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South Africa

# Nationalism and patriotism: the opium of the masses

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**To say that the Republic of South Africa has been dealing with an internal image crisis for the last decade of the “post-apartheid” years would be putting it mildly. The overwhelming national attitude has been disaffection with the political class. This class consists of an incompetent ruling government and a set of opposition parties whose own mediocrity has made the entire electoral system seem to many to be worthless.**

The country is incapacitated by a longstanding failure to deal with structural and societal issues that have marred the democratic experience. The mismanagement of these issues is evident in increasing wealth inequality, racial hostilities across the country, and ongoing violence in various social contexts. This mismanagement should no longer come across as ineffectual but genuine attempts by our leaders to alleviate these problems. It is now certainly a deliberate effort to keep these conditions in place, so that they may continue to extract from them.

## Does patriotism exist?

The imagining of South Africa as a beacon of hope and progressiveness for the world to marvel at has dwindled under the weight of horrors stemming from neoliberal capitalism, heterosexism, anti-Black racism, queerphobia, ableism, xenophobia and other systemic forms of oppression. It goes without saying that thereâ€™s very little for us to feel patriotic about in this current moment. Yet if this description largely sums up what the country has looked like after the tyrannical apartheid regime, one must wonder if patriotism ever truly existed outside of the celebratory moments over achievements on international stages. Furthermore, it becomes more crucial to ask oneself what it means, for colonised people especially, to be patriotic in a settler colonial state.

For the most part this question, which isnâ€™t new, has felt less complicated when coming from African descendants of slaves who live in settler colonies that arenâ€™t their ancestral homes. They have been impacted by the psychological phenomenon, theorised by W.E.B. Du Bois, known as â€œdouble consciousnessâ€ â€” this sense of always looking at oneâ€™s self through the eyes of others, of measuring oneâ€™s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pityâ€.

Itâ€™s not as simple to grapple with, however, when the colonised have an ostensible hegemony over the political and cultural landscape.

If structural power has not changed hands and the colonial institutions have not been entirely removed, then what exactly are we expected to be patriotic towards?

## Nationalism is deliberate confusion

[In a previous article I wrote](#) about the need to question the framework of South African exceptionalism. We see it sustained in the obnoxious examples of chauvinism that weâ€™ve become used to seeing. And we also see it in the seemingly innocent state-sponsored messages implying that we should remain â€œproudly South Africanâ€. This prevailing nationalist discourse has had disastrous consequences not only for non-nationals but also for South Africans who donâ€™t *look* South African (whatever that may mean). The aim of the article was to get more of us to

recognise that this nationalist discourse is one of the outcomes of the nation building project itself.

The construction of a post democratic South Africa, in the image of upholding the nation state, has not only been dangerous for those who don't fall within the arbitrary definitions of nationality. It has also been harmful for anyone who isn't a part of the ruling class in this country. People of all backgrounds are misled into believing that as citizens we have equal claim to a social order that only uplifts a minority. The negative responses directed towards Enoch Mpianzi's family over their call to close down the notorious Parktown Boys High School, led Naledi Mbaba to accurately point out that being South African means "having a false sense of class solidarity with white people" in the aims of protecting "the institutions they've built (for themselves)."

Much as how race became useful in the obfuscation of class consciousness, a national identity within a liberal democracy is utilised to accomplish the same goal.

The rainbow nation mythology wasn't just helpful in reducing racial differences in South Africa to superficial terms; the idea presented a view within which the class interests of the previously disenfranchised and the class interests of the bourgeois elite were no longer in conflict, but coalesced into one, to legitimise the capitalist state. When Black middle class South Africans form a xenophobic movement around the desire to be prioritised over immigrants, it represents a failure to recognise that certain South Africans are already being placed first. And they will continue to be placed first so long as the policies which govern our lives exist only to serve monopoly capital.

## A time of neocolonial fascism

In the book *How Britain Rules Africa*, George Padmore makes this assessment of South Africa: "unity of race as against class accounts for the widespread racial chauvinism which permeates all strata of the European population, and makes the Union the world's classic Fascist State." The Trinidadian writer wrote extensively on the mechanisms of "neocolonial fascism" and how it plays out specifically in settler colonial states.

Expanding on his views, it is important that we come to terms with the fact that we are now living in a time of neocolonial fascism, which not only terrorises African and South Asian communities, but targets the majority Black and poor population of this country. The countless scenes of state-sanctioned violence – on working class protestors, or against civilians as unthreatening as children, or conducted during unlawful evictions (what are lawful evictions when all property is theft?) – undercut every notion of South Africa being a democracy.

Fascism is not just limited to instances of repression, which somehow have not stopped becoming the norm after apartheid was constitutionally dismantled. As radical activist George Jackson wrote in *Blood In My Eye*, fascism can also be defined by "each economic reform that perpetuates ruling class hegemony" and that is intentionally "disguised as a positive gain for the upthrusting masses." The neoliberal policies enacted by every ANC administration since 1994 have offered no material difference to the majority of those who lived under the rule of the National Party.

Unifying people across racial lines on a national basis has not just resulted in the harmful othering of non-nationals, it has placated us so that we don't think about how our lives are completely in the service of capital. If we don't begin to see the generally accepted modes of living – race, nation, capital – for what they truly are, we can never change the conditions they produce that keep us further away from knowing what it means to belong to a democracy.

Source *Amandla* 73/74 December 2020 available [AIDC](#).

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