

# South Africa's ten years of democracy: development and media discourse

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*Newspapers play an important role in selecting, defining and communicating pertinent social issues, especially during changing times. Yet, in the case of the transition to a new dispensation in South Africa, it seems that there has been very little sustained analysis of the news media in terms of its approach to social change before 1994. Hence the apparent lack of vigorous public engagement about the interplay between contending relations of power and the way that conflictive relations are being dealt with in terms of either maintaining or changing the status quo. For example, even in instances where popular discourses were in favour of changing the apartheid order to a more humane society, it would appear that social change was discussed in a way that meant that any alternative understanding was based on an a priori set of assumptions about what would be a suitable socio-economic order for South Africa. Hence the contradiction between election promises of a 'better life for all' and the current increasing levels of poverty in South Africa.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: PLANNING AS A REFLEXIVE MODE TO UNDERSTAND DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Name the unnameable,  
Point out frauds,  
Take sides,  
Start arguments,  
Shape the world and stop it from going to sleep. (Rushdie, 1988: 97)

And lo, amidst the celebrations of ten years of democracy in South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) announces the country's 'Roll of Shame': the ten poorest municipalities, where a household of four members earn below the poverty line of R1 290 a month (*Sunday Times*, 4 July 2004). According to the HSRC, the Eastern Cape Province has 70 per cent of the poorest municipalities and up to 84 per cent of the households exist below the poverty line. This is a province where people often sell marijuana (*dagga*) to eke out a living, while the mayor, who allegedly stole R500 000 from the Ntabankulu municipality, drives around in expensive cars, flaunting his wealth and showing off his expensive gold jewellery. This sordid state of affairs raises the obvious question: what is development and how is it being represented in the newspapers of the new South Africa? Pilger (2004: 111), quoting the US journalist, TD Allman, reminds us that 'Genuinely objective journalism not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right. It is compelling not only today, but stands the test of time. It is validated not only by "reliable resources", but by the unfolding of history. It is journalism that ten, twenty, fifty years after the fact still holds up a true and intelligent mirror to events'.

Here it is important to point out that this article does not focus on news media as such, but on specific newspapers. Since the research topic covers a particular period in South

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African history, 1994–2004, reference to international literature is selective, rather than comprehensive. The specifics of journalism both before and during the democratising phase of the South African society are sui generis and do not necessarily allow for universal generalisations across differing social formations, whether in the developing or developed countries. Thus, to grasp the specificity of journalism and journalistic perspectives during this particularly dynamic period in South Africa, it is important to note the contextual specifics of the South African newspaper environment (Tomaselli, 2004). With a view to enhancing contextual clarity, several points should be highlighted. Historically, the political economy of the media in South Africa has largely been influenced, if not shaped, by the mainly white-controlled news media industry, where the mainstream newspapers have predominantly served the interests of the ‘white’ capitalist class. At the same time left-leaning newspapers, such as the *Rand Daily Mail* (banned in 1977), its replacement, the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, together with a range of defunct liberation struggle newspapers such as *Die Vrye Weekblad*, *Grassroots* and *The New Nation*, sought to present the ‘black’ perspective on South African society (Tomaselli, 2004). Since the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the unbanning of South African liberation movements in South Africa in 1990, the general focus and discourse on social change experienced, likewise, a discernible change (Jacobs, 1999).

Media reform started in South Africa before the birth of formal democracy in the country in April 1994 (Jacobs, 1999). There are currently at least three black-owned companies with significant print media interests, such as New African Investments (NAIL) and Johnnic (Tomaselli, 2004). Ironically, in post-apartheid South Africa the globalised/corporatised print media, under the direction of media mogul, Anthony O’Reilly, dominates the newspaper landscape, while the alternative press has ceased to exist (Tomaselli, 1997).

Thus, since the 1990s both left-leaning and mainstream newspapers were not merely reporting societal issues but their perspectives increasingly focused on socio-economic and political policies that were meant to introduce and ‘safeguard’ democracy in South Africa (Tomaselli, 2004). At the risk of over-generalisation it can be suggested that mainstream newspapers, while accepting the need to extend political rights to blacks, were not, however, equally in favour of economic reform. Left-leaning newspapers, on the other hand, did not merely favour political rights for black people but also a deliberate redistribution of the wealth of the country to address centuries of accumulative socio-economic neglect (Jacobs, 1999). It is partly this hiatus between black expectations, as represented by left-leaning newspapers and white conservatism (fear?), represented by mainstream newspapers that this article analyses. The post-apartheid newspaper environment has certainly changed significantly, as borne out by the birth of the tabloids such as the *Voice* and *The Sun*. Yet some other newspapers have seemingly become more elitist, concentrating increasingly on their commercial success rather than focusing on the socio-economic conditions of the poor, mostly black citizens (Berger, 2001). In the early years of the transition, newspapers were still more closely aligned with the political positions they occupied during apartheid (Jacobs, 1999). Many of them have undergone shifts in political or ideological orientation. Subsequently the editorial staff of these newspapers have also undergone significant changes, resulting in shifts in discourses. Their subtleties and nuances influence media discourse, as well as the structures (ownership, and so forth) that encompass them (Tomaselli, 2004). There thus exist ideological differences between them – even if they contribute to the same discourse.

