



Memory and Socio-economic Transformation in South Africa

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Introduction

South Africa seems to be on crossroads, since the mid-2000s. Socio-economic progress has been weaker than expected in the democratic dispensation although many initiatives have been pursued since 1994 aimed at socio-economic transformation. The earliest socio-economic ideals can be traced back to the Freedom Charter of 1955. Those ideals have been weaved into various laws and policies governing the new dispensation. The various pieces of legislation, among other things, set out to level the playing fields so that citizens can enjoy the benefits of a growing and inclusive economy. The amount of work done prior to the transition to democracy and in the first ten years of the democratic dispensation is often taken for granted when all that work was to ensure that South Africa becomes a country that future generations can be proud of. Arguably, so much effort was going to ensuring that the ugly memory of the colonial and apartheid past is buried and that such repulsive memory is used to advance socio-economic transformation.

Therefore, it is important to examine socio-economic transformation in South Africa in the context of whether memory is being used as an instrument of transformation or not as it is attempted in this essay. The essay draws insights from South Africa's political trajectories to examine the role of memory in socio-economic transformation. Focus is on the meaning and significance of memory in understanding major socio-economic challenges confronting South Africa, since the dawn of democracy. The essay shows how memory appropriation plays a critical role in recent developments across the length and breadth of South Africa, particularly calls for a revisiting of seemingly settled issues in the political landscape. The essay concludes that although memory informs the demands for radical socio-economic transformation in the

country, it equally provides a solid basis for resolution of socio-economic contradictions of a historical nature in a more sustainable and democratic manner.

The analysis begins with an examination of challenges that South Africa faces. Then I discuss critical socio-economic ramifications of the colonial and apartheid periods. That is followed by a discussion of memory as an instrument for social and economic transformation in the context of South Africa.

Challenges facing South Africa

To start with, the economy in South Africa has not been performing well since the late 2000s. This point is more glaring when South Africa is compared with other economies in Africa as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: GDP growth (%) (2010-2017)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Botswana	8,6	6,0	4,4	11,3	4,1	-1,7	4,3	2,4
Ethiopia	12,5	11,2	8,6	10,6	10,2	10,4	7,6	10,2
Ghana	7,9	14,0	9,3	7,3	2,9	2,2	3,4	8,1
Kenya	8,4	6,1	4,6	5,9	5,3	5,7	5,9	4,9
Liberia	6,1	8,2	8,0	8,7	0,7	0,0	-1,6	2,5
Malawi	6,9	4,8	1,9	5,2	5,7	2,8	2,5	4,0
Nigeria	8,0	5,3	4,2	6,7	6,3	2,6	-1,6	0,8
Rwanda	7,3	7,8	8,8	4,7	7,6	8,9	6,0	6,1
South Africa	3,0	3,3	2,2	2,5	1,8	1,3	0,7	1,3
Zimbabwe	19,7	14,2	16,7	2,0	2,4	1,8	0,7	4,7

Source: Own Calculations using World Bank data

Deliberately taking the period after the global economic recession (i.e. 2010-2017), many African countries (or rather the selected ones) performed relatively well – as Table 1 shows. 2010 is chosen as a starting year of the analysis because it is after the global financial crisis,

although the impact of the global economic recession was felt beyond 2009. South Africa however did not fare as well during this period (in terms of GDP growth). For the period under review, the performance of the South African economy has been in decline: 3.0% GDP growth in 2010 to 1.3% GDP growth in 2017. The South African economy has actually been on recession since 2018, although it had started to improve at the time of finalizing this essay.

Latest data indicates that South Africa’s real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.1% in the second quarter of 2019 as recorded by Statistics South Africa (after contracting by about 3% in the first quarter of 2019). It is reported that the contraction was primarily attributed to, “...electricity shortages and strikes that fed into broader weakness in investment, household consumption and employment growth.”¹ In the July 2019 Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting, the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) decreased their growth forecast for 2019 from 1% to only 0.6%. The SARB forecasts 2% GDP growth in 2021.² This implies that the South African economy would remain below other comparable economies. As Gumede (2015) argued, the South African economy performs below par which in turn impacts negatively on human development and poverty. Income inequality remains high partly because the structure of the South African economy and unemployment is also very high.

