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The Embrace of Plurality: Openness to the Other as a Foundational Public Norm

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Abstract

Plurality and difference are ubiquitous realities in almost every modern-day society, including South Africa. This heterogeneity, and the often-accompanying fragmentation, significantly complicate social coexistence to the point where it even challenges the political, in that it pushes against the unity and cohesion required for the flourishing of political societies. It weakens and undermines the development of broad social trust and the establishment of a strong civic culture in its communities. Merely suppressing diversity and requiring all to be assimilated to a single culture is not viable however, for it inevitably leads to a society characterised by exclusion, marginalisation and oppression. Only by recognising an open, accommodating ethos towards the other as a foundational public norm can we hope to establish a political order in which we can live well and flourish in the midst of diversity.

Keywords: *Plurality, Diversity, Cohesion, Public Culture*

Introduction

One of the main, yet often forgotten, challenges facing South Africa in its third decade after Apartheid is that of being able to find a basis for enduring co-existence in the midst of its diversity. Yes, the challenges of

poverty, unemployment, deep socio-economic inequality, political instability, institutional decay and corrosive corruption, are almost all-consuming in terms of our civic attention span, and deservedly so. But, as the future viability of South Africa depends on it addressing these challenges, so it also depends on it maintaining a foundation of social trust and civility among its citizens for without it, social discord, coercion, marginalisation, underdevelopment and even deep and violent antagonism will all cloud its future. Living well with diversity in South Africa is thus not just a matter of addressing inequality and power imbalances. It also requires the establishment of a civic moral practice rooted in an acknowledgement of differences and the mutual respect and understanding that draws us together in its midst.

But should we, in light of our history of separation, not emphasise unity rather than our differences? Is making space for difference not a project tinged with the stench of a past we want to set behind us? We must keep in mind, however, that the foundational motivation behind the struggle against oppression and marginalisation in South Africa has all along been framed within the aspiration of creating a society in which people and communities can live a liberated, emancipated life in which there can be an enduring alignment between beliefs and conduct. Since these beliefs and resultant practices harbour the potential for great variety, it can be expected that a multiplicity of cultural expressions and identity construals will prevail within society. South Africa, like any other present-day polity, must learn how to live well with its plurality.

The broad theme of this article is a reflection upon those characteristics of a civic ethic that will contribute to South Africans living well together. The aim is thus to bring clarity to the guiding principles and values such an ethic entails. Or to put it slightly differently, what are the primary norms and virtues that would characterise a moral framework that would engender in South African society the capacity for embracing diversity and plurality without a resort to coercion, exclusion, oppression and marginalisation?

This article serves as a mere prolegomenon to this complex matter of a viable civic ethic by setting out to address a number of modest yet core themes. First, I will clarify the nature of the problem of plurality and fragmentation, specifically as it impacts on the political. It can be referred to as a 'problem' for while we can celebrate the diversity that surround us, there also remains a need for the solidarity and cohesion of a shared

public culture. Many of the good things aspired to in a society, be it security or public order and well-being, can only be attained though collective action. We are thus caught in a tension where we both value and are suspicious of the centripetal *and* the centrifugal forces at work in our society. Secondly, I will briefly sketch the importance of a foundational ethos of embracing those we differ from. That is, of accepting and engaging with plurality, of an openness to the other, of making space for and being reconciled with the other. The prominence of such a moral stance in relation to all the major principles of our civic ethic, be it justice, *ubuntu*, freedom, restitution or whatever else we may choose for our society, will then be considered. Third, and last, I will consider some of the implications of this embrace of difference within a context of togetherness for the academy, particularly for the disciplines of the humanities.

Though this article is written from within a South African context, the global trend of re-emerging tribalisms and populism often accompanied by authoritarian rule, evident in places like India, Turkey, Hungary, Kenya, and the USA, forms its broader context. The South African context thus serves merely as a point of departure for this article so at to consider the broader challenge. In the current global climate, it seems to be a world-wide challenge to overcome the polarity of "either us or them" and to truly live as cohesive and trusting communities.

The Ubiquity of Diversity and Fragmentation

South African society is characterised and has been for a long time, in reality and in the popular mind, by deep diversity, most notably along racial lines and between the haves and the have-nots in terms of wealth and power. These prominent markers of diversity, though particularly central to the South African story, is not unique however as increasing levels of internal differences, fragmentations and inequalities feature prominently in many societies across the globe.

