

Afrikaans as symptom-formation: A Freudian reading of "Afrikaner" history

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In this paper a few ideas and positions will be sketched for a psychoanalytical reading of the Afrikaner. These ideas represent part of a more extensive project in this area on which we are working.

Our discussion is premised on the idea that the term "Afrikaner" has a shifting denotation and the study of it should entail a careful analysis of the different discursive contexts of which it is a part. The meaning of the term, like any other, is conditioned by changes which take place at the level of the economic and the ideological. In this sense the Afrikaner is a discursive and ideological construct (1). In another sense, as we will show, the fabrication of a collective identity, beginning with the activities of the GRA (Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners; The Association of Real Afrikaners) in the late 1800s, fashioned a past which relates to an original lawlessness and omnipotence. We briefly trace the way in which this lawlessness was threatened with the arrival of the British at the Cape in 1795.

We contrast the lawless, father-orientated perspective of the colonists with the modern recognition of the world as object which is determined by natural laws. Here we employ a number of Freudian concepts whose use suggests that the preoccupation with the Afrikaans language, with race and nation can be read as a symptom-formation which relates to the Afrikaner

nationalist's melancholia - a longing for a lost omnipotence.

The Emergence of the Afrikaner

Before the seventeenth century, the words "African", "Africaander" and "Africaaner" were used to denote the indigenous inhabitants of Africa, in particular the Khoi whom the European settlers found at the Cape. It is only after 1707, in the aftermath of the rebellion of colonists against Governor Willem Adriaan van der Stel, that we have a record of the word "Africaander" being used by a European-descended colonist to refer to himself (2).

The present definition of the Afrikaner as a European-descended person whose first language is Afrikaans became dominant after 1934. This followed the break away of the Purified Nationalists under the leadership of D.F. Malan from the old Nationalist Party led by General Hertzog. General Hertzog's definition of an Afrikaner, which was the accepted one in the period 1910- 1934, was that the term referred to "everybody" (all whites?) who gave their unconditional loyalty to South Africa. In an attack on the Broederbond on 7 November 1936, Hertzog made the distinction between his definition and that of the Purified Nationalists clear: "It is forgotten that there are also English-speaking Afrikaners in South Africa" (Wilkins and Strydom, 1978, p61).

Thus, any discussion of the Afrikaner has to be sensitive to the discontinuity in both the term's usage and the multiplicity of its referents. In short, we make use of a non-essentialist definition. With this in mind however, one should not ignore the way in which the "continuous history" elaborated by nationalist historians has created a collective past for a defined group. By creating the collective past they were constituting a mythical identity for the group as well as a group psychology. This mythical group identity with its fabricated past has concrete consequences. The actions and beliefs of this group are determined by this "continuous past", as is clear in the compulsive symbolic repetition of certain historical traumas such as the Groot Trek and the Voortrekker festivals of 1938 and 1988.

In this paper we will concentrate on the GRA (Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners), a body whose emergence in 1875 signals the beginning of the linguistic and racist definition of the Afrikaner in discourse. European-descended South Africans speaking Afrikaans before 1900 were not

necessarily conscious of themselves as Afrikaners, rather they saw themselves more in terms of the type of production in which they were involved. For example, they described themselves as "Boere" (farmers). It was in 1875 with the formation of the GRA that intellectuals and farmers from the Paarl district of the Cape colony first attempted to mobilise European-descended Afrikaans-speakers into a national movement.

The GRA through its literary, popular, historical and linguistic publications represents the moment when, for the first time, a conscious attempt was made to construct in discourse a new entity - the Afrikaner. Its publications included the immensely popular periodical *Die Afrikaanse Patriot* (circulation had reached 3 000 by the 1880s); the first Afrikaans history book *Die Geskiedenis van Ons Land en die Taal van Ons Volk* (1877); the anthology of poetry *Afrikaanse Gedigte*; (1878), and the dictionary *Patriot-Woordeboek* (1902).

The GRA recreated South African history in the image of the Afrikaner. With heroes such as Frederik Bezuidenhout of the Slachtersnek incident it created a mythology of persecution and survival (3). As poets and makers of heroic myths, its members can be seen as the originators of a group psychology. The nature of the GRA's historical, linguistic and especially poetic activities illustrates what Freud said about the poet, myth and the group:

"The myth . . . is the step by which the individual emerges from group psychology. The first myth was certainly the psychological, the hero myth; . . . The poet who had taken this step, and had in this way set himself free from the group in his imagination, is nevertheless able . . . to find his way back to it in reality. For he goes and relates to the group his hero's deeds which he has invented. At bottom this hero is no one but himself. Thus he lowers himself to the level of reality, and raises his hearers to the level of imagination. But his hearers understand the poet, and, in virtue of their having the same relation of longing towards the primal father, they can identify themselves with the hero." (Freud, 1985, p170).