During the transition period newspaper discourse was extremely cautious, if not mistrusting of the type of economic policies that they have expected an African Nationalist Congress (ANC) government to espouse. Most of these newspapers were under white owner- and editorship, resulting in a skewed picture of South African reality. Since then, the media environment has seen some significant changes, even though the mainstream media remain in favour of a very limited economic transition along neoliberal lines (Jacobs, 1999). Thus, in terms of newspaper debates on socio-economic change, topics, issues, viewpoints and discourses are often restricted or simply biased in favour of the *status quo*. For example, debates on what/who is news and the prominence given to particular events, situations, policy choices and spokespersons, rather than to counter-examples, often deprive debates of the required analytical rigour (Bennett et al., 2006). In the case of South Africa, for example, economic debates are almost always framed in terms of how government policies and regulation stifle business and therefore economic growth. This raises the obvious question: is lack of economic growth actually a factor only of government policies and regulation? Is regulation *per se* anti-business?

Consequently, in the last couple of years, a range of social movements have arisen that challenge the dominant development discourse. These movements have also had an interesting relationship with the news media, sometimes creating media themselves (e.g. on the internet) in response to lack of coverage or negative coverage in mainstream media. Notably, the *Mail & Guardian* has been an exception in so far as it has followed the development of these movements. However, in 2004 the editor, Ferial Haffajee, chastised these movements in her Harold Wolpe lecture at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) for exaggerating statistics, and indulging in alarmism (Haffajee, 2004).

The interest in newspaper reports on social change in South Africa poses fundamental methodological challenges because the researcher must ensure that sources of information are reliable and that, as far as possible, results based on such sources are accurate and replicable (Miller & Brewer, 2003). Methodologically, asking a series of questions about a particular society could be a reliable way of eliciting appropriate information on a particular topic in a specific society (Zelizer, 2004). Questions on socio-economic and political change in South Africa that interest the author include: What is said? How is it said? Why is it said? What are the assumptions about social change? What are the apparent omissions? These questions have been grouped into three categories. First, thematic concerns, i.e. social change as a broad societal issue. Secondly, contextual concerns, i.e. specific stories on economic issues. Thirdly, discursive positioning, i.e. how newspapers phrase their particular discussions and analysis of specific concerns. With a view to approximating to a reasonable measure of objectivity and reliability, the author decided to investigate more than one newspaper; at least three dailies and two weeklies. The daily newspapers were the *Cape Times*, the *Cape Argus* and the *Burger (Citizen)* and the weekly newspapers the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail & Guardian* from 1989 until 2004. However, this focus on newspapers does not imply that news media have the ability to dictate willy-nilly their specific concepts-cum-values to society. However, what does seem to be beyond dispute is that newspapers do highlight specific issues in society; issues which, in the case of South Africa, often resonate with the larger public discourse on social change.

The remainder of this article is divided into four interrelated sections: Section 2: Constructing the discourse of social change: do newspapers play a role?; Section 3: The discourse of delegitimation: detailing apartheid oppression.; Section 4: The discourse of elimination: framing the development debates; and Section 5: In lieu of a conclusion: let us start afresh?

## 2. CONSTRUCTING THE DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL CHANGE: DO NEWSPAPERS PLAY A ROLE?

Unemployment is soaring, poverty is spreading, social dislocation is increasing, criminality is rising, gangsterism is thriving and political opportunism is being celebrated as a sign of a maturing democracy (*Cape Times*, 13 February 2004). Thus announce the headlines of recent newspaper reports on the social conditions in the new South Africa. In the midst of such gloomy news, ordinary people recall their history of resistance against the previous order (Bond, 2004a). They recall their heroic victories over the vicious apartheid state, reminding them afresh of the 'power of the poor in history' (Gutierrez, 1988). It is precisely this 'power' to organise, to mobilise, to dramatise appalling social conditions, that provides them anchorage when the paralysing reality of a deepening scepticism and despair can so easily prove too overwhelming (*Cape Times*, 15 October 2002). Hence in their nascent organisational trenches they embrace their structural marginality and alienation to voice their political discontent (Desai, 2002). They are introducing, thereby, a vitality of purpose and direction in anti-privatisation and anti-eviction fora from the crime-infested, ethnic enclaves of the Cape Flats to the richly textured historical experiences of Soweto (Ellis-Jones, 2003). Indeed, in increasing numbers, the unemployed, homeless and poor in South Africa are constructing their own discourse of memory (Ndungane, 2003). In solidarity and through struggle they dramatise many a broken election promise of 'a better life for all' (Bond, 2004a). In so doing, they are not merely delineating the geography of ghettoisation and material neglect, but they are also silhouetting, in graphic terms, the architecture of fear, the quasi-militarisation of neighbourhoods and the *de facto* existence of gated cities – all post-apartheid forms of spatial engineering apparently designed to guard the ultra-rich against the ultra-poor (Peet, 2002; Bond, 2004a,b).

