

# Southern African Democracy and the Utopia of a Rainbow Nation

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## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>History as a Laboratory of Democracy</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>6</b>

## 1 Abstract

*This working paper describes the methodological and theoretical approach of the research project "Southern African Democracy and the Utopia of a Rainbow Nation". Analysing the "history of the political" as suggested by Pierre Rosavallöin not only allows to improve historiography, but also to correct the distorting effect of colonial categories.*

## 2 History as a Laboratory of Democracy

We understand democracy as self-governance, i.e. the legitimisation of a set of modes of action and its enforcement to govern a society that has been approved by the people.<sup>1</sup> The question of democracy appears in all commu-

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nities "in which the conditions of life in common are not defined *a priori*, engraved in a tradition, or imposed by an authority." (Rosanvallon 2006: 36) Hence, there can be different forms of democracy, but the only alternative consists in disenfranchising the governed. For this reason even authoritarian regimes often try to give themselves the veneer of democracy, because every other justification would be an open confession of the submission of their own people.

Understanding the current state of democracies and their challenges requires empirical studies. In our research we apply the idea of history as an "active laboratory that created our present" (Rosanvallon 2006: 39) for doing this. Elaborating a genealogy of political struggles, not limited to politics or social and economic dynamics, but understood as the full range of practical interactions of the people, builds the methodological approach of our research.

With Castoriadis (1987: 18) we share the starting point: "Method, in the philosophical sense, is simply the operating set of categories." This means that democracy designates the *tuning* of executed political practices with their representation in society. Performed social actions are just transient events, immediately vanishing and forgotten. Ordering and steering their repetition requires to record and remember their mode of performance, and a shared societal knowledge is indispensable for this (Berger and Luckmann 1991). In agreement with Castoriadis we call the symbolic form of this knowledge, which represents a vision of collective social action, the "imaginary." "Categories", then, are not abstract scientific concepts but the *epistemological form* according to which this kind of knowledge is produced and shared. The question of how the characteristics of executed social actions are accounted for and *translated* into imaginaries is very important because it allows for manipulation (Garfinkel 1967). The question asks for the "immutable mobiles" (Latour 1990) as those indicators that are transferred from a chain of action to a ritual, thing, oral or written text, for the legitimacy to do so, and for the modes of its acceptance. In history, this process has often been rendered invisible, with creating an "Archimedian point" (Smith 1987: 69-78) with an abstract and unidentifiable knower in its centre.

In the context of southern African postcolonies, this becomes rather problematic because many of the categories of social sciences developed in a colonial setting. Concepts like *rationality* or the *public sphere*, which are seen as crucial aspects of *modern* democracies, have long been tools for subjugation or privileges of governing elites in southern African contexts (Mbembe 2001). The missing of writing before the invasion of settlers in 1652 has often been distorted into an absence of history, which provided colonial powers with a

monopoly of defining societal knowledge (Mellet 2020).

Hannah Arendt (1973: 123-221) explained the state of southern African societies on the eve of political decolonisation as the result of implementing the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes by the political practice of Cecil Rhodes: a war of all against all for the single purpose of an unlimited growth of power. The existing social fabric was destroyed by warfare, the people were humiliated and dispossessed, and the resources exploited for enjoyment of the richer nations. Nevertheless, African people rebuilt their communities from remaining means in their "countermovement checking the expansion" (Polanyi 2001: 136). They fought back and resisted (Bhebe 1995). Until today, they are struggling to reconstitute meaningful societies under the conditions of still existing dependencies from the imperial powers.

We understand the *utopia of a rainbow nation* as an important imaginary vision not only because it could be successfully invoked to calm down a near-civil war into the more peaceful procedures of a parliamentary democracy in 1994, but also because it kept the questions of belonging, having access to and a share in the common society open ever since. A promise of reframing Southern African people as an autonomous constituency was made by Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1994) in his inauguration speech as the first democratically elected president of South Africa:

We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.

The metaphor of the rainbow had been introduced into the anti-apartheid struggle in a speech of archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu during a protest march of the *Defiance Campaign* on 13 September 1989. On that day, thousands of people gathered in the streets of Cape Town to protest against the state violence against those who had been classified as *blacks* by the apartheid regime. These racistically excluded people had protested against their disenfranchisement in the (last) apartheid elections on 6 September 1989. On election day, the police killed more than 20 people in the townships of Cape Town. Tutu reacted in a remarkable way. Instead of calling for a revolution as the overturn of existing power relations, and hence a continuity of struggles between social groups as they had been formed and defined during South Africa's colonial history, Tutu invoked a completely new framing of the South African society as such. He did this by, first, noting the already achieved establishment of a *new* South African people in the

non-racialised protests against the regime and, second, deliberately inviting the perpetrators of apartheid like then-president Frederik de Klerk into this collective:

You wanted us to show you that we can be dignified. You wanted us to show you that we are disciplined. You wanted us to show you that we are determined. You wanted us to show you that we are peaceful. Right! Mr. de Klerk, please come here! We are inviting you. . . . Come and see what this country is going to become. This country is a rainbow country. . . . Mr. de Klerk, we have already won. Mr. de Klerk, if you really know what is good for you, join us! . . . Join us in this new South Africa! (Tutu 1994: 187-188)

With these words, Tutu took the political legitimacy from the governing group and put it into the hands of the protesters, and then eradicated any substantial barrier between them by inviting the opposed party to join. In this move he overcame the power struggle of political camps by calling a new arena of political competition into existence. Pointing to the evidence of a non-racialised citizenry that demanded their agency in the streets of Cape Town, he disqualified the government as representative of its people. From this moment on, the apartheid regime had to choose between opening constitutional negotiations to the public or to turn deliberately against its own people, franchised or not.

The rapid dismantling of the apartheid regime was surely favored by concurrent international events like the fall of the Berlin wall with its weakening effect on the existing balance of power, but even without them a simple continuity of the reign of president de Klerk would not have been possible after the speech of Tutu, because the elections of 6 September 1989 as constituent foundation of the government had lost a huge share of their legitimacy.

The question of how to reframe society from hitherto hostile groups deserves some elaboration. In the utopia of a rainbow nation the idea of society as an "ideal communication community" resonates, as Jürgen Habermas (1987: 2) made it the foundation of his concept of democracy:

This utopia serves to reconstruct an undamaged intersubjectivity that allows both for unconstrained mutual understanding among individuals and for the identities of individuals who come to an unconstrained understanding with themselves.

According to Habermas, the transformative power of a debate develops from the mutual recognition of four conditions:

1. Understandability as the assurance of speaking in ways the other is able to comprehend.
2. Truth as the pledge to make statements about matter of facts as they are, i.e. accountable for all participants.
3. Moral rightness as the acknowledgement to insist only on normative claims that are justifiable for all.
4. Authenticity as the protection of the own and the others personal identity.

The motivation for applying these standards emanates from the effect of mutuality, because convincing others can derive only from their acknowledgement of the four conditions on my side, which depends on my willingness to grant them the same. In other words, such a consensual procedure of deliberation as an alternative to strategic debate (which of course always exists) develops from the sincerity of argumentative exchange. Its advantage derives from the binding force of voluntary agreements with their higher stability in comparison to compromises in strategic negotiations. It is easy to see that this model of democratic deliberation represents the ideal conditions of academic argumentation.

The beneficial point of this concept is its explanation of the *developmental power* of such debates because a consensus can only derive from a *change* of individual claims in this setting. A successful performance of a non-strategic negotiation in accordance with these principles has a *learning effect* on all participants and *unifies* them into a coinciding collective. This means that even the willingness to give up an own claim in such a discourse may have the *strategically* beneficial effect of becoming member of a new and more powerful group.

The problems deriving from this normative approach have been addressed early on by Gerard Delanty (1997). Society is not a group of scholars ready for a rational debate of problems. Closely examining the above quotation of Habermas reveals the two stages of the process. It *begins* with mutually understanding each other, and continues *then* with fostering identity by a collective learning process. However, this conversely includes the option of sternly defending the existing claims in order *not* to endanger the already established own identity.

Empirically, there is no reason why the willingness to change should be more likely than insisting on securing the own identity and opinion, especially when the latter are supported and confirmed by the community. Right

to the contrary, intensifying political debate and self-assurance of previously subjugated groups multiplies the cognitive perspectives and conflicts. As Delanty (1997: 39) clearly noted, "the problem is that modernity, as Habermas is also aware, is also pluralistic in its *cognitive* structures: modernity involves the increase in value systems and diverse forms of life."

This problematic reveals the importance of sociological and historical science. Overcoming a dissatisfying and conflict-laden situation of society, as we are surely facing in South Africa 28 years after the turn to a parliamentary conflicts, requires *knowledge* about missing understandings, competing truths, mutually unfathomable normative claims and existing fears about the loss of identity. At this point we return to our approach of history as a method of generating a genealogy of political conflicts.

The collaboration of history and sociology is established by the connection of historiography and remembering. On the one hand, a lot of historical records have to be corrected by removing colonial misconceptions and adding omitted facts. On the other, the trajectory of the *historical consciousness* developed from the outdated historiographies themselves has to be analysed, because the constellations of political conflicts were formed according to their lines. We intend to improve historical knowledge, but we also want to understand the effects of remembering history in the past.

Remembering the trajectory of colonial historiography may help to overcome the unwillingness of reflecting own knowledge because it provides the arguments for acknowledging an improved historiography in the first place.

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