Looking at Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRICS) forum, South Africa is effectively the worst performing member. It should however be taken into account that South Africa is a smaller member in the BRICS forum. For comparative reasons, unemployment is highest in South Africa while growth in GDP is the slowest relative to other BRICS members, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of the BRICS Countries

Country	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
GDP Growth	2.3%	1.7%	7.4%	6.6%	1.5%
GDP per capita PPP (USD)	\$16 200	\$28 960	\$7 780	\$18 070	\$13 840

¹ Statement of the Monetary Policy Committee 18 July 2019
https://www.resbank.co.za/Lists/News%20and%20Publications/Attachments/9387/MPC%20Statement_18%20July%202019.pdf pg 4

² Ibid

Unemployment rate	11.8%	4.7%	3.4%	3.9%	26.7%
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Source: BusinessTech³

With regards to social challenges, South Africa effectively remains a two nations in one country. Former President Thabo Mbeki once described South Africa as being split into a first and second economy: “The second economy (or the marginalised economy) is characterised by underdevelopment, contributes little to GDP, contains a large percentage of our population, incorporates the poorest of our rural and urban poor, is structurally disconnected from both the first and the global economy, and is incapable of self-generated growth and development” (Mbeki, 2003).⁴ The consequences of economic marginalisation, inequality and economic strife have been social strife – protests, ‘xenophobic attacks’, looting, drugs, gender-based violence and other forms of violent crime, including rape and murder. Violence in schools and in the communities, dysfunctional families, drugs, and stress also remains a challenge. Although progress has been made in integrating public places⁵, South Africans remain sharply divided along racial and socioeconomic lines, so social cohesion is still a challenge.

Lastly, as far as major challenges are concerned, the main risks to proper governance pertains to state-owned enterprises and municipalities. It is critical that governance issues are addressed. Part of the answer is making proper appointments in the state-owned enterprises and municipalities as well as ensuring that merit is taken into account in the appointments and promotions in the public service as a whole.

Contextualizing memory

³ South Africa vs BRIC countries- average salaries, GDP and unemployment compared <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/260855/south-africa-vs-bric-countries-average-salaries-gdp-and-unemployment-compared/>

⁴ President Thabo Mbeki, Address to the National Council of Provinces, November 2003, as quoted in Devey, R. & Valodia, I “Formal-informal economy linkages: what implications for poverty in South Africa?” (2009) PLAAS Working Paper 8

⁵ Inclusive Cities: The pursuit of urban social and spatial freedoms for all http://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/SOCR/SoCR16-MainReport_04Inclusive.pdf

Functionally, memory inspires hopes and aspirations for the future. Memory helps victims tell their stories. Through memory victims share themselves; their dignities, sorrows, disappointments and expectations with others. As victims recall lived experiences, they hear one another and extend invitation into one another's lives. They learn about issues of concern and possible access to solutions to those concerns. Over the years, stories of past atrocities and gross human rights abuses committed by the apartheid regime against the South African Black population have been told and retold over and over again. The stories provoke anger and hatred and temptation for revenge.

In this section I address some of the obvious socio-economic ramifications of apartheid which tend to reinforce recent developments in South Africa. By socio-economic ramifications, I refer to the interaction between political, historical, social and economic factors which impinged on the development of other races other than whites in South Africa. Fundamental among these were; denial of sound education, land dispossession, segregation in housing development and limited access to economic resources of the country. These backlogs were facilitated by laws such as:

- the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953,
- the Natives Building Workers Act of 1951, and
- the Bantu Education Act of 1953.

Other laws include the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949; the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950; the Group Areas Act of 1950; the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952; and the Promotion of Bantu Self-government Act of 1959.

