



Beyond the Compromise: Crafting new Visions and Practices of Freedom

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Let me pose a few questions – as stepping stones into a terrain that is littered with quagmires as well as possibilities; with explanations on how we can make the shift into a different future. Why do we recount (or retell) the past and on whose behalf do these remembrances function? Hopefully I will make a contribution towards demystifying some of the fictions that have been referred to in the course of my presentation. Is it then, a telling of ‘our story’ as a collective/common story or has the past been massaged and re-tailored to fit the particular contours of a current status quo that remains persistently capitalist and feudal – a toxic mixture of inequality, impunity, intolerance and outright arrogance in many instances.

If we can face ourselves and honestly claim that we are re-tracing the land-marks of our struggles so as to throw open new vistas of a just and dignified future for all, then we can also ask ourselves just how truthfully we have translated the experiences, courage and dreams of those who came before us, who left us along the way to this place of unbridled anger, frustration and unfulfilled expectations for the majority of African people. Only then can we honestly say that we are striving to make Freedom for all a reality of our time?

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When a society and continent is endowed with enormous wealth – in its people, its natural resources, its languages and cultural treasures – then the bar is set much higher for those who assume a custodial role on behalf of everyone. In this context, ‘at least’ does not apply. Excellence and the maximum fulfilment of human entitlements are the criteria by which those who occupy the State and control the wealth of the society are assessed and judged, and there can be no excuses. Two decades is a long time in the life of a people who have given countless lives for an ideal; two decades translates into many generations in the lives of working people whose dreams and children provided the grist for the wheels of movement towards Freedom as a life of dignity.

This moment offers many opportunities to speak truth to power. I would like to thank the organisers for the honour of the time to share my experiences and ideas as a fighter for freedom, within a community that represents a vital cutting edge in this and all African societies – continentally and across the African Diaspora.

I want to speak to two issues that have preoccupied radical thinkers and activists for many decades on this continent and beyond. These are the matter of the State and the ruling classes who occupy it and use it to plunder and enrich themselves even as they proclaim an innocence of economic and other forms of impunity; and the other is the urgency of imagining and launching new social movements that reflect and articulate the key elements of Contemporarity – an essential understanding of how we can become contemporary Africans in the context of our particular nationalist historical past; of the critical discourses, resistances and engagements with colonial/capitalist oppression and exploitation; the crafting of radical traditions and practices of imagining, fighting for and defending freedom; and the ability to continuously move forward towards societies that are premised on justice, human integrity and dignity for all citizens.

Neo-colonialism – which is the moment in African history when ‘the great compromise’ is committed by those who claimed to be the custodians of a different future for us all, is a moment that usurps the bravery and dedication of millions of Africans across this continent. This usurpation is performed on behalf of a tiny clique of people who have ‘empty hearts’, and who treat the common wealth of our societies as though it were their birth-right, throwing crumbs at the working people for which they are expected to be grateful. While the primitive accumulation of black ruling classes is moralistically decried as ‘corruption’ – we understand that to rule in class societies, those who occupy the state must own property – productive and financial property. To rant against the emergence of a black ruling class is to distract attention from a necessary class analysis which enables a clearer understanding of the present and the past.

The moment of neo-colonialism, which has spanned half an African century, has become the insignia of the black ruling classes. The adoption of neoliberal capitalist pacts and the re-institutionalisation of feudal structures and practices as ‘culture’ have re-created the divide between the working people and state occupants, a divide that was temporarily breached by the fleeting hope that Africa would shift its trajectory away from the colonial infrastructure and its exclusionary practices of racist and classist inequality. Into this divide have rushed the new carpet baggers of the late 20th century/early 21st century – extremist fundamentalists of both Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious bent, each touting viciously reactionary feudal texts that seek to capture and hearts and minds (and souls) of Africans across the expanse of this continent. And Nationalism seems impotent (pun intended) in the face of this onslaught as we have witnessed all around us.

South Africa represents the most dramatic and most blatant of all the cases we have witnessed on the continent. Neo-colonialism was ushered in at the moment of independence with globalised pomp and fanfare – so

loud and insistent that it was exceptional and different, the rest of us were astounded at the absurdity of it all. We were and continue to be deeply saddened by the enormity of the lost opportunities that South Africa in all its meanings and possibilities represented to virtually every black person on this planet.

As the neo-colonial crisis deepens, which is inevitable, given that it is built into peripheral capitalism as the backyard of the established western capitalist system, and the people increasingly occupy the streets and public spaces of the society, demanding their entitlements as the people of this land, yes, entitlement as a consciousness that drives the ability to struggle for rights and dignity as outcomes of contestation and engagement with those who occupy and use the State for their narrow interests – so also the new opportunities for envisioning a different society emerge. We need a new and gender inclusive ideology of national and pan-African nationhood and African identity in all its possibilities – inclusive beyond the mere rhetoric of ‘gender mainstreaming’; We need a contemporary imaginary that can be translated into different policies and practices about the land, human sufficiency in all respects, and equitable resource utilisation (or simply the preservation of these resources for future generations of Africans. We cannot allow the ruling classes to recklessly consume the futures of our children and the generations to come through a deceptive ploy such as the *‘Africa Rising’* rhetoric).

Now that we know the terrain after two decades of lived neo-colonialism, the unavoidable question remains - *What is to be done?* To retrieve Lenin’s call once again

I think that it is at the intersection of the clash – between those who represent the interests of capital and imperial systems of privilege and those who struggle for an equitable distribution of the common wealth of this and all African societies, that the new nodes of an alternative future lie. New notions and vehicles of resistance and progress will have to be

imagined, crafted and set into motion among all communities and constituencies of people who are situated outside the State, and engagement on the entitlement to lives of dignity for all in our societies will have to take place in whatever form necessary to make the essential shift from the iniquitous neo-colonial/neoliberal capitalist system – to the truly inclusive Alternative social formations that await this society and the entire continent and the world beyond it.

Whether the shift is sparked off by the refusal of radical Trade Unions to be erased by compromised alliances that served a conjectural political purpose that they have long outlived; or it is lit by the courage of radical intellectuals who refuse to be cowed and silenced by a revisionist telling of our struggles for Freedom and Dignity; or by those of us who already live on the other side of the social curve – embracing the future even as the rest of society grapples with the imperative of having to change; all these and many more nodes of newness and visionary insight and oversight – are the spokes in the wheels that will take us into the future. The future awaits us. Let us retrieve our courage, embrace it, do what we know has to be done, and make the transformation a reality.