

Passages to Freedom: The Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa

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Thirteen years after the formal abolition of apartheid, South Africa is no longer what it used to be. It is coming out of the dark age of white supremacy. Whether by design or not, the country is undergoing multiple and systemic transitions, at different paces and rhythms. In an age that has witnessed an exacerbation of historically entrenched racial hierarchies, it is involved in one of the few contemporary global experiments with a view of creating the first credible nonracial society on the planet.

To a large extent, this involves deracializing the ownership of assets and cultural capital while reconciling the principles of equal protection, affirmative action, and nondiscrimination. This experiment's chances of success cannot be ruled out. But nor can they be taken for granted, so paradoxical and contradictory are, in this instance, the relations between the "forces of capital and cultural production known as globalization and the processes of subject articulation known as racialization."¹

There are significantly more blacks in the middle and upper classes today than there were twenty years ago. In the words of a black female entrepreneur, some blacks have more than one luxury vehicle. They own more than one home and can afford to send their children to private schools and buy them cell phones. Notwithstanding the extent of the abuse and daily humiliation and degradation of farmworkers and tenants in rural areas and small towns, the overt daily horrors of segregation have declined dramatically, at least in the major metropoli-

1. Kamari Maxine Clarke, ed., *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

tan centers.² Although a lot remains to be done, blacks are visible in positions of leadership, affluence, and influence in almost every sector of South African life (government, business, industry, banking and commerce, higher education, health, media, and so on). The meaning of race and the nature of racial identity are far more complex and ambiguous now than they have ever been before. The categories “black,” “Afrikaner,” “white,” “colored,” and “Asian” are no longer pre-fixed. The discourses through which South Africans represent race relations are changing. Racism itself no longer seems to reside exclusively in the economic and social settings of yesteryear; instead it seems to be migrating into the realm of privately held beliefs.

But the defeat of legalized white supremacy has not ended the struggle for racial equality. Pervasive material inequality between whites and blacks coexists with formal legal equality. To be sure, in major corporations, substantial sales of shares have been sold to blacks who, in virtually all cases, did not have the requisite capital to acquire the stakes being sold. A drive to ensure representation at board and management level is also under way. Preferential procurement of goods and services from black- and female-owned enterprises is now the rule.

Far from leading to a wider distribution of wealth, however, most of these efforts—including employment equity measures and skills development—seem to foster a culture of cronyism, clientelism, and corruption. Many participants in equity transactions have financed their acquisitions using debt, or a mix of debt and equity finance. Black South Africans still command less than 5 percent of the national economy. Whites still occupy about 75 percent of top management posts in South Africa. Racial and gender imbalances in the distribution of wealth, income, and opportunity are still the rule.³ Too many poor blacks are still not in a position to create something meaningful with their lives.

The moment when South Africa will be able to recognize itself and be recognized as a truly *nonracial community* is still far away. The dirty little secret of prejudice keeps breaking wide open, often in the guise of debates about things that seemingly have nothing to do with race as such—poverty, crime, corruption, HIV-AIDS, rape, sports, questions of linguistic and cultural pluralism, or, more recently, the change of names of roads, dams, boulevards, avenues, public places,

2. See, for instance, Wonder Hlongwa, “A Place Where Black Life Is Cheap,” *City Press*, July 22, 2007.

3. Department of Labour, *Commission of Employment Equity Annual Report 2006–2007* (Pretoria, South Africa: Government Printers, 2007).

cities, and airports, or the erection of monuments commemorating past struggles or celebrating newfound freedoms.

Because “transformation” or “empowerment” (the set of policies designed by the government and the private sector to redress past racial discriminations and to redistribute wealth and income to previously disadvantaged groups) involves both moral questions of justice and equality and pragmatic and instrumental questions of power and social engineering, it epitomizes more than any other postapartheid project the current difficulty of overcoming whiteness and blackness. It is therefore not surprising that the debate on “transformation” has become more and more contentious, even at times acrimonious. It is as if South Africa is unable to face up to race at the very moment when the walls of racism, while still in place, are nevertheless tumbling.⁴

Proponents of “transformation” (not all of whom are black) and those who oppose it (not all of whom are white) disagree about what it is, why it is needed, and how it should be implemented. Is it a form of reparation and redress or, rather, a temporary expedient that will at some point wither away? Can an injustice rendered in the past against a black person be compensated for through discrimination against a white in the present? Do claims for racial rectification advanced by former victims of racial discrimination irremediably compromise the nonracialist principles enshrined in the Constitution?