The collective memory of these ramifications and their intended consequences often provoke catharsis or the purging of emotions among the Black population that were direct victims of apartheid colonialism. Apartheid colonialism is used as a shorthand for the many centuries of plunder, dispossession and exploitation that have taken place in South Africa since the mid-17th century.

Land dispossession

The functional approach to memory conceptualization tells us that unlike history, memory does not die. Therefore, effects of apartheid laws and policies on the psyche of Black South Africans

are still alive and will live for a long time to come. Evidence of living memory can be seen from agitations for land expropriation without compensation under slogans such as ‘white monopoly capital’ and ‘radical economic transformation’.

These are understandable reactions or emotional outbursts prompted by collective memory of consistent dispossession and deprivation of the right to land ownership intensified by the 1913 Land Act. The abhorrent law limited black ownership of South African land to just 13 percent while simultaneously empowering the white population. The Land Act of 1913 ensured three-quarters of South African land was owned by just 50,000 white farmers or companies (Everingham and Jannecke, 2006; Donleavy and Shearer 2008; McEwan, 2010) with severe socio-political and economic consequences.

On a socio-economic level, land dispossession remains at the root of endemic poverty and economic deprivations among Black South Africans who can no longer be regarded as land owners in South Africa. In terms of hierarchy of power, land dispossession occasioned by the Land Act of 1913 dehumanized and precariously positioned Black South Africans as laborers to white land owners and thenceforth ensured Black people could never engage in commercial farming, trade and industrial activities. The areas which were reserved for the entire Black population to reside and work in were unable to accommodate and support them economically. Associated draconian apartheid laws which displaced Black populations from homes equally restricted or denied them free movement in and around South Africa’s large geographical spaces. Among the generational consequences of the land dispossession is the housing crisis that South Africa has been experiencing.

Housing crisis

A dimension of collective memory of the Black South African population which continues to impinge on their development in the democratic dispensation relates to inadequacy of the available housing. The root of this problem relates to differential meaning of citizenship under colonialism and the apartheid regime. Whereas other parts of Africa experienced European colonialism, South Africa like other countries in the southern African region experienced what scholars have termed ‘white-settler-colonialism’ (see Gumede 2016). Settler colonialism, in

brief, refers to the political, economic and social subjugation by European migrants who settled in South Africa (Southall 2013). While South African Black population groups are indigenous to the lands of Africa, they were never recognized as citizens as this term and its political, economic, social and legal meaning, privileges and rights were reserved for white settler colonialists.

In this regard Black disempowerment through the Group Areas Act of 1950 promoted separate development of racial groups in South Africa. Pursuance of separate development paths was deplorable and the declaration of most parts of South Africa as “White Group Areas” consigned Blacks to the fringes or unproductive areas and sectors of the South African economy. The law became an instrument for forceful expropriation without compensation of properties of indigenous Africans. Africans were moved and relocated to respective Group Areas. The resulting consequence of forceful removals, expropriation of properties without compensation and relocation to the Bantustans or homelands was economic alienation and impoverishment, or as correctly described by Lephakga (2017) –the “institutionalization of poverty” among black people. Biko (2004, 96-108) concisely captured this consequence:

“...Economically, the blacks have been given a raw deal. Generally speaking the areas where Bantustans are located are the least developed in the country, often very unsuitable either for agricultural or pastoral work. Not one of the Bantustans have access to the sea and in all situations mineral rights are strictly reserved for the South African government. In other words Bantustans only have rights extending to 6 feet below surface of the land...”

The Group Areas Act of 1950 segregated South Africans and zoned them into different residential areas while the Housing Act of 1966 made no provision for the state or municipalities to provide housing for Black South Africans. Housing was made an individual’s responsibility (Cloete, 1993) with serious social consequences for mostly Black South Africans who could not provide housing for themselves as a result of economic dispossession, intellectual disempowerment and discriminatory employment laws (Mohlaphamaswe, 2014). It is not surprising therefore that democratic South Africa has been grappling with the social and

economic consequences of a housing backlog. The state had sought to address this challenge through several policies and legislation, for example the Housing Act 107 of 1997 (Mohlalapaswe, 2014).