South African history is deeply tainted with pervasive levels of discrimination, oppression and exploitation based in particular on race. Apartheid was rooted in the premise that racial groups differ fundamentally and hierarchically from one another. Race was prioritised in understanding not only a person's sense of self, but particularly also his sense of worth. From this then followed the view that the wellspring of all complexity and problems in society was racial diversity. Frueh

(2004: 67) explain that through the Apartheid system the complexity of social life in South Africa was simplified by "institutionalising the idea that all political interests, all social interaction, indeed all human activity was determined by or at least infected with a single manifestation of identity-race". No matter how multifarious the identities of people, all their actions, even their very being, would always be interpreted though the categories of racial differentiation and valuation. Even though there have been significant shifts in the prominence and substance of racial identity labels in post-1994 South Africa, the enduring legacy of the exclusion and marginalisation entailed in separation and valuation based on race still persists today.

But the challenges of diversity and fragmentation extends much further than that of race. It is also broader than the traditional scholarly concern with race, class and gender.[i] Intersecting differences in terms of class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ways of life and culture, language, region, sexual orientation, value commitments, viewpoint diversity, rural-urban character, birth cohort, settler-indigeneity along with race, are an increasing reality in our increasingly complex society. All these differences constitute and will continue to constitute deep challenges for the academy and for society at large. How will we deal and live with such irreducible difference? Will our theoretical and political imagination be able to absorb and come to terms with it?

To put it a different way, plurality will feature prominently in South Africa's future agenda even if it should manage to address all the legacies of its malignant past. New fragmentations and new interpretations of well-known differences constantly present themselves and will demand from us much political will and courage to navigate successfully. The presence of such fragmentation is however not a uniquely South African phenomenon. It can truly be called a new reality affecting all corners of the globe.

The reasons for this global trend are manifold. There are, for example, increasing levels of human mobility that are changing demographies and the dynamics of human interaction all over the place, to mention but a few standout examples. The opportunities and inequalities created by the global economic system along with depravation, conflicts and others forms of insecurity and instability all lead to large-scale human movement on almost every continent. These continual and ubiquitous movements contribute significantly to the

diversification of populations within societies (see Smith and Favell, 2006).

There has also been a mushrooming of life options for people in the modern world. No longer are people automatically locked into a limited number of life-choices prescribed to them by their culture, history and their gender. The options that people are exposed to and presented with, even within relatively underdeveloped societies, are more than ever before. This adds significantly to the varieties and complexities of life experiences in these societies and therefore further adds to the heterogeneity of societies.

On a broader scale, and underneath these trends, there lies one of the primary facilitators of this growth in fragmentation: the increased atomisation of society largely driven by a commitment to autonomy (see Wagner 2008: 2-3). The reality of this deeply subjective quest for autonomy, and the subjective valuation thereof, ensure that we will be confronted by an increased variety of interpretations of the good life and of how to actualise it. The resultant fragmentation of meaning and interpretation ensure that every conceivable system of order, be it cognitive or institutional, will always be open to reassessment and reconstitution or even to abolition and replacement. Modern life thus favours cultural fragmentation over homogeneity. Any form of cultural stability is thus constantly under strain in light of this subjectivist turn.

The net result of all this is what Berger (2014: 1) calls "pluralism". That is, a social situation where people with different personal and group identities, ethnicities, cultures, moralities and philosophies of life increasingly live overlapping lives as neighbours, colleagues, fellow citizens and even intimate partners. Navigating this complexity is the increasing reality of everyday practical life, and understanding and responding to it one of the main challenges of political theory as an academic field.

Gunnell (2004: 249) affirms this when he argues that a pluralist bias has come to dominate the focus of political theory to the extent that it can be called its "home". For Schlosberg (2006:143) also, pluralism has come to stand at the heart of political theory, both in its acknowledgment of the empirical and experiential basis of moral and cultural plurality and in its focus on the design of political engagement across differences. This deep awareness of pluralism both socially and theoretically thus constrains political theory, argues White (2002: 475), in that it requires a direct and focused engagement with it. He argues that this engagement with pluralism must come mainly in two forms. On the

one hand, exploring strategies and policies that would help society to live well with its pluralities, and, on the other hand, exploring the ethos or ethical posture that would inform these strategies. It is specifically the latter of these that I want to focus on now for it has a lexical priority over the former.

Public Culture, Cohering Norms and Plurality

Is it always necessary or even wise to make room for or acknowledge differences here in South Africa and elsewhere? Are we not making too much of the various categories of differences, be it race, gender, culture, ethnicity and more? Would it not be advisable, and more suitable, to rather place the focus on individual rights and economic and social justice within a universalist paradigm where we then treat everyone the same? Why must we bring in identity, otherness and difference when we can rather just focus on that which we have in common?