In a country where very few apartheid-era atrocities have been prosecuted, where key political figures refused to testify to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where there have been hardly any acts of public contrition from former executioners and where most killers and torturers have escaped jail time, the persistent denial of white privilege partly explains the acrimonious nature of the controversy. But so does the drive to assert a form of black identity predicated on the idea of victimhood.⁵ The two defensive logics of black victimhood and white denialism collide and collude, often in unexpected ways. Together, they gradually foster a culture of mutual *ressentiment*, which, in turn, isolates freedom from responsibility and seriously undermines the prospect of a truly nonracial future. Furthermore, the logic of mutual *ressentiment* frustrates blacks’ sense of ownership of this country while foreclosing whites’ sense of truly belonging to this place and to this nation.

4. Sarah Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16 (2004): 430–52.

5. On these questions, see Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 239–79.

Self-Absolution

Current South African disputes about “transformation” are therefore expressive of the extent to which, thirteen years into democracy, the country finds it difficult to clearly articulate the ethics of care and responsibility, duties and obligations that freedom demands. These disputes are not unlike similar controversies in other formerly racist states. Take, for instance, the United States, where there have been two relatively unsuccessful historic efforts to undo the legacy of racial inequality. The first—Reconstruction—was initiated after the Civil War.⁶ The second was the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

It helps to see each of these historic efforts as an attempt by the United States to negotiate the contradictions between the nation’s ideals of egalitarianism and its practices of racial subordination and victimization. It also helps to remember that after each of these major initiatives, the operation of white privilege and supremacy could not proceed as before. In an era of legal racial equality, white racism has had to don new clothes. For instance, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the principle of racial equality found widespread acceptance among whites even as substantial numbers later rejected policies designed to implement it. Although most whites came to consider themselves free of racial bias, they nevertheless sought to maintain their social distance from people of color.⁷

They continued to embrace the privileges of white skin and devoted an extraordinary amount of energy to restoring their normalcy. Not only did racism become subtle and often unconsciously practiced but many whites even went so far as to declare that racism was a thing of the past. They argued that in fact white men were now suffering from reverse discrimination. Today, the dominant claim in America is that racism is dead. America has solved its race problem, we are told, and can now be “color-blind.” As a result, race-specific policies such as affirmative action can no longer be justified.⁸

Similar developments can be observed in South Africa. To be sure, not all white South Africans think alike or share the same political and economic interests. Very often, those whites who are the most committed to achieving genuine

6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

7. See Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

8. Michael K. Brown, Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman, *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

racial equality are not recognized and are hardly heard. Many—including former anti-apartheid activists—have been sidelined. Keen to protect their newly gained positions against challenges, the new ruling black elites have failed to tap into the immense reservoir of goodwill and talent among white professionals, some of whom do not support the governing party (the African National Congress) but are eager to fully exercise their citizenship and contribute to the building of a nonracial society.

It is nevertheless true that according to many former beneficiaries of past racial atrocities, reconciliation means that blacks should forget about South Africa's fractured past and move on. It is argued that white youth in particular cannot be blamed for acts of racial discrimination committed long before they were born. Many whites have retreated to a comfortable position of personal nonculpability and are unwilling to tell the truth about past misdeeds. Born to positions of enormous social and economic advantage, they are reluctant to wash their hands of the privileges they accumulated over three and a half centuries.

They have wholeheartedly espoused the promises of individualistic liberty, which they now oppose to the requisites of racial justice. Perhaps more than South African black citizens, they now believe in the liberal conservative ideology of the self-reliant and self-made subject and pretend that thirteen years after liberation, white racism can no longer be considered the most important cause of black poverty. Nor can it be held responsible any longer, they argue, for the troubling gaps in life chances between black South Africans and their white compatriots.⁹

Instead they maintain that once blacks have been granted equality before the law, no further action is needed. They also believe that racial disparities in South Africa today are either the result of the misguided policies of a corrupt and incompetent black government or simply a manifestation of the moral failure of individual blacks—those who do not work hard enough, do not go to school, do not live an ethical life, and do not know how to steer clear of crime, corruption, and illness. To advocate the redress of past injustices and the undoing of a racist legacy that cumulatively resulted in a profound imbalance in the fundamental structures of opportunity (housing, education, income, transportation, employment, social insurance) is proclaimed unfair by white political parties such as the Democratic Alliance, white trade unions such as Solidarity, and white civic and business organizations.