The memory of apartheid era policies activated by reality on the ground account for recent attempts at 'land grabs' in the country. Lack of access to resources for meaningful livelihood during the apartheid era meant that many Black families could neither afford decent housing nor looked up to the state to provide housing. Presently, in the face of a dire economic situation, high property prices and interest rates have virtually excluded mostly Black South Africans from the formal property market and in the process increased the number of those needing decent housing. The excluded from all appearances may be perpetually relegated to overcrowded, crime infested and disease prone informal settlements. Anger and frustrations of many Black South Africans who cannot afford decent housing have also activated the memory of systemic dispossession and dehumanization.

Systemic brutality and disempowerment also vigorously sought the obliteration of collective memory of black South African population through murder, incarceration, denial of agency in historical narratives and depersonalization through Bantu education.

Bantu Education

Of all the apartheid state orchestrated attempts at disempowerment and oppression of black South Africans, intellectual disempowerment arguably remains the most destructive and effective. Sustained subjugation of Black South Africans relied on societal reproduction through the apartheid educational system. Hence, the collective memory of Blacks regarding education has and will always be that of perpetual servitude through intellectual disempowerment.

Education in the context of South Africa has always had the objective of subjugating the 'native'. During British colonialism slave education, had as its main objective making slaves provide quality services to their masters. The Bantu education system effectively pursued the same objective as slave education. It perpetuated subjugation and disempowerment with a much stronger vigor and disdain. This prompted scholars like Fenwick and Rosenhain (1991, 74) to

observe that black education centered in the Bantustans and its curriculum were geared towards preparing black students for life in the Bantustans and in the fringes or less skilled areas of the apartheid South African economy.

In place of teaching science and technology, Bantu Education curriculum emphasized tree-planting, soil conservation and agricultural practice, religion, hygiene and local customs. In this regard, under the Bantu education law, funding of black institutions was never proportionate to Black population growth and needs (Horrell, 1968, p23). Forceful state control of Black education equally meant considerable reduction in the involvement of Christian missionaries in the education of Black South Africans. The apartheid South African state had control over employment and training of teachers as well as the determination and development of the curriculum of Bantu schools (Bruwer, 1967).

This intentional and well-orchestrated system of intellectual disempowerment of Black people had the sole motive of legitimating and propagating the doctrine of apartheid and white racial superiority. It therefore came as no surprise that those who passed through the Bantu education system acquired simple skills which consigned them to the fringes of the South African political economy and perpetuated the false notion of Blacks as incapable of critical, creative and innovative thinking. Hendrik Verwoerd (1953), captured this thinking when he infamously stated, “There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour...what is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice.”

Understandably, democratic South Africa, as a beacon of hope, is meant to correct inherent structural deficiencies in the country’s educational system. Although progress is being made, more needs to be done as the country’s educational performance remains a topic of much discussion nationally and internationally. Although South Africa has some world class educational institutions, the country remains one of the worst educational performers in the world if recent reports are to be believed. In the Africa Competitiveness Report of 2015, for example, South Africa ranked last for its quality of mathematics and science education, and ranked 139 out of 143 for the quality of its education system (WEF, 2015).

Weak reconciliation

Even though oppression and subjugation of Blacks are self-evident, historical narratives do not place much emphasis on distortions of historical records or archives necessary for healing, reconciliation, rebuilding or reconstruction of post conflict societies. As McEwan (2010) observes of South Africa, “in the weeks immediately preceding the inauguration of the first democratic government, in excess of four tons of highly incriminating records of Security Police operations were destroyed.” Actions such as these remain antithetical to forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and rebuilding in a country with a brutal past where many still demand for justice and closure. Nevertheless, post-apartheid South Africa forged on with the desire to build a new society based on the principles of justice, the rule of law and democracy based on oral recollections, testimonies of eye witnesses and perpetrators’ willingness to accept responsibility for their actions (Nuttall and Coetzee, 1998; McEwan 2010).

