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Beyond Leaders, Towards Institutions: The Case for Citizenship Consciousness

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The paper argues for a break from the over-reliance on national leaders that has characterized our democratic transition. South Africa urgently needs to develop a new citizenship consciousness that can in turn be the basis for local democracy. In short the paper is a call for building democracy from the ground up, through citizen action. It draws heavily from institutional and leadership theory.

From Leadership To Institution Building

Since democracy's birth in 1994 South Africa's political culture has privileged individual leadership. This reliance on the individual leader has sociological explanations. Sociologists have observed that societies undergoing transformation are often in need of charismatic leaders who can give assurance to both the victors and the vanquished. Max Weber, arguably the most influential sociologist of the 20th century, wrote that modern societies are characterized by three types of authority figures. First there are the charismatic leaders who emerge during moments of social crisis, when institutional mechanisms for mediating conflict have broken down and the society is adrift from lack of purpose. James MacGregor Burns uses the term 'heroic leadership' to describe leaders who emerge in societies undergoing crisis. The crisis usually emanates from unfulfilled material and psychological needs, ultimately leading to mass alienation. Mass support for these leaders is expressed through votes, applause, letters, shaking hands- rather than through intermediaries or institutions (1978: 244).

Nelson Mandela was indeed the country's quintessential charismatic or heroic leader. As the late Frederick van Zyl Slabbert puts it in my latest book, Becoming Worthy Ancestors: "Mandela seized the moment. He is still revered as an international icon for the way he handled that whole situation (**Slabbert, 2010).**"

However, the ultimate test for democratic societies is whether such leaders "can help in new nations develop the political movements or parties that convert personal followings into durable ones, personal affect and symbol into policy and program." Hence the emergence of the second stage of leadership - what Weber calls rationalist-legal authority. Here the function of the leader is to routinize the new social values ushered in by the new leadership. Weber famously described this process as the routinization of charisma. Yet another sociologist Alvin Gouldner argued that this transformation takes place when the disciples of the leader, seeking to secure the revolutionary movement and their status in it, are confronted with the problem of succession upon the death of the charismatic leader. As Mandela's de facto prime minister Thabo Mbeki saw it as his duty to rationalize the system of government- to be sure Mbeki saw himself as both the technocrat-in-chief and the philosopher-king. The two were interrelated. The philosopher-king behaved as if he had the solutions "in the private lair of his skull." The idea of democracy as collective problem solving was displaced by the lone warrior model of leadership (Briggs, 2009; Heifetz 1994). Ultimately Mbeki's leadership was characterized by mass alienation and ultimately rebellion on the part of his own political party. According to Achille Mbembe, Mbeki 'made enemies of people who could have been his friends and of those he could have easily won over by charm, persuasion,

or simply by carefully listening to them'. For Mbembe, Thabo Mbeki 'never really achieved the kind of inner peace and inner joy that could have set him on the path towards authentic freedom – freedom from past wounds, pettiness, paranoia, vindictiveness and lack of generosity'.

Jacob Zuma emerged as the classic Weberian charismatic hero representing the interests of the alienated masses, and of course representing his own interests. But there was no way of getting to the latter without going through the former. To save his skin from potential political imprisonment or a Siberian-like banishment to Nkandla Zuma had to fight with every fibre of his being to oust Mbeki, and it helped that Mbeki had alienated almost every important constituency in the ANC- the workers, communist, youth league, war veterans and a public that had enough of his prevarication on HIV/AIDS. And as Ernesto Laclau puts it: "since any kind of institutional system is inevitably at least partially limiting and frustrating, there is something appealing about any figure who challenges it, whatever the reasons and forms of the challenge." This is crucially important in helping us understand – and even temper our frustrations about Zuma's presidency – he came to power less because he was loved and more because Mbeki was hated.

