

MODULE 10

SOUTH AFRICA: SOCIETY AND SPACE - SOME SUMMARY COMMENTS

Introduction

Throughout the course I have tried to draw some more general lessons from our discussions of the changing geography of South Africa. These have been of a broadly methodological sort: how we might go about thinking about particular places and their geographies anywhere in the world. In this final Module I have tried to distill what I think are some of the more important issues raised by the course and the lessons that we might draw from them. There are three of these.

The first is that of geographies of places, and places themselves, as something that we imagine, both academic, layperson, and creative writer. The South Africa of the immediate post-war period described and interpreted by Luli Callinicos in *A Place in the City* is not the same as that envisioned by Alan Paton in *Cry the Beloved Country*, for example, and these imagined geographies affect how people act with respect to them.

The second and related topic is that of how we are to understand the myriad geographic changes that we experience in our world. South Africa's human geography has been revolutionized in so many ways over the last two hundred years, but in that it is no different from, say, Australia, Canada or France. So how do we go about making sense of these changes? Is there some approach which can shed light on them and be true to our everyday understandings of how things get produced, including change?

The final topic is, to put it in rather abstract terms, that of relating particularity to universality. Places are highly particular in how they appear. Intellectuals talk of American exceptionalism, but *every* country is exceptional, or at least a case can be made out for that being so. South Africa is like other countries in that regard; how more particularistic can you be than the extraordinary racial segregation imposed on the country under apartheid? On the other hand, places are connected one to another and open to influences from outside. We often find them comparable in certain ways. How, therefore, are we to reconcile these two views of places being highly particular and so

beyond comparison; and places being formed by very similar forces so that they *are* comparable?

Imagined Geographies

“When I was driving ..., YYY, who is awful, kept going on about the roads and the trees. On the road, the tar was seeping to the top of the gravel, confirming for her that a BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) contractor had done the job: ‘look at the road, this is what happens when you give blacks contracts.’ On the side of the road were trees, some of which had clearly been hacked at by people looking for firewood. This was especially the case near the township to the west of town. I didn’t notice them at all, a tree is a tree to this city lad (!), but YYY mentioned them a few times: ‘look, they [blacks] just cut off whole branches, even if it eventually kills the tree. They don’t understand about the long-term. They just think day-to-day.’ This sort of ‘evidence’ of blacks’ inability to look after the land, to farm, to think long-term, is part of the justification for her stance on land reform. And so, in this way, the landscape talks to her, confirms what she already believes. She fails to accept that people just bloody well need firewood because they are so dirt poor! It’s the same when farmers say, ‘just *look* at Venda.’ What they see is people farming small plots of land because blacks can’t manage land, not land scarcity. They see trees cut down for firewood because blacks don’t care for the land, not the desperate need for firewood because people are poor. And they see dust and degraded hillsides because blacks can’t farm, not because of poverty / inequality.” (e-mail from a former student doing research in Limpopo, November, 2004).

We have been talking about the changing geography of South Africa and using a particular approach to imagining it and the forces that have conditioned and created it. We have engaged with a description of South Africa’s human geography and an explanation of it. But the indefinite article is important. All geographies are imagined and there are many ways of imagining them. Academics have their ideas about what is important enough to be highlighted – residential segregation by race, perhaps – along with their interpretive frameworks. In this course you have been given a particular way of

imagining South Africa's geography. It has stemmed from the historical geographical materialist position of the teacher. This has led, among other things, to an emphasis on production, how South African geography has shifted with changes in the capital accumulation process – the deskilling of the labor process, for example, allowing decentralization of industry to positions close to the border. We have also highlighted the distributional struggles in South Africa, what they have meant for residential geographies, and how they need to be situated with respect to the chronic economic insecurity people experience in a capitalist society, so that too much cannot be enough.

A course on South Africa taught by someone else would almost certainly be different, and in some cases, radically so. In virtue of our theories, our particular readings, even the order in which we read them, we would have different ideas about South Africa's geography. That does not mean, however, that some might be more similar than others.