Is this the miracle of 1994, turned nightmare in 2006, a mere 12 years since the world press started to 'sing the praises' of the New South Africa? Yet, miracles do tend to turn into gnawing problems, especially when they are based on a partial understanding of society, its tensions, contradictions, fissures and struggles (Mamdani, 1996). And, in the case of South Africa, the miracle was deliberately constructed in response to the great expectations of the investment community who apparently made all manner of promises if the country were to avoid a racial conflagration (Bond, 2000a,b). Yet, to all intents and purposes, it would seem that a development tragedy of some sorts is taking place (Hart, 2002). The discourse of imaging, projecting, and dictating a specific development trajectory, along particular ideological lines, appears to be unable to contend with the prevailing socio-economic challenges inherited from the apartheid order (Alexander, 2002).

It is precisely this existential problematic of the structural hiatus between the human condition in its experiential specificity and its semantically inscribed discursive forms that enjoys elaborate attention in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse* (1970). Foucault identifies three modes of intervention that operate simultaneously to influence, if not determine, the overall nature, form and substance of information/knowledge about a particular situation: prohibitions, simplistic binary oppositions such as good/bad, sanity/madness, and the will to know or the will to truth.

To be explicit, this article hypothesises that newspapers play an important role in selecting, defining, and communicating pertinent issues in society, especially in periods of socio-economic and political flux. However, it would appear that very few sustained

analyses have thus far been performed around the general discursive practices of news media in delineating the overall parameters of social change prior to the negotiated settlement in South Africa in 1994 (Tomaselli, 2004). Hence the apparent lack of vigorous engagement in the public domain *vis-à-vis* the complex interplay between conflictive relations of power and the means through which these conflictive relations are being revealed, interpreted, communicated, and embraced/contested with regard to specific socio-economic and political strategies of either maintaining or changing the status quo (Steenveld, 2004). For example, even in instances where popular discourses were in favour of changing the repressive apartheid order to a more humane society, the terms, forms, dimensions and substance of social change were, none the less, couched in such a way that any alternative understanding and forms of development in relation to the human condition were based on an a priori set of assumptions and predispositions with regard to the suitable order for South Africa (Murray, 1994). In this instance, newspapers have not merely informed the debate around a peaceful negotiated settlement in South Africa, but frequently, as will be highlighted in this article, appear to have contributed substantially to the permissible development scenarios for a post-apartheid order (Bond, 2004a,b). This ideologically driven stance, often in concert with individuals/groups belonging to particular political tendencies and formations was, and perhaps still is, most pronounced in relation to the role of the state and/or market in society (Marais, 2001). It is not the intention of this article to review all the literature on the state/market debates. Rather it seeks to cite examples from the mainstream press in the period immediately prior to the unbanning of the liberation movements on 2 February 1990 and the formal announcement of the search for a new South Africa, in order to indicate the one-dimensional, and thus simplistic nature of the debates in the mainstream press *vis-à-vis* the role of the state in society (Barchiesi & Bramble, 2003). Accordingly, this article hypothesises that the forms, dimensions and substances of policies, institutions, and mechanisms which have become a common feature in the new South Africa after the first democratic elections in 1994, derive, at least in part, their conceptual and theoretical validation from the debates that were conducted in the mainstream print media prior to 1990 (Alexander, 2002).

In other words, print media often do influence the trajectory and substance of debates in both civil and political society (Orgeret, 2004). It can, therefore, be suggested that it is important that, claims of journalistic independence and impartiality aside, it often happens that the media in general and, in the parlance of Noam Chomsky and his colleague, Edward Herman (2001), newspapers in particular, are not merely in the business of disseminating the news. On the contrary, they are perhaps first and foremost in the business of manufacturing the consent for particular notions of truth, justice and peace (Williams, 2000a). It is precisely in this context of constructing specific forms of truths and truth-claims that the newspapers play an important role in structuring the debate around state-driven, as opposed to market-assisted, development and market-driven, as opposed to state-assisted, development programmes, as evidenced by a random selection of newspaper articles from the mainstream press (Harvey, 1999). Hence, it is only by highlighting the structural links of the present order with the past, especially in relation to mainstream ideologically driven debates, that it would be possible to understand the potentially catalytic role of newspapers *vis-à-vis* the specific forms, content and dimensions of particular development frameworks, scenarios, projects and programmes (Zelizer, 2004). And, in the South African context, where economic and political power was wielded for almost 400 years by a minority 'white' group, issues such as media ownership, the illiteracy of most black people in the

commercial languages of English/Afrikaans, and various forms of 'white' racism against the 'black' majority, all have an impact, in differentiated ways, on how the media report on societal issues (De Beer, 2000). Yet, caution must be exercised against a reductionist, monological and overly linear reading of material practices (e.g. neoliberalism in free market terms) and the particular ideological bent of a specific newspaper (Harvey, 2003).