Francis Fukuyama (2010) provides a similarly Weberian, institutional approach to the democratic societies. According to Fukuyama the transition to democratic rule necessitated a shift from the big man rule of kinship based and tribal societies. Over time democratic societies developed institutions to distribute power "irrespective of the individuals who exercised power at any given time. Institutions in other words, replaced individual leaders (p15)." Thus, "modern democracy was born when rulers acceded to formal rules limiting their power and subordinating their sovereignty to the will of the larger

population as expressed through elections.” Democracy thus developed as “more than majority voting in elections; it is a complex set of institutions that restrain and regularise the exercise of power through law and a system of checks and balances.” In an observation that may be instructive for South Africa, particularly in the light of the African National Congress’s furtive succession debates, he also notes that “ while individual leaders can shape institutions, more highly developed institutions not only survive powerful individual leaders but also have a system for training and recruiting new and better ones”.

Institutional theories have a long history in politics, economics and sociology. In fact Fukuyama acknowledges the great influence of Huntington’s theory of political institutionalization on his own work. To Huntington institutionalization was about the creation of recurring values as the basis of political stability. For economic historians such as Douglss C. North institutionalization consists of clear and predictable rules to guide economic decision making. Hugh Heclo argues that to think institutionally a leader has to internalize the “presuppositions” of an institution: “Accepting and participating in those values as a moral agent is what makes you a part of the institution. And, reciprocally, it makes the institution a part of who you are, though it need never fully define you **(2008, 84).”** To think institutionally is to appreciate that:

> there is something estimable and decisive beyond me and my immediate personal inclinations. In approaching a major choice, the question is not, how can I get what I want. It is the duty-laden question that

> asks, what expectations and conduct are appropriate to my position and the choices I might make. What is it larger than myself into which I am drawn (2008:102).”

Heclo cites America’s founding president George Washington as an example of a leader who was able to think institutionally. During the revolutionary war Washington did not always receive the Congressional support he needed to successfully prosecute the war. Fraudulent and incompetent administration of army supplies threatened defeat for his forces. And yet the army was in such a strong position that he could have installed himself as a king or a great protector of the nation. But he chose, in Hugh Heclo’s phrasing, to continue depending on “a feckless and unreliable Congress” out of respect for the institution When Congress finally gave his support he said: “instead of thinking myself freed from all civil obligations by this mark of confidence, I shall constantly bear in mind that as the sword was the last resort for the preservation of our liberties, so it ought to be the first to be laid aside when those liberties are set aside.” (Heclo, 2008: 75-76). Four years later he denounced all claims and pretensions to power “to the astonishment of Europe’s leaders.”

Washington was able to do this because he was “thinking institutionally”, and not merely about his survival.

Their different emphases notwithstanding the older institutional theorists tend to assume (1) the existence of a common moral frame that guides organizational actors and (2) that there is something individual leaders can to steer them.

However A different approach to the Weberian search for societal and institutional order as the basis for democracy comes from scholars such as Alvin Gouldner and C Wright Mills.

As Gouldner (1957: 507) points out institutions are often the site of contestation among contrary needs:

> These contrary needs are just as real as and just as consequential for organizational behaviour… but they point in a different direction. They are oriented to problems of change, of growth, of challenging contingencies, of provoking unsettling and unsettling encounters.

Reacting to Talcott Parsons functionalist institutionalism C. Wright Mills (1959:37) similarly argued that:

> we may not yet assume that some such set of values, or legitimations, must prevail lest a social structure come apart, nor may we assume that a social structure must be made coherent or unified by any such 'normative structure'. Certainly we may not merely assume that any such normative structure as may prevail is , in any meaning of the word, autonomous … often there are quite well-organized symbols of opposition which are used to justify insurgent movements and to debunk ruling authorities.

Amartya Sen (2009:83-86) warns against institutional fundamentalism: "Yet, whatever good may be associated with the chosen institutions it is hard to think of them as basically being good in themselves, rather than them possibly being

effective ways of realizing acceptable or excellent social achievements."

