was recognition that the region's borders were little more than lines on a map. As a result, the sovereignty principle upon which the legalisms of multilateralism rely, is mostly false in southern Africa: the region's people share common interests as opposed to a series of clearly-defined national ones. Put colloquially, the lines on the region's maps are different from the sovereign boundaries in the heads of southern Africa's people.

In a weird kind of way, the lesson of all this for those who worry about the region's future is best described by a novelist from another continent, Tomás Eloy Martínez (1934-2010), when writing of the affairs in his native Argentina: ‘Nothing is true; at the same time everything is true.’[2]

So, today, as policy-makers in the region – with their penchant for efficiency, governance and social order through sovereignty – believe they can discipline social life in the region, not much has changed at the outer reaches. As they have for several centuries, the region's people are on the move – borders and interpretations of international law are

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unlikely to stop them. As a result, any belief that it will be possible to separate South Africa's interests from those of its neighbours will fail, as badly as SADC (Southern African Development Community) – the institution of choice for regional multilateralism – has failed these twenty years past.

Without understanding the real limits of current thinking around policy-making in southern Africa, there will be no end to the red lights flashing across the region: from the grubby politics in South Africa, to those in Lesotho, or Swaziland, or Zimbabwe – to mention only four; to fears of region-wide Water scarcity and the mounting cost of Energy; to the recurrent Health scares of which HIV/AIDS and Malaria are the most obvious; to corruption in Mozambique, graft in Angola, or embezzlement in Malawi; or, to bring the issue to the doorstep, migrants selling Chinese goods at traffic-lights and even illegal miners burrowing for gold below the streets of Johannesburg.

One of the keys to moving beyond the muddle-headedness offered by narrow thinking on the region will be dusting-off the idea of political economy and recognising it for what it is: a tool not only for sound analysis of southern Africa's affairs, but also for policy-making.

Notes

[1] van Onselen, C. 2015. *Showdown at the Red Lion. The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859-1919*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

[2] "Provocative Argentinian novelist, Tomás Eloy Martínez" <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/provocative-argentinian-novelist-tomas-eloy-mart%C3%ADnez-1.3165361>

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