

Which black republic?

There is a bigger issue at stake than media freedom in the current claims and counter-claims about the independence of newspapers. We get a sense of it from a recent column by Mukoni Ratshitanga, President Thabo Mbeki's spokesperson (*Mail & Guardian*, 21 September 2007), writes IVOR CHIPKIN. There he seeks to locate the discussion about the rights and responsibilities of the media in the context of a debate about values.

'WHAT VALUES, freedoms and rights,' he asks, 'did we fight for and what place should they occupy in society?'

For Ratshitanga the nature of these values is unmistakable. This is what he says in reply to his own question above: 'The centre of our moral universe, which must be vigorously asserted, as do all people assert theirs, is African'. This rhetorical manoeuvre lets him defend Dali Mpofu's withdrawal from the National Editors' Forum. It turns out that the manner in which the *Sunday Times* criticised the minister of health was in conflict with African norms and values.

Yet there is reason to be less confident than Ratshitanga that post-apartheid values should be 'African' values.

The struggle against apartheid in the name of non-racialism, and under the banner of the Freedom Charter, has a complex genealogy. What is often overlooked in the current situation is that, among several tendencies, it also articulated a vision of a cosmopolitan, democratic society. Let us recall that the Freedom Charter invoked a principle of geography, rather than any ethnic or cultural principle, as the basis of South Africa's unity. 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it,' the Charter declared. This is one of the key aspects of the non-racial tradition. What South Africans had in common was simply that they happened to

live in the same territory. [Read Mcebisi Ndletyana's article on page 15 in this regard].

It is important to identify this cosmopolitan tendency for at least two reasons. Currently a certain revisionism is taking place that wants to underplay this aspect of the ANC tradition, if not write it out of history altogether. Moreover, the prospect of a workable cosmopolitan society in South Africa has made the current project of historical importance for progressive forces around the world. The stakes are very high: if South Africa is to be democratic it has to be non-racial.

This is why it is important to identify the politics against which it conflicts in the current situation. The dominant challenge to the democratic project comes today from those wishing to articulate and defend a certain idea of the Native Republic – one that defends and encourages a certain standard of African norms.

A recurrent feature of the last few years has been the claim that criticism of the ANC government amounts, in effect, to a campaign against a Native Republic. The frequency and vigour of these claims has increased over the last couple of months. It seems likely that we will hear them more and more as the current presidency tends further towards crisis. These claims are normally associated with the following assertion: that critics of

the government, if they are not white, then they are, at least, animated by a 'white' view.

Others have been dismissed as mere dummies (unwitting or not) of their master's voice. Media reports are frequently dismissed as part of a campaign to discredit particular ministers and/or government in general. Sometimes it is said that racist subversion masquerades as critique. The argument goes that the intention or effect of criticism is to call into question the competence of black leaders in particular and black people in general. Even more sinister, by so doing, criticism is said to undermine the legitimacy and the sovereignty of the black government and the Native Republic more generally. Hence, and herein lies the *coup de grace*, criticism serves not to develop the democratic space, but to undermine it.





Usually these matters are dealt with in the public domain as questions of fact. Is it true that so and so is a white liberal, or worse, a racist? Or that such and such a journalist is incapable of thinking for themselves? Or that the media reflects white interests set on subverting the Native Republic?

We are regularly reminded by some commentators that not all black people act in their own interests. How? There were black people complicit in the apartheid project (as askaris, spies, homeland officials and politicians and so on). Following this logic, a government is not black simply when it is populated by black people.

Herein lies the novelty of South Africa's anti-apartheid tradition, especially as it was articulated by the African National Congress and its allies. It broke with the very logic of

apartheid, and nationalism generally, by refusing to reduce blackness to a question of race or culture. Incidentally, this was the centre-piece of Frantz Fanon's own dispute with the negritude movement.

Blackness was not simply a racial or cultural quality. Its measure was, above all, *political*. The term 'black' referred both to those people that had been oppressed and exploited by apartheid and to those people that conducted themselves on the basis of certain political values. It is the nature of these values that is currently at issue today. There are some who would suggest that the values of racial solidarity or solidarity based on some or other 'native' personality are at the heart of the ANC tradition. What is certainly true, however, is that black values were construed as democratic values.

Apartheid was resisted because it was violent, racist, exploitative of black people and undemocratic.

On these terms, a Black Republic (or a National Democracy) is not a Native Republic. Its measure is the degree to which the democratic project is advanced in South Africa, not the extent to which 'authentic' black figures occupy positions of power and authority. We must endorse this vision of the republic against those wishing to invest the notion of blackness with a different standard. ●

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