And what about the assumption that leaders can do something to steer institutions and/or adjudicate conflicts that take place within them. There are indeed three main categories whose basic assumption is that leadership is about exerting influence. First, there are the trait theories of leadership that go back to Thomas Carlyle's concept of the great man theory of leadership- in other words the history of the world is the history of great men. In this perspective, leaders are born not made. Indeed much of the adulation of Nelson Mandela proceeds from such assumptions. Second, are the those who argue that it is the time that call forth great leaders. These men maketh the times. At the other end of the spectrum are situational theories of leadership. Thus a much more sophisticated explanation of someone like Mandela or Steve Biko is that the political situation called forth their latent talent. A middle position is that there is no such thing as a leader for all seasons. Or as Heifetz (1994, 17-18) puts it "the appropriate style of leadership is contingent on the requirements of the particular situation." This is because context is key in determining the leadership style: "Sometimes a directive, task-oriented style is the most effective, and at other times a participative , relationship-oriented style is required."

Similarly, Garry Wills (1994:19) produced a typology of leaders for different situations – electoral leaders, radical leaders, business leaders, etc. In this perspective there is no leadership template fitting all situations across time and space:

> different types of leaders should be distinguished more by their goals than by

> their personality (the most common practice). The crisis of mere subsistence on a life raft calls for one type of leader. Democratic stability for another. Revolutionary activity for still a third.

The community organizer Saul Alinsky (1969:72-73)wrote that “just as people have a variety of interests, so, too, they have a variety of leaders.” These partial leaders- because they address specific needs- tend to be the most natural leaders.

MacGregor Burns (1978) introduced the concept of transformational leadership to suggest that leadership was essentially about taking people on a higher moral plane. Instead of accommodating followers, the leader challenges them to the achievement of certain moral goals.

But even in leadership theory there is a tradition that goes against the assumption of normally shared values, and therefore against the idea of leadership as influence. The most influential writer in this regard is Heifetz (1994), for whom leadership is an adaptive activity. By this he means that the starting point is plurality of society, and the leader’s task is not to exert influence as much as it is to respond to what society or organizations throw up. Oftentimes this involved going against the people, and challenging them to go through what he calls reality-testing. Reality-testing takes place when commonly accepted norms are challenged, and shown not to be in the interest of those who hold on to them. FW De Klerk exercised adaptive leadership when he argued against the comfortable but ultimately counterproductive values that underlay apartheid; Mikhail Gorbachev did the same for Russia, although there is a debate about how successful he was in pushing the project of reality-testing to its logical outcome.

From Leadership and Institution Building to Citizenship Consciousness

If, as Laclau argues, conflict is in-built in the very construction of popular alliances, then surely not even the most adaptive institutions or leaders will be able to forestall or avoid it. Something else is needed to sustain leadership and institutional development- citizenship. The search for an answer must begin with the ability of citizens in society to handle conflicting interests and identities. Beyond leaders and institutions we have to address ourselves to the politico-civic culture of the society. By the term politico-civic culture I simply aim to signal that political culture – again commonly defined as the values that underlie the political system- is itself a site of contestation by agents in civil society. The ruling ANC may for example insist on solidarity as a principle of its political culture but that may be questioned by civil society institutions that question its government's policies. These institutions bring a sense of political vibrancy and democratic contestation to the political culture of any given society. As Michael Sandel puts it: "whatever their more particular purposes , these agencies of civic education inculcate the habit of attending to public things. And yet given their multiplicity, they prevent public life from dissolving into an undifferentiated whole."[1]

A number of writers have pointed to the ability of India to endure as a democracy to the ability of Indian culture to absorb conflict and mediate among- Kilnani, Tharoor, Kothari.

The aim here is not to jettison 'leadership' and

[1] Michael Sandel, Democracy's Discontent, America in Search of a Public Philosophy, Harvard University Press, 1996, 320-321

institutionalization but to suggest a different causal relationship. Instead of starting with the top-down, teleological assumption that leaders make the world and routinize its values through institution building, we would argue that an citizenship consciousness finds expression in new civic institutions that in turn produce a new kind of leadership.

The best place to experiment with this kind of leadership would be through the revival of the discourse and practice of local democracy. For too long development policy has been predicated on technocratic foundations; and on the idea of cities as sites of globalization, economic growth, and service delivery. And yet,as Gerald Frug observes in his brilliant book, City Making, “a primary city function- the primary city function- ought to be the cultivation and reproduction of the city’s traditional form of human association.” Frug argues that “cities ought to teach people how to interact with unfamiliar strangers, how to deal with their terror of the black poor or of whomever they imagine as the mob… (1999, 140-141).”