If academics have imagined geographies, so too do laypeople. We all construct them and store them in our minds for retrieval as required. We use them to navigate, of course. Importantly, however, they may also express, as well as confirm, our political views: something that has been very important in the South African case. Which brings us to the quote at the beginning of this part of the module: It was relayed to me by a graduate student doing research on the politics of land restitution in South Africa. He was in a car accompanied by a local woman who was commenting on, and interpreting the landscape they were traveling through. She clearly understood the landscape in terms of certain ideas about the abilities, or rather inabilities, of Africans. She selected in certain things like the tar seeping up from the highway and the branches that had been lopped from trees in order to make political points about Africans; points that were supposed to help convince my graduate student that land should not be restituted to Africans since they did not know how to look after it, and that granting of contracts to Africans for highway maintenance were a joke.

We have come across this sort of thing before in this course. The National Party under apartheid had a certain view of African urbanization; that if they were allowed to move to the cities permanently, then they would start seeking the vote and that this would be

difficult to resist. The resistance movement also had an understanding of South African geography. It selected in, for example, those nasty things that it believed could be laid at the door of apartheid; things like migrant labor and the separation of family members one from another that it inflicted. It also selected in a particular view of race and its importance in shaping the geography of South Africa: this was one that highlighted white racism – whites doing insidious things to anyone who wasn't white.

We now know that this was a dreadful oversimplification: that migrant labor was a much more complex thing, for example, and that the politics of difference in South Africa never was, and never is, reducible to the differentiations whites make. One consequence of the liberal view of migrant labor was the expectation that with the ending of influx control, migrant labor would evaporate to a trickle. This turned out to be far from the truth, of course, as we discussed in Module 8. One of the forces that has kept it going has been that of patriarchy and the desire of many of those two-thirds of migrant workers who are male, to keep their wives and children away from the evils of the city. The intensity of patriarchy in South Africa, however, and its geographic consequences, tended to get marginalized by a view of the country's geography intended to bolster the case for the overthrow of apartheid.

We can make similar remarks about the politics of difference. With the ending of apartheid observers have had to accommodate themselves to the fact that the material interests and identities of most Coloreds and Indians are different from those of Africans. Indians and Coloreds were relatively privileged under apartheid and the advent of 'black' – more accurately *African* – majority rule has raised red flags for them. So people were surprised at the fact that in the first nonracial election in 1994 most Coloreds and Indians voted for the party of their former oppressors, the National Party. But they should not have been, and they would not have been if they had not been in thrall to a resistance model of South Africa in which politics could be reduced to whites in struggle with anyone who wasn't white; when things were more complex. And in fact the ending of apartheid has done nothing to make the politics of difference go away in South Africa. This is something that we should now understand as a result of our discussions of the

attempts of South African blacks to keep non-South African blacks out of Johannesburg's street trading; or the way in which Zimbabweans are chased away from squatter settlements.

So imaginative geographies are invariably selective, myopic, marginalizing other possible geographies that might emphasize other sorts of conditions: patriarchy rather than apartheid, for example. They are also often highly political. They express certain interest and / or identities. This is particularly evident in creative literature. Alan Paton's view of South Africa and how its geography is likely to be changed is far from that of Alex LaGuma's. LaGuma emphasizes resistance while Paton looks to the moral reform of individuals. LaGuma foregrounds the role of dispossession in understanding the tribulations of the African, whereas Paton is more emphatic about the detribalizing effects of urbanization. He is less concerned about dispossession since he has that very European idea of how civilization was brought to Africans through urbanization. He just thinks that Europeans went beyond the 'permissible', as he explains through the words of Jarvis Jr, and through their failure to provide some alternative to the moral structure of the tribe. Incidentally, apartheid literature was full of imaginative geographies, as one might imagine, and the works of people like Andre Brink and Nadine Gordimer are hugely informative, though one has to remember the particular, privileged slant from which they are written, and however critical they might be.

