

NATION, RACE AND HISTORY IN ZIMBABWEAN POLITICS

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One of the central features of the Zimbabwean crisis, as it has unfolded since 2000, has been the emergence of a revived nationalism delivered in a particularly virulent form, with race as a key trope within the discourse, and a selective rendition of the liberation history deployed as an ideological policing agent in the public debate. A great deal of commentary has been deployed to describe this process, much of it concentrating on the undoubted coercive aspects of the politics of state consolidation in Zimbabwe. My intention in this paper is to provide a more careful examination of the ideological project of the Mugabe regime and, in particular, to concentrate on the ways in which both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are defined in this national project. In this analysis it is important to keep in mind that, in a Gramscian sense, the Zimbabwean crisis has also resulted in the reconstruction of the post-colonial state in order to provide both the modality for and consolidate the accumulation drive of the ruling party elite in the country (Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004).

However the manner in which the ideological battle has been fought by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front [ZANU PF] as a party and a state is of particular importance in trying to understand the ways in which a beleaguered state is attempting not only to extend its dominant economic and political objectives, but also its

...intellectual and moral unity, posing all questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate level but on a ‘universal’ plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental group over a series of subordinate groups (Gramsci 1971: 182).

For the manner in which Mugabe has articulated the Zimbabwean crisis has impacted not only on the social forces in the country but also on the African continent and in the diaspora. Such an ambitious political outreach demands that we view the Zimbabwean state as more than a “simple, dominative or instrumental model of state power,” but as a state with a more complex and multi-dimensional political strategy (Hall 1996: 429; Hall 1980).

In this multi-dimensional strategy, the state has monopolised the national media to develop an intellectual and cultural strategy that has resulted in a persistent bombardment of the populace with a regular and repeated series of messages. Moreover this strategy has been located within a particular historical discourse around national liberation and redemption, which has also sought to capture a broader Pan Africanist and anti-imperialist audience. A key tenet of this redemptionist logic has been the reawakening of the Zimbabwean nation from the colonial nightmare into a more essentialist African consciousness, defined by the select bearers of the liberation legacy. As Vimbai Chivaura, a media ideologue of the ruling party expressed it:

...right now we are destroyed spiritually. We are suffering from what psychologists say (sic) somnambulism. We are really sleepwalking, walking corpses, zombies.... We are carrying other people's world view (Gandhi and Jambaya 2002: 10).

Moreover in articulating this ideological strategy the ruling party has drawn on deep historical reservoirs of antipathy to colonial and racial subjugation in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa and Africa more generally, and on its complex inflections in the diaspora. Thus the Mugabe message is no mere case of peddling a particular form of false consciousness, but it carries a broader and often visceral resonance, even as it as it draws criticisms for the coercive forms of its mobilisation. Additionally for many progressive African intellectuals there is an internal tension over the content and form of politics of Mugabe's Pan Africanist message, particularly in the face of the of the dominant message of empire offered by the Bush/Blair axis. Thus within Zimbabwe the opposition to Mugabe is not only expressed in the political polarisation in the country, but often in the more complex forms in which the nationalist messages are interpellated within 'our selves', given both the historical resonance of the messages and the unpalatable coercive forms of its delivery. It is also a feature of this ideology that it attempts to naturalise the unity of the nation by concealing the internal ethnic tensions within the polity and the reality of Shona political dominance.

Nation and Race

In Zimbabwe the state has a monopoly control over the electronic media through such laws as the Broadcasting Services Act (2001) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2002). Through