9. See Stanley Uys, "Afrikaners 'Tired of Saying Sorry,'" *ever-fasternews.com*, June 13, 2007, www.ever-fasternews.com/index.php?php_action=read_article&article_id=440.

Many doubt whether “transformation” has accomplished anything of value.¹⁰ “Transformation” is said to interfere with market rationality, discourage foreign direct investment, and act as a form of reverse racism and discrimination against whites, who, disenfranchised, now have no choice but to leave the country. Those who cannot leave have but a fleeting attachment to the new democratic order. Unable to give up their former investment in the psychic and material benefits of whiteness, they vacillate. As their former identity unravels and its old symbols crumble, they retire into racially secluded enclaves. Instead of practicing freedom, they opt for a politics of recrimination, heckling, and rancor.

The kind of casuistry and formalism used by conservative opponents of “affirmative action” in the United States is now peddled in some white South African academic circles, business and political organizations, trade unions, and think tanks: the more fortunate black South Africans receive a disproportionate share of the benefits of “transformation”; “transformation” has done relatively little, on balance, to help blacks in general or poor blacks in particular; “transformation” generates major social costs that fall disproportionately on whites; redistribution is a process in which what is lost by one group exceeds what is gained by another, making the society as a whole worse off.¹¹

A radical revision of South Africa’s white supremacist ideology is therefore taking place. White supremacy no longer involves asserting the “natural inferiority” of blacks and rejecting the idea of a common humanity, a world of individuals endowed with common rights. Instead, the defense of racial inequality and stratification is articulated in two ways. First, the moral legitimacy and appropriateness of policies of redress are challenged. This argument rests on the belief that law should neither mandate social equality nor attempt to eradicate conditions of racial inequality and the legacy of past victimization.

Second, the apologetics for racial inequality is gradually couched in the rhetoric of rights, fairness, and equality. Such rhetoric is mobilized in an effort to institutionalize a racial privilege that is trying to mask its racial nature. In essence, those who deny that past racial injustices can be rectified by legally enforced and

10. “It has enriched only a small elite,” writes Nikki de Havilland, deputy director of the F. W. de Klerk Foundation Centre for Constitutional Rights. It only favors “well-connected businessmen for state contracts,” he adds. See “Affirmative Action Is Not Working,” *Legalbrief Today*, April 26, 2007, www.legalbrief.co.za/article.php?story=20070426162211935.

11. Read Thomas Sowell, *Affirmative Action Around the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004). For a local version of casuistry and formalism, see David Benatar, “Affirmative Action Not the Way to Tackle Injustice,” *ever-fasternews.com*, April 14, 2007, www.ever-fasternews.com/index.php?php_action=read_article&article_id=376.

race-conscious remedies in the present hope that real differences among racial groups will thereby be protected and preserved and the imperative of justice and redress indefinitely postponed.

Such a racially inspired critique of “transformation” is different from the class-based critique emanating from certain quarters of native opinion—for example, from predominantly black trade unions, such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and political parties allied with the ruling party, such as the South African Communist Party. Thus, for Moeletsi Mbeki, South Africa’s ruling class is composed of two groups. The first, the white economic oligarchy, owns and controls the minerals-energy complex that constitutes the dominant core of South Africa’s productive economy. The second, the politically dominant black upper middle class, oversees the redistribution of wealth toward consumption.

For Moeletsi Mbeki, “transformation” is the name of the historical compromise achieved by these two groups during the negotiations that led to the 1994 political settlement. “Transformation” entails wealth distribution from white capital and large corporations to the black upper middle class, and the creation of a class of blacks with capital. Less than a policy, it is a method perfected by the oligarchy to placate the political elites and to buy protection. Among the many effects of this wealth redistribution program are not only political stability and economic prosperity, but also the emergence of an unproductive, comprador class of rich black politicians and ex-politicians who depend on white capital and pursue a parasitic relationship with the government.¹²

For more radical black critics, this accumulation path is not simply a betrayal of the poor. It also increases inequality among black people and reproduces a situation not too dissimilar to the racial, class, and gender regime under apartheid. It exacerbates racialized poverty and, more ominously, fosters the creation of a vast urban black underclass—a quietly ticking bomb.¹³ For other critics still, capital should be allowed to accumulate in the hands of a small group of black tycoons, since wealth dispersed among many shareholders is unlikely to achieve as much leverage as wealth concentrated within a small group.¹⁴

12. Moeletsi Mbeki, “Concepts of Transformation and the Social Structure of South Africa,” in *Visions of Black Economic Empowerment* (Johannesburg: David Krut, 2007), 216–26.