Geographic Change, Social Tensions and Human Creativity

In the course of our studies of South Africa, we have seen how its geography has been subject to continual change. Migrant labor developed very significantly after the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and more especially after the discovery of gold on the Rand in 1886. As dispossession of Africans took hold, both with the 1913 Land Act, and the forced 'resettlements' of the apartheid period, it received a further impetus. There is also a history of urbanization. The English-speaking were the first to become more completely urbanized, many of them coming directly from Britain and North America to the Rand subsequent to 1886. The urbanization of the Afrikaner came later, particularly in the 'twenties and 'thirties, and the fact that they found themselves in competition with

the English-speaking who had arrived earlier and gained job experience and saw their children benefit from the superior schools of the city that made the English-speaking / Afrikaans-speaking struggles of the period so fraught. And despite the prevalence of migrant labor, many Africans did in fact settle permanently in the city to become the 'Section Tenners' defined by the 1946 legislation (the Bantu (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act). The apartheid period is associated with its own distinct suite of geographic changes. These included not just draconian racial segregation to an unprecedented degree, even in the American South, but the creation of the homelands, industrial decentralization, and the rise of frontier commuting.

In the first place, there is always some social process that is the necessary condition for what is happening: some new institution or set of institutions, like the rules of apartheid; some new configuration of power relations, which will certainly affect institutional change; or new social practices, which again, will be facilitated by institutional change. In this regard we should certainly hesitate to explain one set of geographic changes with another and assume that that is the answer. To some degree frontier commuting is related in its destinations to those places receiving decentralized employment. But underpinning that particular geographic configuration were surely institutions which limited the permanent settlement of Africans in 'white' South Africa, as well as the attempt to limit migrant labor by moving employment closer to the homelands.

How, however, are we to understand these social processes in terms of what generates change, or perhaps simply reproduces what already exists even though there is a threat to the underlying conditions that facilitate the realization of interests? In abstract terms, I would suggest that we have to put them in the context of what can be vaguely called 'social tensions.' By this I mean an encounter by people with some resistance to the realization of their interests or identities, something that has to be overcome or at least countered, some change in conditions which were at one time favorable, but are no longer so. We understand the emergence of job reservation in terms of the threat that cheap African labor presented to white workers who were used to a much higher standard of living. The conditions necessary to making sure that that standard of living continued into

the future were under threat as the mine owners turned to Africans for the entirety of their labor needs. This is the source of white worker agitation for institutions – job reservation – that would protect their relatively high wages and ensure, among other things, that value would continue to flow through the relatively privileged areas where they lived and so reproduce them. This is a case where what exists gets reproduced through intervening in social processes so as to ensure that it will be reproduced.

In other instances, new social forces arise in the midst of social tensions, and transform the geography of a country. So was that the case with Afrikaner nationalism. The conditions in which it arose, conditions which challenged the living standards of Afrikaners – their own migration to the city and ensuing competition with the English-speaking along with Africans – were ones which Afrikaner nationalism sought to change to the advantage of its supporters. Apartheid was one consequence, as was the Afrikanerization of what had hitherto been a largely English-speaking civil service.

This is not to argue, however, that these things – the drive for job reservation, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism – are foretold in the changing conditions confronted by people and which they experience as challenges. Emphatically, there are huge uncertainties coupled to the role of both agency and contingency. To paraphrase Marx, people make history, though not under conditions of their own choosing.

People are creative, they develop new institutional forms, form new political movements, new ways of coping with the changing constellation of conditions that can threaten their interests. The mine compound was one, as were the recruiting organizations created by the Chamber of Mines to recruit Africans for the mines and to reduce the costs of procuring labor for an industry that was already experiencing precarious economic circumstances. Likewise, would the rise of Afrikaner nationalism have occurred without the formation of the Broederbond and the decision to try to penetrate and influence opinion in key South African organizations, both national and local? One also wonders about the public effect of the spectacle of commemorating the Great Trek through an organized caravan of ox drawn wagons from Cape Town to Pretoria? So agency, for sure.