Central to the GRA's activities was a preoccupation with Afrikaans as language. This preoccupation involved the intention to appropriate the language for themselves. The origin of this intention was, ironically, Arnoldus Pannevis's earlier idea to translate the Bible into Afrikaans so that it would be more accessible to "coloureds". The British and Overseas

Bible Institute was not interested in this request, and declared itself disinclined to "perpetuate jargons by printing Scriptures in them" (Steyn, 1980, p137). In the wake of Pannevis's attempts in this regard the GRA was formed. These missionary intentions though were soon submerged by a racial and national circumscription of the language.

The GRA and the language movements which followed it cannot therefore be viewed as simply the occasion on which a pre-existing language and culture was, at last, brought into the light. The work of the GRA reveals rather an intersection of the ideas of language, race and nation. This intersection formed a new problematic from whose perspective a new history was written and new political agenda formulated. The configuration of these ideas points to a symptom-formation which symbolically refers to a repressed content. The nature of this content can be traced to the establishment of British rule in the Cape.

The Law

To uncover this symptom-formation - this forming of a counter-identity to that of the governing British group - one must understand what British imperialism meant to the Dutch-descended colonists in the light of their lawlessness and omnipotence which preceded British domination. This lawlessness was especially apparent in the areas far from Cape Town. Du Toit and Giliomee (1983) describe it as follows:

"In the interior itself there was a lack of those socialising agencies which would instill respect for law and authority. The trekboer dispersal meant tenuous ties with schools and churches - in fact with organised state and society. The central government, travellers from Europe and prominent colonists commonly expressed the fear that this would lead to increasing lawlessness, moral degeneration and ultimately barbarization of the colonists." (p3).

This lawlessness was not simply a standing beyond the law but also an exclusive claim to use what law there was to further their own interests. The law functioned to the advantage of the colonists and at the expense of the slaves and Khoi who were denied any rights before the law (4). The law was seen as something exclusive to the Europeans; an instrument of power to be used to impose the colonists' will on others. It represented the power of a small group over the whole of the indigenous and slave population.

When the British arrived at the Cape in 1795 they insisted on firmer government and the establishment of law and order for everybody. This eventually led to the introduction of circuit courts in 1811 and "the new notion that no one could any longer be a law unto himself". For the first time the Khoikhoi had access to the courts and legal equality. This equality before the law was extended by Ordinance 50 of 1828, which nullified the restrictions on the personal freedom of indigenous persons and led to the emancipation of slaves.

To this imposition of the law by the British the colonists on the frontier reacted with a "large-scale emigration from the colony and settlement outside the area of British control." This:

".... held out the possibility of a trekboer society where the "proper" relations between master and servant according to the norms of the accustomed racial and social order could be reinstated." (Ibid., p17).

Much later the GRA, representing the descendents of colonists who did not take part in the Trek reacted ideologically to British rule. To the GRA British government and law became synonymous with the humanism of the missionaries, and the materialist values which accompanied the scientific revolution and laissez-faire capitalism. Reaction against these values underlies the following ideological motifs which were common in the writings of the GRA:

1. the adherence to a rural world view;
2. the romanticisation of the past;
3. the rejection of materialism and modernism;
4. the propagation of racist and sexist values;
5. the dominance of the authoritarian father-figure and an obsession with a then still non-existent "fatherland".

British imperialism represented the Enlightenment, and modern and materialist values which threatened the class positions of the Dutch/Afrikaans clergy (whose mysticism is untenable in a materialist world view), teachers (who feared Anglicisation of the community they represented), and the farmers whose arbitrary power over their labourers was questioned by the new humanism. The clergy, teachers and farmers are the groups from which the members of the GRA came.

This group romanticised and idealised the lawless and omnipotent positions of colonists before the arrival of the British. All later regressions in the group psychology of Afrikaner nationalists are attempts to reinstitute this lawlessness against the modern extension of the law. This extension of the law as historical process was described by Freud as follows:

" cultural development seems to tend towards making the law no longer an expression of the will of a small community - a caste or stratum of the population or a racial group - which in its turn, behaves like a violent individual towards other, perhaps more numerous, collections of people." (1985, p284).

British imperialism threatened the original lawlessness of the colonists and it threatened the narcissistic and symbiotic relationship which developed between the colonists and the new continent. This symbiosis between the colonists and Africa is revealed in the fact that they took the continent's name to denote themselves.

Modernism and the Father

The British, and essentially capitalist, ethics - represented by the liberalism and humanism of the missionaries - challenged the brutal colonisation of the continent by the Dutch-descended colonists. The colonists responded to this foreign ethic by emphasising a father-orientated conception of the world. A world of predestination in which they acted on behalf and in the name of the father (God) and in which they adopted the omnipotent father's role towards their environment and those who inhabited it. This conception elides the facticity of an objective world and places the world within the domain of the will.

Where the world came to be seen by science as an object which is determined by experimentally tested physical laws, the colonists instead saw the world as an expression of the omnipotent father's will. Where imperialism, and its capitalist dynamic, represented a movement to an integrated world economy, the GRA emphasised national and racial difference. In Freudian terms the early Dutch-descended colonists and their nationalist off-spring can be seen as a force which stood against the civilising activities of Eros:

"Civilisation is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to

combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind." (Freud, 1985, p313).