The importance of rights, justice, and well-being cannot be denied and need to stand at the centre of our consideration. However, we must recognise that a politics of universality which aims at treating all people the same irrespective of their differences can easily mask the reality of extreme power and wealth imbalances where the broad culture of the dominant group asserts itself over the rest under the guise of universality[ii]. A focus on equal treatment can easily negate or undermine the identity of subalterns and force them into a homogenous mould that does not hold true for them (See Taylor 1994: 43). We therefore must realise, as Volf (1996: 17) did when he reflected on the bloody wars fought in the Balkans during the 1990s, that we have to make space, right alongside our consideration of rights, justice and well-being, for the consideration of diversity and identity.

As increased fragmentation poses a challenge to the universalist framing of rights and justice, it also challenges the modern state for it seems to push against the framing of the common good within the nation state. Habermas, cited in Mendieta and van Antwerpen (2011:15) argues that whereas in the democracies of the latter half of the twentieth century, politics was still able to steer all its various and diverging subsystems, today "the political capacities for protecting social integration are becoming dangerously restricted". The fear seems to be that one of our primary expressions of politics as "legitimised and *public contestation*, primarily by organised and unequal social powers, over access

to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity" (Wolin 1996: 31), is simply no longer capable of holding our political associations together.

We must remember that the very conception of political order that informed the modern state at its birth was closely tied to the notion of unity, or social integration as Habermas calls it, in that the modern state came to be understood as an often diverse people of a specific territory united in their submission to a single sovereign authority while being united in a shared public culture, a supreme identity, namely that of their state. There is therefore a deep prioritisation of unity and homogeneity that has characterised the modern state since its inception. This emphasis on unity or commonality is not insignificant or just symbolic for from this flows much of the good that comes from the state itself (Fukuyama 2014; Parekh 2006: 184-186). This includes key characteristics and benefits of the state such the rule of law and the establishment of collectively binding and enforceable decisions and a stable and clear structure of authority both of which then serve as a basis for the management of conflicts, the establishment of social justice, enhanced welfare and growth, room for specialisation and innovation, the warmth and care of community, and an overall robustness to the society which will enable it to confidently face the vicissitudes of life. However, deep fragmentation and the inherent contestation in politics increasingly pose a challenge to, and militate against, the viability of the existence of a cohering, shared public culture within a common public space.

All of the benefits that accrue from being associated together depend on the presence of a minimal level of trust and a sense of common belonging among the citizens of the state. The importance of such an interconnectedness throughout society should then not be underestimated. The rapid increase in societal diversity and fragmentation in recent years has not changed this. In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, the greater the diversity in a society, the greater is the necessary level of cohesion required for it to hold itself together, for a "weakly held society feels threatened by difference and lacks the confidence and the willingness to welcome and live with them" (Parekh 2006: 196). The challenge is thus to emphasise common belonging and interconnectedness, while still doing justice to uniqueness.

Calls for such cohesion within the society and the emphasis on a strong public culture that usually goes with it, can however evoke a negative response from those who fear that it might impose ahomogen-

ising imperative on members of society, usually at the behest of a self-serving political elite, that all must then conform to. This fear should be taken seriously and cannot be too glibly dismissed, for the conforming to an officially sanctioned manner-of-life is a low-hanging fruit that many an oppressive regime quickly reaches for. In light of this danger, it may be helpful to keep in mind that while a shared public culture does imply a shared understanding of how public life should progress and how to share values and norms in the society, it does not prescribe what those norms should be nor does it necessarily require uniformity on *all* norms and beliefs (Lenard 2012: 76). This is especially helpful to remember as public culture can provide the necessary counterweight to the centrifugal tendencies so prevalent today so as to still garner the common benefits of life in a state to all its citizens. The value of the presence of such a public culture with its sheared values and principles for a heterogeneous society should thus not the underestimated.

In light of the prominence of societal fragmentation, the importance of a cohering element necessary to counterbalance this has become one of the major challenges of our time. It is regarded as so vital that it is made the central aspect of a new model of political order sketched out in broad outlines by Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor (2011). They regard it as the most viable model for political order in these days. They explain that this would be a model "founded, on one hand, on an agreement about basic political principles and, on the other, on respect for … plurality. [This is] the model most likely to lead to a just and sufficiently harmonious coexistence" (Maclure & Taylor 2011: 5).

In other words, they argue that coexistence in a society marked by diversity requires society-wide agreement about certain principles, often identifiable as norms and values, that will then serve as the basis for the ordering of this community as a whole in spite of its diversity pulling it in different directions. These shared principles will frame the practices of its public culture and serve as the basis for a common identity. From these principles and values will then flow a sense of national selfhood and the worthiness and legitimacy we appreciate in it.