A more nuanced understanding and interpretation of the role of newspapers, both prior to and after the unbanning of the liberation movements on 2 February 1990, is needed for at least two major reasons. First, newspapers are not the only means through which ideas and perspectives on society are relayed, even though they certainly do constitute an important purveyor of what is the truth about a society in general and the world at large (Fairclough, 2001). Secondly, newspapers, for the sake of their own survival, depend for their funding and overall viability on access to the communities they serve and, as such, they must at least appear to be as inclusive and impartial as possible – even though they are frequently directly responsible for the type of image they have within a particular constituency, for example as either conservative/liberal or reactionary/progressive (Herman & Chomsky, 2001). Indeed, notions of liberal and progressive often serve merely as convenient covers to propagate the most dubious ideas and perspectives on specific planning strategies (Mokanyane, 1994). However, in the absence of counter-hegemonic perspectives, questionable views, if repeated with regularity in a range of fora, tend to assume the status of an eternal truth (Bourdieu, 2003). It is precisely this catalytic, potentially change-inducing, role of newspapers that should be harnessed in the quest to accent and implement policies and practices that can materially benefit, on a sustainable basis, the unemployed, homeless and destitute in South Africa and beyond (Williams, 2005; Shepperson & Tomaselli, 2001).

### **3. THE DISCOURSE OF DELEGITIMATION: DETAILING APARTHEID OPPRESSION**

The South African State, through a range of institutional and extra-institutional practices, during both its colonial and apartheid modes of existence and operation, introduced and applied a range of systematic practices that deprived the black majority of their basic rights (Mamdani, 2000). To the extent that newspapers highlighted such exploitative relations of power of the oppressive state apparatus (military, police, courts and so forth) they contributed substantially to the legitimacy crisis of the apartheid state (Asmal et al., 1996). By extension, however, it would seem that the same newspapers failed dismally to highlight the dialectical relationship between oppressive and exploitative relations of power *vis-à-vis* the black majority and the associated material privileging of the white minority (cf. Tomaselli et al., 1987); thus, the current socio-economic profile of a country that is the second most unequal society in the world (cf. Marais, 2001). Indeed, the extant literature suggests that how newspaper articles frame topical debates does influence, for better or worse, the trajectory of policy discourse within and across a range of socio-economic and political sectors in a particular society (Phelan, 1987).

Here it is posited that prior to 1990 South Africa experienced an organic crisis (Williams, 1989). The negotiated settlement in 1994, served to 'mediate' the tensions, contradictions, conflicts and struggles associated with the colonial-cum-apartheid history of the country (Asmal et al., 1996). This means, among other things, that the structural fluidity, multi-layered problems and overall social turmoil had to be recognised in any resultant policy framework that sought to 'prepare' the country for a transition to a new order. It

would, however, appear that, while the print media recognised the organic crisis, the material antecedents engendering such a multilevelled crisis, they seemingly did not inform the operational concepts, procedural analyses and empirical substance of many a newspaper report as to the form, substance and overall dimensions of the eventual economic dispensation in a post-apartheid order (Alexander, 2002). Here it can be argued that, if a post-apartheid order were to represent the departure from oppressive and exploitative relations of power, especially in relation to the collective Other (i.e. the black majority), then several remedial steps had to be taken (Bond, 1991). Specific measures would have to be taken to ensure that there exist the apposite material conditions, social relations and overall psychological infrastructure of human solidarity and support that would make it possible for black people to claim and translate into a post-apartheid dividend the series of rights that were to be ensconced in a future constitution of the country (Williams, 2000).

Social relations do not exist in an historical vacuum (Gramsci, 1971). On the contrary, they emerge from within the very contradictions, tensions, fissures, conflicts and struggles prevalent in the broader society (Wolpe, 1988). In the case of South Africa, prevailing social relations assume(d) a distinctly racially driven profile of inclusion/exclusion in the corridors of socio-economic-political power (Adam & Adam, 2000). Thus, for example, a content analysis of a random selection of newspaper reports, immediately before the unbanning of the liberation movements on 2 February 1990, suggests that apartheid was a totalising ideologically driven policy as it affected literally every sector of the South African society (Williams, 2000). It violated the most basic rights of most South Africans in areas such as freedom of expression, education, labour conditions and so on, as borne out by the ensuing press reports. For example, more than 75 000 people had been detained without trial since 1960, 52 000 of them between 1985 and 1990. By the end of 1988, 35 000 people had been detained at various times since the first state of emergency in July 1985. Even upon their release from prison in April 1989, 65% of the former detainees were heavily restricted, i.e. their civil liberties were drastically curtailed in an effort to deprive community organisations of their leadership skills. At the end of 1989 there were 572 restrictees in South Africa (*Cape Times*, 28 December 1989). These statistics do not merely capture the magnitude of repressive relations prior to the birth of the new order in South Africa. On the contrary, they also indicate the overall institutional support that would be needed in the new dispensation to effectively address the psychology of distrust, fear and overall trauma (associated with the old regime) so as to allow ordinary people to claim, access and affirm their basic rights in the new order (Asmal et al., 1996). Indeed, any economic arrangement in a post-apartheid society would have to address the multiple effects of centuries of systematic oppression and denial of opportunities to the majority of people in the subcontinent (Goldstone, 2000).