British rule in South Africa coincided with the emergence of the modern world. A distinguishing feature of the modern is its recognition of the distinction between the ego/subject and the world/object. For the pre-modern the subject was the unexaminable source of the world of which it could not be part for it was the world's very condition for existence. In contrast the modern episteme removes the privileged position of the ego/subject (5). This modern conception of the world as independent object determined by an independent set of empirically revealed laws must be contrasted with the lawlessness and arbitrariness of the pre-modern. This contrast is best represented in modern science which postulated an epistemically privileged material reality which is made transparent and comprehensible by a determined set of underlying and universal laws. The ego/subject is not therefore a transhistorical phenomenon but rather one which is firmly located in history and whose existence is entrenched in the modern episteme (6).

The ego in history, as in individual psychology, therefore, arises as a consequence of an awareness of the world as object. Freud discusses this process in individual development as follows:

"An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him. He gradually learns to do so, in response to various promptings. He must be very strongly impressed by the fact that some sources of excitation, which he will later recognize as his own bodily organs, can provide him with sensations at any moment, whereas other sources evade him from time to time - among them what he desires most of all, his mother's breast - and only reappear as a result of his screaming for help. In this way there is for the first time set over against the ego an 'object', in the form of something which exists 'outside' and which is only forced to appear by a special action. A further incentive to a disengagement of the ego from the general mass of sensations - that is, to the recognition of an 'outside', an external world - is provided by the frequent, manifold and unavoidable sensations of pain and unpleasure the removal and avoidance of which is enjoined by the pleasure principle" (1985, p254).

The discovery of the world as object implies the discovery of the world as something different from the inner self and becoming aware of "pain". The colonists in the early Cape did not perceive the world as "object" in the modern sense and the sense explained above, possibly because of the boundless freedom which they experienced away from the constraints of established society. The new continent was a generous and fulfilling provider as long as the colonists could act without constraint towards it. The relationship between the colonists and the environment and those who lived in it was structurally the same as the infantile symbiosis between mother and child, in which the child does not differentiate between him or herself, the mother and the environment. (It is therefore appropriate that this symbiosis was given concrete form in the name "Afrikaner".) This symbiotic relationship was upset by the arrival of the British and the constraints and challenges this implied.

To the descendents of the early colonists, in whose minds the memories of the early freedom came to dominate, the world was an expression of the Same (7); everything was drenched in the Father's omnipotent presence; everything was predestined by the Father. This ties up with the special emphasis the GRA placed on the ancestral fathers. These ancestral fathers are nothing but expressions of lost omnipotence. Further, God as the Primal Father related to their own omnipotence in so far as they saw it as his will that they should dominate.

Seen from this perspective, the link that Freud drew between the internalisation of the father figure and the development of personal conscience becomes questionable. The father is not necessarily an indicator of the development of personal conscience, but of a power above the law, of omnipotence and of lawlessness.

The erasure of the omnipotent father which accompanies the modern world view fills Afrikaner nationalists of the previous century, and of today, with remorse (8). They sense in this a nearing apocalypse (Ostow, 1986, pp278-284). This leads to self-destructive and irrational rituals of self-purification (9): the demand for sacrifices in war and the imposition of censorship. Censorship specifically, implies a silencing of the reality principle, of the personal and questioning conscience, in so far as censorship represses investigations into social reality. Further, when censorship is directed at repressing sexual depiction in art and literature, it implies the denial of a libido. The silencing of the libido is revealing in so

far as the libido refers to a relation with difference, energy directed towards objects outside of the self (10). This is in contrast to incest which refers to the direction of sexual energy towards the Same, and which found expression in the laws which Afrikaner nationalists enacted after they came to power in 1948 which prescribed that only people of the same race may have sexual relations.

Language as symptom

In so far as the GRA and later language movements' obsession with Afrikaans relates to their reaction against modernism, Afrikaans is a non-language. It is a non-language in the sense that it cannot refer to the world in its objectivity. It is then, a language which is a symptom of the inability to part with lawlessness and the omnipotence which was experienced in the collective archaic past.

Conclusion

The preceding paragraphs obviously do not constitute a final position, they merely mark a first line of enquiry into an uncertain terrain. Nor do we think that this line of enquiry could exhaustively explain the phenomenon of Afrikaner nationalism; it ignores important considerations of economics, class, domination and exploitation. It nevertheless opens the possibility of explaining Afrikaner nationalism in its concrete forms and moves beyond a purely reductive explanation which can do no more than show how Afrikaner nationalism is functional for capital accumulation. Many important and foundational problems remain unaddressed, problems which we hope to face in future work.

Notes

- (1) On the relation between language and the Afrikaner see Hofmeyr, 1987.
- (2) See Franken, 1953.
- (3) See Thompson, 1985.
- (4) See Chapter 3 in Du Toit & Giliomee, 1983.
- (5) See Foucault, 1982.
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) The erasure of the Father in Western thought has its origins in the

questioning of the premises of religion and culminates in Darwinism.

(9) See Van Wyk, 1989.

(10) "Sexual desires naturally urge a person to enter all kinds of relations with the world, to enter into close contact with it in a vast variety of forms." (Reich, 1970, p90).

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