But at the same time, there were various other, quite unpredictable conditions, that facilitated growth of support for Afrikaner nationalism. Not least of these was the Second World War and South Africa's participation in it on the side of the hated British. Likewise one has to wonder about the role that South Africa's Jews played in the struggle for black liberation. Most of them originated in the Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania and some brought with them very radical ideas. They formed the core of the South African Communist Party and were extraordinarily important in focusing the ANC, and giving the struggle some interpretation beyond simply combating racism.

These are lessons we can apply in understanding any geography as it changes over time: identifying the changes, then linking them to how people, perhaps taking advantage of various contingent circumstances, met the challenges of those changing social conditions threatening to their interests or identities. Note also here how important the historical is. We should always be looking for the preconditions for some sort of change and these emerge over time; not just the conditions to be overcome but those which enable and facilitate and which are mobilized by human agents and their organizations.

Questions of Specificity and Universality

From one angle South Africa is a very, very distinctive place. It is not just the fact of apartheid, the effects of which continue to be seen in the landscape, as in the degraded conditions of the former homelands, or the relatively poor character of the housing in African townships. It is also the fact that for much of its twentieth century history South Africa had a very colonial feel to it – racial domination by settlers, in particular – without actually being a colony; and in fact not relying on any external power for the reproduction of its oppressive social system, as was the case with other settler societies like Algeria, Kenya, and Angola. As we discussed in Module 6, this was what was called 'colonialism of a special type.' And South Africa was, of course, the country to which settlers uprooted from their colonial way of life elsewhere in Africa, ultimately fled. There are other oddities about the place. It is most unusual, for example, for the major party of liberation of the indigenous peoples – the ANC in this instance – to be

multiracial in its membership. Then there is the heightened racialization of social forms, of sport, of migrant labor, even of the news media.

Despite this distinctiveness, there are nevertheless attempts to assimilate the South African instance to more general, universalizing, understandings: to take South Africa out of its distinct geohistorical context and to celebrate what it shares with other countries, differing only in matters of degree rather than expressing some qualitative, irreducible, distinctiveness. So, for example, in Module 9 we learnt of the idea of the ‘normalization’ of the South African city; how it is acquiring the same suburban shopping center and office complexes, and walled communities as many cities in North America and Western Europe, for example. Even the heightened level of crime in the cities is taken as an indication of ‘normalization.’ The idea is that with the abolition of apartheid, South Africa is becoming more like other countries. There are also attempts to group South Africa with what are believed to be societies sharing some of its features. To define South Africa as ‘a settler society’, for example, is to find in it similarities to cases like Kenya, Algeria, Zimbabwe. Other attributions such as ‘deeply divided society’ drawn on by advocates of consociational democracy, assume similarities to Belgium or Switzerland. And then there are other cases where one sees sharp parallels between the South African case and some other instance elsewhere in the world. The struggles between Afrikaner and English-speaking whites have been likened to those between French- and English-speaking in Quebec; or between Northern and Southern whites in the US in the post-civil war period, as in the work of Anthony Marx.¹

What, therefore, are we to make of these quite different claims? Is South Africa to be interpreted in terms of its specificity as a society and geography; or is it to be explained in terms of forces found elsewhere in the world? Particularism or universality: Which is it to be? Or alternatively, is there some way of negotiating between these polar claims so that both find a place in explanation? First, we should recognize how South Africa is part of a wider world, of interactions with it, and how this shows in its geography. We should

¹ *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States and Brazil*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1998.

not be surprised at the way forms of real estate development with which we are familiar in North America and Western Europe and which are highlighted in arguments about the ‘normalization of the South African city,’ find their way south. Developers travel, they read a business press that details what is occurring elsewhere in the world, and, of course, as businesspeople, they are always looking for new ideas to make money. Knowledge circulates and is adopted by those facing similar challenges. This applies to the public as much as to the private sector. South Africa’s urban planning profession was deeply influenced by ideas emanating from Western Europe in the post-World War II period and these affected the form of cities emerging under apartheid, though the original ideas had no racial intent, of course.