However, there is a big difference between local democracy and local autonomy. The latter often romanticized locality and puts a fetish on identities. Local democracy is simply another way of achieving the ideals of national democratic ideals. The United States provides an interesting example in this regard. Contrary to the romantic view of American democracy being built on little platoons of churches, Theda Skocpol argues that “democratic governmental and political institutions encouraged the proliferation of voluntary groups linked to regional or national social movements.” 33). The existence of political parties and these federated, translocal networks encouraged people to participate both in local, state and national politics. Political struggles brought people from all over the

country into contact with each other thus making possible nation-wide collective learning about democracy. The emergence of political parties coincided with the emergence of these translocal federated networks. All these institutions were confronted with the challenge of “how to inspire large numbers of people to participate while at the same time forging links across a growing and diverse new nation. They solved the dilemmas by linking interactive groups of local adherents into federated networks and decision making structures. ” (43)Membership in local units of translocal organizations offered people routes into political movements and organizations. In Benedict Anderson’s elegant phrasing this is how communities are imagined. And as local-state-national leaders worked their way up the leadership ladder they had to interact with ordinary members: “Inside the clubs, lodges, and posts millions of people learned about group operations and collective debate and decision making.” On a substantive basis they discussed notions of citizenship and community and how government affected those. Thus many of them went to the extent of lobbying and mobilizing public opinion.

This raises the question for South Africa: how can those who have never participated in government be expected to behave institutionally? There is long tradition in political and social theory that argues that individuals learn political participation by first participating in civic structures such as the church, or the sports club or the religious group. From there they gain the skills, and the confidence to engage with others in political institutions (Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mills GDH Cole,Verba et al, 1995, Mangcu 1997). They learn the rules but also the etiquette of working with others in organizations. Robert Putnam has described the important role

of social capital in initiating people into democracy. However, as Xavier de Souza Briggs in democract As Problem Solving, social capital is a resource and not the mechanism for bringing about democratic participation. For that something else is needed- and that is the idea of collaborative work- in civil and political society, and in the domain of development. This was exactly the role of the black consciousness movement. The movement promoted the philosophy of self-reliant development by organizing communities to build schools, clinics, day-care centres, cooperatives and home-based industries throughout the country, and that became the basis for political mobilization. Just as in the 1970's we need community learning processes, particularly with young people. Thus many of today's leaders got their training from the black consciousness experience (Pityana,1991).

In South Africa the 'translocal'role described by Skocpol was played by civil society organizations and the revolutionary movement: civic associations, trade unions, student,religious and political organizations. As activists we travelled the length and breadth of the country to attend national congresses and to ensure that our movements acted in unison. In the process we became a community in anonymity- arguing through the night honing our intellectual and leadership skills. We inspired and affirmed and taught each other not only the finer aspects of political theory but strategic leadership under some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable. We also ought to look at the examples of non-racial coalition building of the 1980's and '90's particularly the struggles around cities. Civic organizations and structures such as the Metropolitan Chamber played a key role in generating new local government alternatives during a period Kecia Rust and Sue Rubenstein describe as "the golden age of forums."

Unfortunately, the achievement of democracy in 1994 resulted in a break not only with this tradition but also in a break in the link with communities. This was perhaps to be expected as local leaders took up jobs in municipal, provincial and national government; and in municipal, provincial and national legislatures. The lesser the attention local government received, the greater were the prospects that corrupt politicians would take over and run local municipalities as their personal fiefdoms using patronage to enrich themselves, their families and their political supporters. This has been a festering sore in our body politic for a long time now partly because we have not developed a language and practice of local democracy. We ought to build an archive of the best traditions of community building and local government practice in our history, and use that in a process of on-going citizenship consciousness. With that consciousness in place, no political party can ever again take the support of the people for granted. Instead, one hopes, politicians would be forced to engage more seriously with what a set of new younger voters may have to say, unencumbered by historical loyalties.