Interventions

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Magic, Realism and the State in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Madiba 'magic'

In April 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) won an overwhelming majority in South Africa’s first democratic elections and sought to build a Government of National Unity (GNU). The National Party (NP) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) joined the ANC in the GNU. In the economic sphere, capital and labour were ‘locked-in’ to corporatist institutions mediated by the state.

On 10 May 1994, Mandela was inaugurated as President. Before our eyes the racial hierarchy of apartheid morphed into the ‘rainbow nation of god’. The twentieth century had come late to South Africa. But in this time of miracles, would not the last be first? Indeed, while South Africa was a new nation in 1994, it was a uniquely powerful one. Not in military might but in symbolic might. If ever there was a chance to re-imagine the conditions of existence for a ‘Third-World’ state, to engender an economic ethics in a post-Communist world or, simply, to introduce honesty into domestic and international
politics, then the Mandela government in the months after liberation had this opportunity.

While the right-wing threat, jittery investors and bureaucratic hostility could account for some inhibition in not opting for the most radical outcomes, the ANC set its sights, laudably, on an economic programme that was ‘people-centred’, labelled the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP had many of its more radical features shorn by 1994. But, in an era of rampaging neoliberalism, where it was said that history was made from the ‘outside’, in South Africa, the RDP was commended as an example of how history, without ignoring global forces, could be determined from the inside.

Exactly two weeks after his inauguration, Mandela addressed the ‘liberated’ parliament for the first time. Mandela’s speech sparkled with references to RDP. He had a commandment for every department of his government. Healthcare shall be accessible in line with the RDP; education shall be affordable; the labour market shall not shed jobs. Mandela went so far as to say that the liberation struggle was meaningless unless the government stuck to people-centred policies. In every way, the RDP was the ‘centre piece of what this Government will seek to achieve, the focal point on which our attention will be continuously focused’.

Importantly for Mandela in 1994, the RDP was a real policy with actual targets. The RDP was no mere guideline or wish-list. As Mandela himself promised in his maiden speech: ‘We [will] integrate the objectives of our Reconstruction and Development Plan within government expenditure and not treat them as incidental tasks of government, marginalized to the status of mere additions to the level of expenditure’. Taking Mandela at his word, the RDP was the framework for public policy that would put people at the centre.

But, soon, that argument came to be inverted.

Government ministers and big business preached that the RDP did not pay the god of the market enough heed. In the era of globalisation, capital moves. Fast. Greater cognisance would need to be taken of the ‘outside’ forces. By not abiding by the commandment: ‘Thou shall make maximum profits’, South Africa ran the risk of being abandoned in the wilderness for another forty years. And, so, the RDP became apocryphal. A new gospel was preached,

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1 Mandela 1994.