The preceding statistics reflect the materiality of the contradictions, tensions and conflicts within and across most public sectors in South Africa (Goetz, 2000). Hence the nature of the organic crisis that faced South Africa prior to 1990, compounded by conflictive labour/industrial relations as made clear by the *Weekly Mail* (21 December 1989–18 January 1990). Through a systematic analysis of the overall socio-economic trends in the country the paper revealed that from 1980 until the end of 1988 the real gross domestic product (GDP) of South Africa trundled along, growing on average less than 1 per cent per annum (0.09%). Over this same period the population grew on an average by over 2.5 per cent per year, causing living standards to fall in real terms.

Average annual per capita growth fell over the preceding three decades: from 3 per cent between 1960 and 1969 to 0.5 per cent between 1970 and 1979 and -1.1 per cent between 1980 and 1987. Thus, since the 1960s the living standard of South African workers consistently declined and their overall social conditions became unbearable as the inflation rate was running at least 20 per cent.

The *Weekly Mail*, (21 December 1989 to 18 January 1990) listed other major labour conflicts in South Africa in 1989 as well, namely:

- a strike by 14 000 motor workers in August
- a series of national strikes in the retail sector
- a wage strike by 8000 workers at De Beers diamond mines
- a three-week strike by some 1200 farm workers
- strikes at Mobil refineries and depots in March 1989 by members of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union and at Goodyear in the Eastern Cape by Numsa members in August 1989 (*Cape Times*, 16 October 1989; *Cape Times*, 25 November 1989; *Cape Times*, 30 December 1989).

The preceding newspaper reports show that during apartheid the South African social formation was, and to a great extent still is, characterised by multiple contradictions, tensions, conflicts and struggles – a veritable arena of contestation (Williams, 1989). Hence the question arises: would this overall context of political repression, material exploitation and social marginalisation inform newspaper debates on the form, substance and dimensions of the economic order in a post-apartheid democratic order in South Africa? The ensuing section explores this question by examining the manner in which the debates on a new socio-economic order had been framed by the mainstream media prior to the abolition of the apartheid order. It specifically argues that through a strategic process of interposition and nullification of competing socio-historical analyses of the South African social formation, newspapers promoted a monological, linear and largely unidimensional discourse on social change via the ‘free market’.

#### 4. THE DISCOURSE OF ELIMINATION: FRAMING THE DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

If it is historically true that the South African state did something special against its black citizens in the past (by legally oppressing and exploiting them), then by logical inference one could postulate that a democratic state would have to do something special for them so to ensure, in a democratic order, a semblance of structural equity between the apartheid beneficiaries, the whites, and the historically marginalised and excluded, the black majority (Lehurere, 2000). Indeed, as argued by Melissa Steyn, Director of the Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies at the University of Cape Town: ‘After 400 years of conquest and oppression – taking people’s land, destroying their livelihoods and families, subjecting them to grossly unfair labour practices, and not educating them to take their place in the modern world – surely we can’t now simply say it was all just a mistake that whites have no responsibility and can simply leave, taking the assets we have accumulated here over generations?’ (*Cape Times*, 25 November 2002).

In simple terms, that would mean taking historical precedent seriously. For example, two leading Afrikaners, Sampie Terreblanche (2002: 272–275) in *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* and Herman Giliomee (2003: 433–439) in his treatise, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, emphasise that the South

African state provided a range of development programmes to assist poor whites during the 1930s depression, and then during the racist order between 1948 and 1994 enacted a range of legal measures to preclude direct competition in the workplace between black and white (in the favour of the latter group) (Terreblanche, 2002). Such evidence of direct state intervention in the economy would have a logical extension in a new South Africa. This means that in a democratic order it could legitimately be expected that the state use extraordinary measures to support especially poor, black citizens to enable them to meaningfully access, participate in and benefit from the human and natural resources of their country (Bond, 1991; Murray, 1994). In practical terms this means, among other considerations, that the state, at least to some extent, would have to direct and drive the economy to ensure the construction of development programmes that could adequately, and in a sustainable manner, address the immense socio-economic problems that have largely been inherited from the former racist order (Terreblanche, 2002). Yet, it would seem that newspapers, despite the historical precedence for such state-driven measures in favour of the socio-economic upliftment of certain sections of the population, deliberately under-emphasised the historical precedent of a benevolent state (Berger, 2004). On the contrary, through a range of one-sided perspectives and interventions they seem to preclude a proper debate of such state-driven measures (Tomaselli, 2004). Thus, at least to some extent they contribute to the ideological triumph of so-called market capitalism and the resultant privatisation-cum-restructuring of state driven enterprises, with the concomitant erosion of welfare programmes and related social spending on the basic needs of ordinary people (Tomaselli, 1997, 2004).