13. Blade Nzimande, in *Umsebenzi Online*, the online journal of the South African Communist Party, October 6, 2004, www.sacp.org.za.

14. Khehla Shubane, “An Argument for Capital Concentration and Socially Responsible Investing,” in *Visions*, 162–76.

It is one of the many ironies of the 1994 “negotiated settlement” that a large number of white South Africans can simultaneously stigmatize the project of “transformation” and continue to feel entitled to their privileged position in society. They are willing to fight for their constitutional rights, but they are not ready to contemplate, and deal with, the accumulated atrocities on which these privileges rest.

For centuries, whites in South Africa — and not only Afrikaners — enjoyed unfair advantages in the labor market. As in the United States, they were able to rig the rules of the game and control access to jobs and promotions while closing off blacks’ access to training or education. The disempowerment and dispossession of black people goes farther back than earlier processes of proletarianization in the nineteenth century. The introduction of the pass system, the institutionalization of the cheap labor system, the exclusion from property ownership — these tactics were instrumental to the accumulation of wealth, land, and power among whites, on the one hand, and the development of patterns of dispossession among blacks, on the other.¹⁵

To protect white privilege, those in power created boundaries in the form of laws, customs, and traditions. A deeply embedded racist ethos helped to justify whites’ loss of feeling for human fellowship with blacks. This is how white privilege came to be seen as an entitlement that was hardly ever contested. Over many centuries, whites developed an ability to pass on to succeeding generations the spoils of racial violence and atrocities. These took the form of monetary or property value, banking practices, housing and land assets, educational resources, cultural capital, insider networks, good jobs, and a sense of self-esteem, dignity, and superiority.

The process by which white privilege was legislated has been well documented. It started as a genuine concern for the real problem of white poverty. But from the early 1920s on, the harder the state worked to alleviate white poverty and rehabilitate poor whites, the more racist it became. Already with the Pact’s victory in 1924, W. F. Hertzog wanted to replace large numbers of cheap black labor with unskilled or semiskilled whites. “Uncivilized labor” was replaced with “civilized labor” at “civilized wages,” particularly in the railways, the harbors, the post office, and local government.

15. Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

Employers who hired “whites only” received preference for state contracts. Under the policy of import substitution, customs were relaxed for protected industries that employed a certain percentage of whites. A Wage Board allowed the state to enforce minimum wages. Meanwhile, the trades were closed to blacks as a result of the Apprentice Act. Welfare was reorganized. Extended state assistance was provided to poor whites in the form of public works, vocational guidance, health services and housing, social clubs, pensions for poor mothers or the elderly, and sick or disability grants.¹⁶

Later, the capital accumulated in farming flowed into financial institutions, which in turn helped greatly to diversify the range of Afrikaner commerce. A recapitalization of the education sector, especially at the university level, expanded Afrikaner involvement in a whole range of professions in the public and private sector. A new generation of Afrikaner entrepreneurs spearheaded upward social mobility. Sanlam and Trustbank, among others, gave Afrikaners a footing in a commercial world dominated by English corporations. Anglophone mining houses made space for Afrikaner-controlled corporations to buy into this sector. In 1946, per capita income among Afrikaans-speaking whites was less than half that of English speakers. By the late 1970s, it had risen to 80 percent and was heading toward parity. This is how white South Africa came to enjoy a standard of living equal to that of the richest countries in the North.¹⁷

Today, large sections of the South African white population can no longer see the advantages they gained from these arrangements. Indeed, in order to oppose “transformation,” they have to mentally erase the past and forget the element of cruelty and brutality it took to maintain white privilege. Whites have to be discouraged from understanding the benefits that still accompany their own skin color, even in the new democratic dispensation. Instead, in a typically neoconservative move, they are encouraged to absolve themselves from the sins of the past and to perceive themselves as the new victims of a corrupt and incompetent black government that, in addition, is “soft on crime.”

The Poor Whites’ Predicament

But what about today’s poor whites? A century ago, the African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois remarked that white workers’ choice to define themselves by their whiteness was understandable in view of its short-term advantages. These

16. Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003).

17. Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 2002).

short-term advantages were manifested in, for instance, higher wages than those paid to people of color. But even when white workers received a low monetary wage, Du Bois added, they were compensated in part by a public and psychological wage that amounted to a tangible benefit acquired at the expense of people of color.