Hearings at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided a good understanding of the apartheid system and reasonably justified the pursuit of a just and egalitarian society in a new democratic South Africa. However, destruction of incriminating records presented democratic South African state with the challenge of “how to construct archives that create adequate space for the stories of ordinary people...” The seriousness of this challenge can be understood from the perspective that the content of archives shape and reshape history and in the process define power relations among competing groups (McEwan 2010). Post-apartheid efforts in rebuilding South Africa as envisioned by the TRC have consistently encountered difficulties because records which could have helped in reaching incontrovertible verdicts were never found.

Therefore, William Blackstone’s 1769 legal doctrine interpreted as meaning that ‘it is better a guilty person goes unpunished than to condemn the innocent’ largely determined rulings at the TRC. This was the outcome in the absence of incontrovertible evidence especially in cases where known perpetrators received favorable rulings. Memories of the atrocities committed by perpetrators who escaped justice have not allowed for true closure, healing and reconciliation between former oppressors and the formerly oppressed. The euphoria of the end of apartheid

created much excitement and in the process tended to have clouded the state from clearly seeing the consequences of reconciliation based on partial justice.

Recent events in the face of a serious economic crisis in the country partly support critics of the TRC who argued that the commission failed to achieve the primary goal of reconciliation and unity among various groups which make up South Africa. Boshomane (2016) faults the restorative justice approach of the TRC as an approach that mostly benefited perpetrators of violent acts and gross human rights abuses more than the victims. The reason for this had much to do with the focus of the TRC on politically motivated crimes and human rights abuses. Lived experiences of forced removals, systematic discrimination, forced labour, targeted impoverishment, institutional and psychological violence never received deserved attention by the TRC (Bochomane, 2016).

Furthermore, not all recommendations of the TRC have been implemented by the South African government many years after the TRC ended. Among recommendations of the TRC yet to be implemented is a wealth tax on beneficiaries of the apartheid regime. Also, some perpetrators of violent acts who did not receive amnesty from the TRC are yet to be prosecuted. In this regard, Boshomane (2016) notes that TRC's restorative justice "erases the fact that racism was the root of apartheid, which downplays white supremacy, making it easier for systematic racism and white privilege to continue to thrive largely uninterrupted". The TRC did help though to some extent. In the words of Ignatieff (1996) and those of Stanley (2001), while the TRC was not meant to resolve all social contradictions, the Commission at least helped reduce the number of lies that could have circulated unchallenged in public discourse.

Role of memory in socio-economic progress

Although the end of apartheid has brought about political rights and rule of law, it has largely failed to address the challenges of poverty and inequality. Memories of systemic dehumanization and exploitation continue to cause anger and frustration among many Black South Africans. This has increased with the slow pace of change, growing poverty among Blacks and dashed hopes in democracy. Thus, criticisms, impatience, violent demonstrations and other protests in South Africa can be viewed as direct expressions of collective memory of the past.

Many Black South Africans have come to regard democratic South African as no longer a beacon of hope because it would seem that the economic interests of former oppressors and beneficiaries of the apartheid regime have been expanded and protected. As Lephakga (2015, 95-148) points out, “negotiated settlement has only resulted in whites retaining their economic power and blacks receiving political power. But if the blacks had hoped that political power would bring them economic emancipation and social justice, they have been grossly misled or disappointed”.

There is also a view that post-apartheid policies such as Black Economic Empowerment have not gone far enough in correcting the anomalies of the past. Democracy and adherence to the rule of law continues to constrain the hands of the South African government from adequately addressing major national questions such as land ownership. Democracy has granted Black South Africans and other historically disadvantaged groups the right to participate in political processes, governance and management of the economy. However, democracy has not provided nor was it intended to provide a level playing field for economic competition between whites and Blacks in the country. For this reason Lephakga (2015) and others find fault with the legal principle of “equality before the law” because it “de-historicizes the notion of ‘equality’ within South Africa,” institutionalization of poverty, alienation and relegation to the background and dependence of Black people on whites for economic survival. Lephakga (2015) sustains that the ahistorical argument of equality before the law falsely “promotes socio-economic tabula rasa because it seems to suggest that suddenly, without historical consideration, ‘we are all equal’ before the law and thus can participate in for instance the economy of South Africa” (Lephakga 2015).