Even so, as an outsider and observer of the recent socio-political developments South Africa, William Waterman, Jr (2000: 7), attorney-at-law in New York, remarks that 'unless there is significant change in the economic system, there is no way the promise of equality underlying the political changes can be realised'. And yet, it would seem that already before 1990 the form, substance and dimensions of the debate *vis-à-vis* economic development in South Africa had already been largely determined by discursive frameworks constructed, mediated, propagated and advocated mainly by the print media. This would then leave the economic relations of power largely intact in a post-apartheid South Africa (Terreblanche, 2002). For example, a reading of a random selection of newspaper articles in 1989 suggests that journalists, editors, commentators and all manner of experts advanced the blanket idea that, in the wake of the disintegration and collapse of Stalinist economies in the former Union of Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR), any questioning of the dominant economic system in the West and, by extension, in South Africa, was, therefore, an anathema (Amin, 2003). This means that newspapers do not necessarily depart from ideological stances associated with the past, but rather offer a continuation of existing certainties in terms of material dividends and social securities derived from the prevailing 'order of things' (Berger, 2004).

This apparent need for ideological certainty perhaps explains the almost virulent attacks by newspapers at the dawn of the new order on the sub-continent when suggestions were advanced to review/reform/change/supersede/abolish the prevailing economic system, which until then (hitherto?) had been (is?) too closely linked with the history of colonialism/apartheid/discrimination/exploitation in South Africa (Phelan, 1987). Consider, for example, the vitriolic attack by the *Cape Times* (1 December 1989) on the then

quasi-socialist perspectives of ANC leader Govan Mbeki provided during his keynote address at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) on 29 November 1989. Under the caption *Socialist masquerade* it said:

No Mr Mbeki, neither the Afrikaner nor any other group has been recruited to defend exploitation of the black majority by capitalism in South Africa; rather all races here have suffered as a consequence of government's socialist policies masquerading under the guise of capitalism. The East Germans, Czechoslovakians, Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, and citizens of the Soviet Union's own states have learned to their cost that government control of the economy inevitably means control of their lives, and at dismally low living standards. Afrikaner socialism has indeed been as inequitable and unworkable as the systems practised in Eastern Europe; the State President tacitly recognises as much in his assurances on accelerated privatisation. Black socialism would be no better.

The above editorial was presumably a rebuttal of the assertion by Mbeki that: 'Capital is the principal historic beneficiary of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. As capitalists were few in number, millions were recruited to defend the interests of property owners, including the Afrikaner people. By that act, they put themselves in a situation in which they join big capital as junior partners.' Here it is important to point out that it is not so much the rejection *per se* of alternative frames of reference that constitutes the subject of concern, but rather the absence of a more nuanced consideration of the context of human activity in a post-apartheid order and thus the obvious need for structural differentiation of the competing development objectives and related scenarios (Moll et al., 1991). Surely what has to be accepted is that there is no one-to-one correspondence between preferred propositions and a particular social reality, but rather an imputed relationship between approximate realities and suggested planning programmes (Hardt & Negri, 2000). In short, the human condition in its variegated experiential forms and dimensions, especially in South Africa, does not allow for pure and simple, determinable outcomes (however sacrosanct and dogmatic the prescribed market-driven strategies) for several reasons.

First, ideally an alternative set of signifying information systems would be preferable to determine the manner in which tensions are attenuated and related struggles for human survival in the marketplace of being and ideas are handled and resolved (Foucault, 1970).

Secondly, empowering people who have been excluded from privilege through historical practices presupposes the presence of an enlightened understanding of the 'public good', of inclusive and safe living environments, where humans experience a sense of belonging (Gill, 2003). Newspapers seldom make the connection between generational privilege and historical neglect and between existential suffering and historical duty to alleviate such suffering (Nieumann & Hsiao, 2004).

Thirdly, people often access recorded snippets of the past in terms of what they prefer to know about that past and in terms of their current interests (Bourdieu, 2003). Here news media can ensure that the different versions and perspectives on both the past and present are debated in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Fourthly, sensitivity towards specific occurrences and experiences allows news media to present a balanced account of what has happened in the past (Bircham & Charlton, 2002). In this sense, human experiences are shared within and across different memories and intellectual landscapes (of reflection and interpretation) (Capra, 1997).

Fifthly, any version of reality is inextricably linked to the dialectics of competing particularities within the historical matrix of human experience and reflection (Baudrillard, 1983). Reflexive thinking recognises biases and slippages and is thus not frozen and reified into a specific mantra of human development (e.g. either state-driven or market-assisted or market-driven and state-assisted development) (Panitch & Leys, 1999). Hence the question arises: are South African newspapers sufficiently reflective in their coverage of the South African story? For example, how do they present specific planning scenarios in the transition to the new South Africa? A glance at both the English and Afrikaans medium press allows some insights.

The English-medium press did not differ at all from the Afrikaans press in equating the horrors and demise of the Stalinist bureaucracies with the practices of communism, and therefore, the rejection of any critique of the prevailing economic system. Compare, for example, the editorial of the *Burger (Nation)* in relation to the revolutionary insurrection in Romania towards the end of 1989, where the lessons for South Africa have been reduced to, and indeed equated with, Stalinist bureaucratic, anti-democratic practices:

Perhaps it was self-evident that the current disintegration of communism would have been the most difficult in a state such as Romania, which was so fundamentally bound to the red ideology. But it is shocking that it should have cost as many lives as has been alleged. What the world witnessed here was strongly reminiscent of the French Revolution. Everything just happened faster and with greater intensity. Are the ultra-leftists in South Africa still going to persist after this in their efforts to have communism take over here?