In the United States today, poor whites are encouraged to support the dismantling of the welfare state and the cutting of specific policies that could improve their life chances. Although policies stigmatized as “affirmative action” have helped hundreds of thousands of white women enter colleges, secure employment, and gain promotions, poor whites are persuaded that “the blacks get more.” For this reason, they are the most virulent opponents of “affirmative action,” although they, too, suffer from economic hardship, social stigma, and political disempowerment.

South Africa has a long history of poor whites—a destitute class and, as in the American South described by Du Bois, an illiterate class, one with little self-respect and no self-reliance, with an intense religious excitability and a deep-rooted antagonism toward blacks. Here, racism has always played an important role in maintaining the self-esteem of the poor whites. Very often, the white working class has thought of itself and its interests as predominantly white. As a result, it has been unable to contemplate a struggle of united white and black labor against the exploiters. Poor whites have always believed that black emancipation will keep them out of work and threaten their human worth, or even their masculinity. That is one of the reasons why white society in South Africa, as in America, long stood against democracy, which might have emancipated blacks.

Historically, therefore, race has played a powerful role in fracturing classes and serving as a barrier to alternative forms of cross-racial solidarity. It is estimated that today, of about 4.5 million white South Africans, 400,000 are poor whites, most of whom come from “historically poor white families.” Since 1994 and the advent of globalization, they are forced to compete with blacks in an unstable labor market without the privilege of their whiteness. No wonder they cling so tightly to the symbolic vestiges of a racist past as a way of softening their newfound material precariousness. Consumed by nostalgia and melancholia, they cannot imagine what it means to be white in Africa without the paraphernalia of apartheid (the church, the national-Christian ideology, the army, black servants, and so on). But evidence also suggests that some members of the new white underclass—those who navigate cross-racial inner-city life as beggars and destitute—are forced to undo the racism of earlier generations.

The end of apartheid, however, has not affected the structural positions the

white propertied classes enjoyed during the period of white supremacy. If anything, these whites are doing better today, economically speaking, than ever before. To be sure, they lost political power. But they did not die as a class. In most instances, they can still use their economic muscle and social capital to co-opt an increasingly predatory black elite, therefore gaining the upper hand, to the point of turning the “transformation project” to their own advantage.

Passage to Freedom

The question of what to do with the inequalities that have resulted from unfair policies consistently applied over centuries is both ethical and pragmatic. To achieve a modicum of social justice after apartheid has been abolished and racial segregation outlawed, South Africa must dismantle the barriers that were erected against full justice for all and attend to distributional inequalities. For black South Africans in particular, freedom must translate into an expanded control over their labor and their lives. It should be the goal of “transformation” to galvanize them as they struggle to stop the violence that preyed on their vulnerabilities during the years of racial oppression. But as they labor to make their lives anew, what they create is conditioned by what they had endured in the past.

In principle, there is nothing fundamentally illegitimate in providing relief to those who, in the past, have been injured by race-based state action. This is not the same as systematically denying to innocent white citizens equal rights and opportunities. Yet it is true that policies of racial rectification might constrain their opportunities in certain areas of public and economic life. The deprivation they might endure in the process should, in any case, be temporary. It can in no way be equated with the race discrimination and dehumanization blacks suffered under colonialism and apartheid.

On the other hand, the project of “transformation” cannot be confined to a largely managerial, bureaucratic, or quantitative exercise with the primary concern of ensuring that adequate numbers of blacks find places in government, higher education, commerce, and industry in general. South Africa cannot afford to simply replicate the old Afrikaner model of filling state corporations, civil service, and the universities with incompetent citizens while using state patronage to promote dubious business ventures.

Devoid of any ethical consideration, the project of “transformation” can be catastrophic in terms of its costs and its consequences. Opponents of “transformation” are right when they point to loss of efficiency, especially when unqualified black persons are chosen over more qualified whites. The “transformation”

project can easily turn into a social quackery — blacks coming to wreak havoc in the former master's house after the latter has relinquished political power. This is indeed what has been observed in countless African postcolonial societies under the rubric of “indigenization.” The morality of the project of “transformation” should be judged by the extent to which it fosters equality and restores capabilities to those who have been deprived of these by unjust laws and racist policies.

But equality does not mean equal distribution of everything to everyone. It means instead the equal treatment of everyone, the granting of the same weight to everyone. South Africa constitutionally subscribes to the idea that all South Africans, black and white, are subjected to the same rule. Furthermore, the latter should be applied in a manner that is always equal. “Transformation,” on the other hand, requires that when two individuals possess the same qualifications, preference should be given to the “formerly disadvantaged” individual. It therefore objectively introduces a degree of inequality in the very process by which it aims at reaching the goal of equality. Indeed, in the calculus of “transformation,” not everyone counts as much, or has the same weight. This, in itself, constitutes a serious risk for the ethical consensus among equals that is the essence of democracy.

