

The performativity of non-racialism and a culture of complaint

[B O O K R E V I E W]

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Mashele's shrill and often exasperating essay pinpoints a series of factors underlying the apparent decline – even the *death* – of South African society. This somewhat melodramatic tone is seemingly belied by the vibrancy of contemporary political culture in the country, even if this culture is itself often marked by the type of responsibility-aversion, ritualized complaint and factional mud-slinging that Mashele laments.

None of this is to say that Mashele's arguments are incorrect. Quite frequently his remarks hit the target. He bemoans South Africa's "intellectual desert" – a not-so-veiled reference to the anti-intellectualism of South Africa's ruling party – and asks: "Which South African politician has written which authoritative book about our society and where we need to go?" (p 120). In a chapter on "the race question" he helpfully deploys a paradoxical notion of unity: "All racial groups in South Africa are united: their unity lies in their respective aversion for truth. Blacks do not want to hear anything negative about themselves as a group, and whites are quick to throw stones at a black person who states the truth about them" (p 84).

To this Mashele adds a poignant reflection on a failure of what we might guardedly call a type of 'inter-racial' communication:

"Both well-to-do white and black parents place their hopes in the fact that their children got to the same schools, and believe that their children will somehow integrate. But they do not make an effort to facilitate this integration beyond the school fence ... the adults do not know how to relate to one another. They do not know what to say when they get to one another's gates, or how to engage in unpretentious conversation while their children play. As a result they stand in the way of their children's innocent yearning for genuine inter-racial friendships" (p 85).

One might phrase this differently, drawing on a psychoanalytic vocabulary, pinpointing the communication impasse imposed by the prospect of whites and blacks both still suffering racialised fantasies about one another. What we may have thought was purely a colonial or apartheid phenomena, namely the preoccupation with the imagined desires and intents of (racialised) others, has not been surmounted, 20 years after South Africa's democratic era. Awkwardness, self-consciousness and a lack of spontaneity all too often characterize relationships between blacks and whites - such is Mashele's claim. One might equally point here to the forlorn hope, nicely invoked by Mashele, that the younger generation might get right what an older era of South Africans (the "born unfrees" as we might put it) seem unable to manage: non-racialised forms of interaction. This leads to the question: has there been a tacit form of surrender on the part of an older generation of South Africans, namely, a sense that the work of integration has proved too much for us, beyond our capabilities, and that it must now be left to our children?

Mashele also includes some memorable thoughts on racism in its relation to humanism. Although these ideas at first seem uninspired, unoriginal, marked by the tone of sentimental moral humanism, they do find their mark in respect of the (post)apartheid context: "The majority of whites do not know how to be fully human in relation to blacks, and blacks are equally conflicted regarding how to be human towards whites ... most whites and blacks in South Africa ... lead daily lives of pretence towards each other ... The truth is that racial integration in South Africa remains a myth" (pp 58-60).

Many would argue that such commentary is lacking in nuance. The spectrum of subjectivities in (post)apartheid South Africa can no longer, after all, be divided into categories of "black" and "white". Nevertheless, Mashele is right to describe the everyday performativity of non-racialism that so many of us - racial categorizations aside - are deeply complicit in. Such performances of non-racialism - a distinctive form of postcolonial dramaturgy - of course contrast dramatically with the multiple realities of racialized difference as they manifest in South African society today.

Mashele is also right to single out a type of distinctive post-apartheid white phobia: the fear of being labelled racist. This nervousness contributes not only to a sharp decline in political discourse, but for Mashele, to an "artificial national consensus ... based on a philosophy of conformity" (p 71). The most perspicacious passage in the text discusses the subject-to-society relation, and indeed, the ritualized activity of complaint which particularly characterizes the South African public sphere.

"One individual removes himself from [what is seen as] immoral society, followed by another, and another, and by many more, until all morally and ethically guilty individuals disappear into their artificially constructed zones of immunity. This retreat from society leaves us with an uninhabited geographic space, abandoned by individual monads who have fled into individual zones of safety, where individuals are not seen as part of a decaying society ... In the end no single citizen views his actions as constitutive of the stuff that degenerates the social fabric. We all sit comfortably in our artificially constructed zones of immunity, and we distantly see a morally corrupt society through the lens of our individual subjectivity" (pp 92-93).

We have thus a failure of agency, a situation wherein individuals ex-nominate themselves from society which becomes the receptacle of many condemned values. In locating their own sense of agency outside of - and typically as opposed to - the broader public sphere, such individuals failure to grasp that this is not an isolated phenomenon, and that the similar actions of many others itself leads to the malaise of values that is being decried. Exempting ourselves from the society

we condemn is itself a part of what is ultimately condemnable about the society: it becomes an evacuated space of public participation.

Mashele is of course drawing here upon the familiar Hegelian theme of the beautiful soul who castigates the surrounding world without realizing that they are themselves complicit in what they so bitterly resent. “[A] finger-pointing South African fails to understand the dialectical interplay between himself and society; thus does he see himself as a deserving beneficiary of the morality that immunizes the observer” (p 89).

This is a fine point and it is well made. The problem though is that in his more moralising moments, Mashele falls prey to his own critique. In a chapter on immoral and social decay he regrets the growing number of children raised by single mothers in contemporary South Africa and the “overwhelming majority of husbands and wives who have extramarital affairs” (p 97). He likewise invokes the fight of good against evil, an odd gesture in a book that approvingly cites Nietzsche. In such sections it becomes clear that Mashele’s is essentially a conservative vision. It is likewise apparent that he is prone to locate himself outside of the society whose decline he spends so much time chronicling.