Emphasis on equality before the law fails to acknowledge or downplays inherent principles of capitalism such as ownership and access to capital, entrepreneurial and managerial skills which enhance one’s chances of participating in the economy. Earlier, Terreblanche (2002, 25) made a point that:

[M]ost unemployed people [in South Africa] are Africans; more Africans than any others live in abject poverty; the inequalities in the distribution of income, poverty and opportunities are mainly to the detriment of Africans; and it is largely Africans who are criminalised during the long periods of repression, discrimination, and violence, and who are now the main victims of criminality and violence.

Continued calls for radical economic transformation and expropriation of land without compensation can be understood from the perspective that existing policies have failed. Recent developments in the country indicate that while amnesty was achieved and maintained through legal instruments, the majority of South African society has not forgotten the dehumanizing past. Through recent developments the government has realized that South Africans are humans after all and forgiveness does actually have some limitations. Arguably, the collective memory of the previously disadvantaged will continue to reinforce agitation for redressing or revisiting of seemingly settled issues in South Africa because the euphoria of ending apartheid brought about high hopes of a better life among historically disadvantaged groups in the country. Those hopes and aspirations of better living conditions were not misplaced but rather amplified by knowledge of imaginable and unimaginable things that the capture and control of political power can bring about.

The undeniable consequence of systematic dispossession of the Black population on one hand and systemic empowerment of the white population on the other hand is the creation of generational problems (Lephakga 2017; Terreblanche 2002). To put it differently, the apartheid regime ensured that politically, socially and economically empowered whites could pass their wealth from generation to generation while economically dispossessed socially relegated and politically suppressed Black South Africans would remain generationally or perpetually dispossessed and poor. This is therefore structurally embedded, and will likely remain unchanged and unaffected by post-apartheid policies of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), mergers of higher education institutions, the RDP housing programme and other affirmative action policies. These policies have been unable to dislodge white privilege and sufficiently empower majority Black population.

The issue arises whether the ugly memory of the past can be used as an instrument for socio-economic transformation. In other words, because all South Africans are aware of the bad memory of the past, all South Africans can join hands to ensure that social and economic transformation takes place. It is in the benefit of all South Africans that transformation takes place in order that possible breakdown of society is avoided. There are examples of countries that have successfully used memory to transform society. Brazil to some extent, coming from an ugly past. Rwanda is another example, coming from a genocide. There may be lessons to draw from countries such as Rwanda and Brazil. South Africa would have to chart its own path of reconciliation and socio-economic transformation however because it faces rather peculiar realities. For instance, South Africa is a settler colony which presents a context that is different from Brazil and Rwanda as examples of countries that with bad memories but have pursued commendable socio-economic transformation.

Conclusion

In this essay, a functional meaning of memory was adopted to explain recent developments in South Africa. The essay has sustained the argument that settler colonialism in South Africa and elsewhere in the southern African region created major uncertainty around identity and belonging (Peberdy 2001). As a result, the democratic South Africa has continued to grapple with how to redefine South African society and identity. The need to strike a balance between remaining democratic, maintaining the rule of law and restoring the dignity of the Black population is critical. South Africa is conscious of its global image of a 'rainbow nation' with a high capacity for forgiveness or amnesty.

Having analyzed the various challenges facing South Africa and examined socio-economic ramifications, the central argument of the essay is that memory can be an instrument to transform the South African society. There are realities that would need to be taken into account while drawing from lessons from other countries that have had to deal with an ugly past to transform society. Most likely for South Africa, there would need to be a national dialogue in dealing with pertinent issues.

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