But there is more. We need to note that Maclure and Taylor specifically included a second aspect, namely "respect for plurality" in the description of this model of political order. The implication of irreducible difference in society is that differences will never be fully reconciled and integrated and will thus have to be accommodated in daily coexistence. Otherness will therefore be a constantly present reality even

as we pursue shared basic principles around which we build our common story. Without a predisposition of accepting these differences, of perpetually welcoming the other, of being comfortable with those of differing cultures and viewpoints, all the common ideals and values we aspire to, even the most noble, can become corrupted to the point of actually enabling oppression and exclusion. Our acceptance of, and even respect for plurality provides a foundation on which to build the rest of the societal values and principles we cohere around. Without it even our treasured values that are supposed to act as binding agents can actually drive us apart.

To illustrate this vital point, one can note that even the pursuit of justice in society, that highly prized aspiration Rawls refers to as the "first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls 1971: 3), can become an instrument of marginalisation and even violent oppression. Nietzsche elucidates how this can happen with his discussion on 'phariseeism' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* where he argues that the greatest danger for humanity lies with "the good and the just" (see Nietzsche 2006: 170-71). Those who pursue justice can be so sure that they know what is just and good, it can be so obvious to them, that they would pronounce a woe on those who are not sure and even crucify those who question them. He explains that "their spirit is imprisoned in their good conscience" and that they thus cannot see beyond their own conception of justice for, "[t]he stupidity of the [just] is unfathomably clever". Even the pursuit of the good and the just thus need some guardrails. To put it differently, even our most generous pursuits after justice must always be grounded in a *telos* aimed at making space for and accepting those who differ from us, otherwise our justice will becomes again but an expression of an 'us *vs* them' and the coercion, marginalisation and exclusion that it all entails.

Some have argued that the all-embracing nature of African ethics, expressed in concepts such as *ubuntu,* leads to an understanding of justice that can serve as such an all-embracing public norm for society. African conceptions of justice do have much to offer in this regard. It is evident already in the ancient Egyptian concept of *Ma'at* which scholars such as Diop (1954) and Obenga (2006: 48) believe served as the basis for the development of African moral philosophy. *Ma'at* is a broad concept of social order and refers to the role and place of the individual within society, to the place of society within the Pharaonic state and to the place of the state in the cosmos, and it implies a unity of the cosmos and society, of justice and order. *Ma'at* establishes an expectation for political

order, social justice and harmony between humans, and between humans and gods. Justice in ancient Egypt, in the context of *Ma'at*, is thus a kind of connective justice that connects people to each other by a feeling of responsibility and trust where the common good is human interconnectedness. *Ma'at* is thus a principle of integration of the individual into the structure of the community. Individuals need to recognise and take their roles as part of a comprehensive whole seriously and recognise their place in the community so as to keep the world moving and to maintain social harmony (Graness 2017: 306-308). It is exactly this connective dimension which makes authors like Obenga and Diop (see above) draw connections between *Ma'at* and indigenous concepts in Africa south of the Sahara, notably also to *Ubuntu* (see Broodryk, 2008), where the interconnection between the physical and the metaphysical, the visible and the invisible, human and non-human beings, the living, the ancestors and the unborn are recognised (Kelbessa 2011: 569-570). *Ubuntu* declares that the "…human self… only exists in relationship to its surroundings; these relationships are what it is. And the most important relationships are the relationships we have with other persons" (Shutte 2001: 23). Justice in light of *Ubuntu* is a moral "…attitude of basic respect and recognition of the rights of others in order to promote human dignity and harmonious, peaceful coexistence" (Graness 2017: 311).

Ubuntu thus appears to be intimately suitable as the foundational public norm for a pluralistic society. The problem however is that it is at times so closely tied to African ethics and ontologies, and even to the very linguistic peculiarities and the epistemological structure of the Bantu language (see the works of Mogobe B. Ramose, notably Ramose 2003: 324-330) that it is viewed as potentially exclusionary to very different cultural, epistemological and ontological persuasions. *Ubuntu* thus also needs to be grounded in a radical ethos of embrace of deep difference for its contribution to the problem of plurality to be fully realised.