The *Sunday Times* (31 December 1989), in its efforts to 'prove' there was no alternative to the prevailing economic system, published the perspectives by David Welsh, professor of Southern African Studies at the University of Cape Town. Welsh lavished praise upon Mikhail Gorbachev for introducing free market economics along capitalist lines into the former USSR, claiming that he was 'struck by the growing worldwide consensus that the multi-party democratic systems – resting on secured human rights and the rule of law and driven by market economies – offer the best chance of achieving growth, freedom and equality. "Scientific socialism" is dead – may it be buried very deep'. In his assessment, 'popular pressures for "redistribution" and insufficient resources to meet demands do not make a stable basis for democratic government'. Glaringly, this Welshian assessment fails to identify and mention that there exist different types of market economies. Indeed, capitalism itself assumes different forms and dimensions in different parts of the world, such as in the United Kingdom, Western Europe, the Nordic countries and Canada as opposed to the unfettered market-driven practices in the United States. These analytical slippages severely curtail the debate about the role of the state in the provision and protection of basic services in a future South Africa. In this regard, the operative *diktat* 'no interference by the government in the economy' would be elevated to the level of some type of 'Holy Writ' not to be ignored/transgressed by the architects of consensus politics after 1990. Here the distinction between the state and the market would finally be made – apparently never to be revisited in practice. Hence the apparent difficulty in the 1990s and beyond to recapture and re-activate the salience of the question: Should the economy be market-driven or state-assisted or should it be state-driven and market-assisted (Marais, 2001)? In the Welshian policy framework of economic development, the question was seemingly irrevocably settled in favour of the market (and against the state) with the 'Fall of Communism'.

Accordingly, the mainstream newspapers, like the *Cape Times* (14 December 1989), would give ample coverage to the pro-market ideologues from the former USSR, Professors Apollon Davidzon and Irina Filatova, who visited South Africa in December 1989. With reference to the debates between the Soviet academics and South African Marxists at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, the *Sunday Times* (17 December 1989), observed, quite preemptorily:

With the whole Eastern Bloc ditching tired Marxist–Leninist dictums, some radical elements here (and possibly in Albania) may be the last custodians of such reactionary thought (i.e. there is a need for the state to secure and protect the basic rights of ordinary people, such as employment, housing, health care, education). Commendably, the Soviet scholars took the time to tell their often starry-eyed audiences how dreary life really is in the worker’s heaven. Throughout Eastern Europe, statues of Lenin are being pulled down. If the reborn communists are looking for somewhere to send these monuments to failure, South Africa may be one of the few remaining places in the world where there’s still a market for such relics.

The *Sunday Times* (26 November 1989), in its ‘war of position’ against any alternative to its version of a market economy in a future South Africa, would even invoke the one-dimensional views of Chester Crocker, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa: ‘Marxism, the last of the Utopian philosophies, most certainly is dead in Europe. One has to visit out of the way places like South Africa to find people who can, with a straight face, carry banners around saying things like “Workers of the World Unite”.’ Ideologically, therefore, for the mainstream press the future economic order was settled in favour of the capitalist free market. Indeed, the *Sunday Times* (17 December 1989) appeared so confident of its position that it was even prepared to publish the provisions of the ‘Harare Declaration’ of 1989 of the ANC which, upon closer scrutiny did not seem to threaten the free market system in a future South Africa, as it advocated a united, democratic and non-racial state; equal citizenship; one person one vote on a common voters’ role; a Bill of Rights; basic individual freedoms; equality before the law; an independent and non-racial judiciary; and an economic system promoting the well-being of all South Africans.

This capitalist-friendly declaration prompted the British historian, Paul Johnson, to write in an almost prophetic mode that: ‘[a] pacific and constitutional solution to South Africa’s problem depends essentially on the skill, speed and thoroughness with which the black middle class can be brought into the ruling structure. As educated and property-owning blacks come in out of the cold within South Africa, so South Africa will come in out of the cold in the wider world’ (*Sunday Times*, 12 November 1990). It is, indeed, quite remarkable that within less than ten years the foregoing prognostic scenario has become the actual overall pattern of socio-economic development in South Africa, to the extent that an academic activist such as Patrick Bond (2000a) calls it an *Elite Transition*, largely confirming the creation of a black middle class along the lines suggested by Johnson (Murray, 1994; Marais, 2001).