South Africa, moreover, is part of a global economy. It exports and it imports. It receives investment from around the world, and its corporations invest in other countries. Since the ending of apartheid we have seen how South African retail and hotel chains have moved into other parts of Africa. The major brewing company, South African Breweries, has purchased brewing companies in both the US and in China. South African mining corporations have acquired world wide mining interests, as in the merger of the South African corporation Billiton with an Australian counterpart, Broken Hill Proprietary. As such South Africa cannot avoid being affected by developments in the global economy as a whole. We also saw how rhetorics of ‘globalization’ affected the negotiations over a new constitution for South Africa subsequent to the events of 1990. Arguably, however, changes in the world economy had more material implications for political developments in South Africa; implications that remind us how we cannot possibly understand South Africa outside of these wider currents.

From the early ‘seventies onwards the world economy went into what has been called ‘the long downturn.’ Profitability declined, rates of change in investment and employment went down, unemployment increased in the major national economies and in some of the minor ones – like South Africa. The golden years of apartheid were then over. The South African state confronted diminishing opportunities for implementing its ambitions simply because its fiscal room for manoeuvre had contracted. At the same

time, black unrest increased in South Africa, fed, among other things, by unemployment and subsequent difficulty in meeting rents and service charges. Under apartheid's 'golden years' large numbers of Africans had been relocated from the 'white' rural areas into the homelands where they had to try to eke out a living as migrant workers in an economy where there were decreasing numbers of openings.

It is not just a global economy that South Africa belongs to, however. It is a global economy of a particular stripe: a *capitalist* global economy. South Africa shares with most of the rest of the world a particular way of organizing, socially, production. This is a mode of organization in which commodities are produced with commodities. Markets for labor power, raw-materials, instruments of labor, have to be engaged with if production is to occur; and then the ensuing products have to be sold in other markets – markets for consumer products, capital goods and the like – if the capitalist is to retrieve the money laid out so as to start over again. Moreover, it is through the imperatives of this mode of organizing production that the peoples of the world find themselves enmeshed in a global web of commodity exchange; one that exercises insistent pressure on producers to lower their costs, develop new products that can take the pressure of the bottom line – until other producers catch up, that is. So capitalists ransack the world for new ideas on how to compete – as in the new forms of real estate development now appearing with the 'normalization' of the South African city.

Universality today means capitalism, with all its pressures and opportunities. South Africa shares in that, or at least firms in South Africa do, and have done so since sometime in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless during that period of time, and right up to the present, South Africa has remained distinctive. How, therefore, can that be given the pressures emanating from a mode of organizing production that is worldwide and which enmeshes countries in a global web of production? The important point that we need to recognize is as follows: Capitalist firms, the mining companies, the capitalizing maize farmers of the platteland who pushed forward the 1913 Land Act, the big sugar corporations of Natal and later the forestry companies working in the vicinity of the Drakensberg escarpment always worked, and continue to work, within a distinct set of

not just geographical, but geohistorical circumstances. Out of those circumstances they have had to create the conditions of their profitability, molding them to their needs; creating place-specific solutions out of place-specific possibilities in other words.

This is very clear in the case of the gold mining industry. Because of the nature of the gold reserves – low grade and at great depth – it needed a large, cheap labor force. Dispossession of Africans so that they would have to work for a wage became part of their agenda; and so too did the various attempts to hold wages down through the migrant labor system and the agreement between the mining companies to pay no more than a maximum wage – not to compete with one another for labor, in other words. This was possible because of the fact that Africans lacked the vote and hence any way of, for example, voting down the 1913 Land Act. At the same time, the sorts of racial attributions made by the early settlers which we discussed in Module 4 made that ‘solution’ to the mines’ problem all the easier. In other words: Local solutions to the universal problem of profitability are the way in which particularity gets reconciled with universality.