Furthermore, morally bankrupt as it was, something can be learned from the Afrikaner model of “empowerment” (*reddingsdaad*). This was largely a social movement and not simply a state-inspired initiative. It is significant that this was an economic movement with intellectual and social foundations. In order to foster their economic revolution, the Afrikaners created two structures: the Federale Volksbelegging (Federal People's Investment) and the Reddingsdaadbond. Their role was to mobilize capital — to pool the financial resources of white Afrikaans commercial farmers, entrepreneurs, and workers with the goal of launching Afrikaner businesses. That is how almost every Afrikaner came to have something at stake in the future of South Africa — a home, education, a job, something they were ready to fight for and to protect.

For Afrikaners to emerge from the weight of oligopolistic English political and economic domination, they needed to pool their financial resources, regain control over their savings, labor, and buying power, while promoting empowerment at various levels, including language, culture, and politics. This is how they achieved a transformation of ownership in the domestic economy.

Today, there is no ethical consensus regarding “transformation.” The task facing South Africa is therefore to rebuild a cross-racial ethical consensus around this project. Used as an expediency, “transformation” is also susceptible to lead-

ing to moral corruption. It risks codifying within the law and in the psyche of its beneficiaries the very powerlessness it aims to redress. It can socially stigmatize black South Africans by turning their past injuries into lucrative assets and entitlements. Furthermore, it risks turning victimhood into an *affect* as well as a social position.

Were blackness to be rooted predominantly in an unredeemable injury and seldom in black citizens' duties and obligations with regard to everyone else, South Africa would be unable to achieve the particular forms of ethical life its Constitution requires it to strive for. At the same time, neither political stability nor genuine democracy will be achieved if the beneficiaries of past racial atrocities yield political power while still clinging to the rule of property—that is, the monopoly of ownership of land; capital; access to universities, holiday resorts, and corporate boardrooms; and wages three to six times those of blacks doing the same labor. If the ethical risks involved in the implementation of the project of “transformation” are real, however, so would be the endless deferral of black hopes and, ultimately, freedom. The risk is also that of a reversion of times—the disjointed times of black and white South Africans curving uncertainly toward each other, moving apart once again, reverting, and once again taking up segregated paths.

If the goal of “transformation” is to restore capabilities to those who have historically been deprived of these by unjust laws, barriers that have operated in the past to favor “whites only” should be removed. This is not the same as arguing that the less qualified should be preferred over the better qualified simply because they are black or have been “disadvantaged” in the past. But the formal-legal removal of these barriers is not enough. As evidenced by countless anecdotes in sectors as diverse as higher education, business, and industry, practices and procedures neutral on their face, or in intent, may in fact operate to freeze the status quo and to keep prior discriminations in place under a new guise. Moreover, the racist ethos written in the life of institutions, in the public mind, and in popular culture is the hardest to tackle once the legal and coercive apparatus of apartheid is gone. The removal of these immaterial barriers is mostly the result of new forms of cultural creativity and imagination—a realm whose power is so thoroughly misunderstood by the current government.

Conclusion

In spite of substantial changes, South Africa today is still a nation composed of too many black people in possession of almost nothing—no meaningful founda-

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tion for social and economic autonomy. For too many, the possibility of purchasing much of anything in freedom is still foreclosed.¹⁸ In this context, “transformation” is a justified claim that requires urgent treatment. It will be a justified claim so long as South Africa can establish that it is not pursuing the good by violating the basic requirements of justice itself. Because it is the most likely device to shield the nation from calls for retribution or vengeance, “transformation” is also one of the various mechanisms to achieve true racial equality and, ultimately, real freedom.

Real freedom means “freedom from race”—the kind of freedom that South Africa is likely to enjoy because this nation will have built, for the very first time in the history of humankind, a society, culture, and civilization in which, for once, the color of one’s skin will be superfluous in the overall calculus of status, dignity, opportunities, rights, and obligations. This freedom will originate purely and simply from our being human. And this relation between race, freedom, and democracy might come to constitute South Africa’s unique gift to humanity.

18. This is not dissimilar to how black people’s experiences in slavery shaped their lives in freedom in the southern part of the United States. See Susan Eva O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).