Here it is suggested that this apparent correlation between prognostic trends favoured and anticipated by academics—in the service of mainstream newspapers – and the actualisation of such preferred scenarios could, indeed, largely only come to pass by mobilising the ideological apparatus of the dominant vested interests (Bond, 1991). Making this point, however, does not mean that there was no viable, alternative socio-economic development directory for South Africa (Moll et al., 1991). On the contrary, it merely

serves to highlight the extent to which dominant interests – both locally and globally à la the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – managed to determine the future planning frameworks in a post-apartheid South Africa (Bond, 2000a,b, 2001). Consider, for example, the trenchant points raised against Robert Schrire's argument in the *Cape Times* (28 November 2002) that the South African development programme is the best choice under prevailing economic circumstances and that an unemployment rate of 30 per cent is inevitable. Citing the works of Joseph Stiglitz, a former World Bank chief economist, *Globalization and its Discontents* (2002) and *The Mystery of Capital: Why capitalism triumphs in the West and fails everywhere else* (2001) of Hernando de Soto of Peru, Paul Malherbe notes that 'there is much that government can do. Sorry Professor Schrire, to regard 30 per cent unemployment as an unavoidable condition is, to my mind, the height of irresponsibility' (*Cape Times*, 3 December 2002).

Launching a consistent ideological battle against any possible alternative path of socio-economic development, journalists such as Ken Owen of the *Cape Times* (6 November 1989) posed the perennial question: 'does the communist tail wag SA's ANC dog?'. Owen, for example, bemoaned the fact that 'the government would allow members of the Communist Party, such as Ahmed Kathrada and "scientific socialists" like Walter Sisulu to speak freely, from public platforms and in the press, but they... do not permit the light of glasnost [reform and transparency à la Gorbachev] to fall on their conspiracies'. Claiming the ideological victory in favour of a market-driven economy for a future South Africa, Gerald Shaw, in a subsequent article in the *Cape Times* (5 December 1989), noted that at the 27 November 1989 Paris Indaba there presumably existed a great deal of 'disillusionment with the role of the state; and the old rhetoric of nationalisation – capturing the commanding heights of the economy – was explicitly disavowed'.

What the above content analysis also shows is that the discourse of international compatibility via the free market and the associated economic mantra of international competitiveness pre-dates the birth of the democratic South Africa (Peet, 2002). And it is precisely this linking of the local economy with the global market that constitutes the experiential nightmare for ordinary South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa (Bond, 2003). Paradoxically, as pointed out at the outset of this essay, it is through the lens of the newspapers that the possibility of the alternative assumes clarity as they detail the prevailing and deepening tensions, contradictions, fissures and struggles at grassroots level.

## 5. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: LET US START AFRESH?

Memory is the mode through which we interact with the past, interpret the present and seek to secure the future. In our efforts for self-preservation, both as individuals and as a society at large, we often have to change both our thinking and our plans to effectively transform a particular social reality. In this newspapers play an important, if not determining, role in selecting, defining and communicating pertinent issues in society, especially in periods of socio-economic flux. In the transition to the new South Africa, however, it would appear that news media discourse displaces the analytical rigour of the material conditions experienced by the majority of citizens with a cavalier and an a priori celebration of the market as the panacea for prevailing socio-economic problems. In the process newspaper reports, by strategic omission and design, ignore and at best fragment the socio-historical reality of racial oppression and economic exploitation of the black majority as a fleeting and unfortunate event in the lives of ordinary people.

Yet, both generationally and existentially, Africans have been rendered substantially marginalised and debilitated in relation to the determining criterion of the 'new world order', namely the ability to compete and pay for the necessities of life on the ubiquitous free market. None the less, there appears to be the unproblematic valorisation of a predominantly market-oriented approach to economic development (in the context of high levels of unemployment, homelessness and abject poverty) and the associated decentring of the role of state-led initiatives to improve overall social conditions. It would, indeed, also appear that the hegemony of the free market discourse and practices in the new South Africa has its locus in the unhistorical approach to the materially driven tensions, contradictions, conflicts and fissures underlying the unequal relations of power in South African society at large. Contributing unproblematically to this free market ideology implies, in practice, that newspaper discourse is steeped in a Nietzschean epistemology of scepticism – a type of intellectual nihilism through pejorative labelling and intellectual exclusion. Consequently, in the transition to a new order in South Africa, spaces and places for alternative and competing discourses, in contradistinction to the proffered scenarios of mainstream newspapers, are extremely limited and limiting.

Prevailing institutional relations of power are unequal and access to media often conditional on the nature, form and substance of the voice, image, message of the messenger. Truncating newspaper debates in such a fashion means, among other discursive practices, that the liberal notion of plurality exists only in so far as the structural nexus between a pluralised notion of being/planning/choice/alternative does not subvert the *status quo*. More importantly, perhaps, such discursive hegemony also means that the complexity of competing development trajectories is flattened and the human condition is largely read through the one-dimensional lens of a privileged text of the market and the role of the state is put under erasure. In short, in such a monological and linear discourse, the role of the state in society becomes atrophied, while humanity is portrayed as irrevocably individualistic, self-centred and egotistical: free-floating atoms in the Vast Ocean of Space and Time. Yet, in the Rushdiesque parlance of the quote at the beginning of this article, it is still true that we change our world, our society, our community and ourselves through the courage of our questions, the depth of our answers and the consistency of our actions. The lack of rigour in mainstream newspaper discourse in the transition to the new South Africa suggests that they have yet to realise, embrace and demonstrate this historical truth.

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