

IVOR CHIPKIN ON NATIONALISM, DEMOCRACY AND THE IDENTITY OF 'THE PEOPLE' IN SOUTH AFRICA

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South Africa is peopled by subjects not fully democratic citizens, argues Ivor Chipkin. For the latter occurs only when fraternity, equality and liberty are exercised with ethical responsibility, in line with the principles universal human rights, and this has not been achieved in theory or practice.

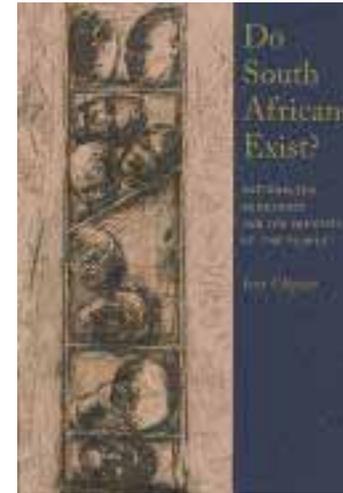
Do South Africans exist? asks Ivor Chipkin in a powerful and evocative book published by Wits University Press in 2007, which masterfully deals with some of the most difficult political issues facing contemporary South Africa. Chipkin has a lively, engaging style which makes it possible to follow his detailed argument. He explores what nationalism, nation and democracy mean in the South African context. Ultimately he suggests that in order for democracy truly to work South Africans' universal imagining of the democratic still has to struggle to accept that every "state is in itself cosmopolitan, indistinct

and contingent because its borders never coincide with any one ethnic or cultural or religious group and because its particular social character is not the expression of some or other pre-given identity".

In this detail political-historical-social study Chipkin suggests that the people of South Africa are still in the process of becoming citizens and should be referred to as "authentic national subject(s)". He argues that the "citizen is hailed through democratic institutions and acts according to democratic norms – (what he calls) 'ethical values'. The (authentic) national subject is produced in and through the nationalist movement, supplemented by state bodies if it comes to power". A Democracy made up of citizens only emerges when fraternity, equality and liberty, are exercised with ethical responsibility, in line with universal human rights principles, by all members of that state. South Africa has not yet established this ideal in practice or theory.

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By analyzing the history and meaning of African Nationalism Chipkin shows that 'true democracy' – its ethics, institutions and ideals – have not been the driving force in the creation of the New South African Nation. Under apartheid African nationalism was about protest and struggle in which Marxist and Leninist ideas of class consciousness, worker-led revolutions and socialism were central; democracy, capitalism and the bourgeois were either considered unimportant or evil. In his chapter on African Nationalism in South Africa, Chipkin argues that while Black Consciousness was weak as a movement, "it



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strongly informed the nationalist imaginary". Biko's ideals of a 'Man-centered society' (of community, communication and clan, in which patriarchy was pivotal) informed the peoples' understanding of the African nationalism and liberation they were fighting for.

Chipkin also analyzes the social imagining that seems to have guided President Thabo Mbeki's governing style and policies. Here he clearly shows how radical ideas of African Nationalism changed in the South African Nation of that era. By unpacking some of Mbeki's rhetoric (his 'I am an African' speech for example) Chipkin shows that while "being an African" was located by Mbeki in the context of the struggle against colonialism, freedom was associated with individualism, democracy, the black bourgeoisie, the English language, and breaks with tribal or clan links.

Through the remainder of the book Chipkin argues that this democratic, capitalist, middle-class, national ideal is impossible because it is conscious-

ly or unconsciously based on a Schmittian idea of friend versus enemy: Us and the negative Other who cannot be trusted. To establish this argument Chipkin explores the hostel violence in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area, and the violence between the ANC-UDF alliance and KwaZuluNatal-based Inkhata in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He concludes that the violence during the late 1980s and 1990s was about them and us – the perpetrator and the victim who cannot, or do not want, to live together as one community. The TRC, instead of bringing about one coherent South African Nation, was based on the premise of human rights and Christian universalistic ideas of reconciliation, which argued that the victims and the perpetrators were both black and white, African and non-African, and were all part of the universal human society. Thus the TRC did not give a clear demarcation of who was and was not South African.

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For Chipkin the building of a national community of citizens in South Africa is impossible until South Africans collectively comprehend that democracy is built on ethical values and the ability to hold difference within the imaging of a specific community. He cites the rebuilding of Manenberg in the Cape after 1994 as an example of the power of ethical citizenship to bring about true re-formation of a community that was divided by violence, race, religion and gangs and, now functions as a stable democracy.

This is an insightful, well researched book, but coming to the end of it I was left asking two ques-

tions. First, what about women and their role in the building of the nation? Chipkin is not unaware of gender issues, but the text would have been so much richer if he had been able to weave a deeper account of the experience of women into the debate. Further, he uses a fresh lens through which to discuss issues of identity and politics in South Africa, but fails to take into account the role of religion in the structuring and re-structuring of South African identities. Nevertheless, together with readers like Colin Bundy and Adam Habib, I would recommend that anyone interested in understanding South Africa should engage with this book, for I am sure this will lead to fruitful conversation.