As a further and last illustration of the lexical priority of openness to deep difference as a public norm, think of the principle of freedom, a sacred ideal of ours which tends to frame all our pursuits after justice and dignity (Taylor 1985: 318ff). Volf (1996: 102) states that all of our social projects built around the notion of freedom and emancipation tends to operate within the dyad of "oppression" and "liberation" wherein oppression acts as the negative, liberation as its negation, with

freedom then the resulting positive. This can lead to some problems however if we treat it as the overarching schema for all social ordering as we are often tempted to do, for more often than not, conflicts are messy. Volf (1996: 103) explains that it is simply not the case that one can construe narratives of the encounter between parties in conflict as stories of pure evil on the one side and indubitable good on the other. Such a Manichaean reading of events simply does not take into consideration the extent to which conflicts compromise all parties involved. Conflicts usually also taint the oppressed who in the course of their struggle fall into deplorable and vicious behaviour. However, even if one insists on arguing for such a clear moral division in some cases, be it the struggle against Nazi brutality or the Apartheid system, a second problem remains: What happens when, armed with the belief in the rightness of its own cause, one side wins? How will the liberated oppressed live with their conquered oppressors? A default response is usually that the 'oppressors themselves need to be liberated', which is the answer that the 'oppression/liberation' schema suggests to us. The previous oppressors have to be set free from the mindsets and enabling systems which served them in their oppression of the now freshly liberated victims. But is this argument complete? Does it not betray an ideological dogmatism because it fails to recognise that when the victims become liberators, it is they also, and not only the oppressors, who might need to change (Volf 1996: 103-104)? The victims themselves have been partially shaped by their oppression and struggle and moulded in its image. We thus cannot apply a simple subtraction theory which states that if we only remove all the instruments and agents of oppression then all will be okay. The victims will have to go through a process of laying down all the habits of the old oppressive system and their fight against it that they wittingly and unwittingly picked up and engage in a process of recovery and rediscovery after liberation. As Bauman (1995: 183f) argues, so often the superior and oppressive morality turns out to be the morality of the superior, even if it is a morality of a previous victim. If the victim continually builds her identity on her liberation, then her previous oppression will still be a constant companion hovering in the background, engendering along with it the exclusionary categories necessary to establish its plausibility. Victims will thus have to be emancipated from their emancipation so as to fully banish the ghosts of their past and to ensure the possibility of mutual coexistence of all.

Liberation simply does not have the substantive coherence to, on its own, serve as the basis for the ideal.

The important implication is that an ethos of deep acceptance of plurality needs to act as a desideratum to all the other principles a society pursues. If the end goal of the struggles for justice and emancipation is not a welcoming accommodation of the smorgasbord of 'others' present in the society, then the option of living well together recedes, and the perpetual power game of 'us *vs* them' continues, with exclusion and oppression following surely in its wake. All of our political and social quests thus need to be framed within an inclusive framework, a vision of the common good that is rooted in a welcoming attitude to difference. If this is not taken as a point of departure, then differences will become more entrenched and various identities increasingly weaponised against one another, with the ground note of our politics becoming expressive rather than persuasive and thus indelibly undermining the political and even human nature of our social existences.

To think again then of Maclure and Taylor's 'most viable model' – there needs to be a space of convergence within society around certain norms and values around which all can cohere. These norms may differ from society to society, for they need to make sense in light of the unique history of each society. The story of each society around which it builds its own identity of peoplehood needs to align with and emanate from its own historical experiences for it to carry any legitimacy in the hearts of its people. It is also of great importance to ensure that this shared culture is able to accommodate the ubiquitous and irreducible pluralities it possesses. The goal of a harmonious and just political order therefore requires an agreement about certain guiding norms, and especially respect for plurality and the need for togetherness, which all together will then open up the possibility of this "just and sufficiently harmonious coexistence" we aspire to.

Togetherness and openness in this context do not refer to an assimilation of all into some shared sameness but rather to a basic stance of respect towards all people. It is a predisposition that exhibits a willingness to make space in your life for the other and it reflects an acceptance of plurality and a willingness to receive from the other. Such a reconciliatory stance towards plurality in the contemporary world is readily informed and motivated by a twin recognition of human dignity and human complexity. The idea of human dignity carries special currency in the modern world where there has been a decided flattening

of social hierarchies and the replacement of its unequal appreciations of human worth with the notion of dignity according to which all humans have the same inherent value (see Fukuyama 2018: 37-42 and Taylor 1994: 26-27). In its contemporary idiom, dignity entails a universalist and egalitarian commitment which implies that "everyone shares in it". The ethical and social value of the idea of dignity is especially significant in preventing the marginalisation of those with seemingly low levels of social and political capital and of peripheral and minority groups, thus fostering a more inclusive and reconciliatory disposition.

This recognition of the dignity of all people, a dignity that necessitates acknowledgement and respect, must however be balanced with a recognition of inherent human complexity both as individual and communal beings each with a distinctive and rich identity. It is part of the human prolificacy that we are capable of demonstrating both the highest of virtue and the vilest of evil in our actions. Ascribing dignity to all then cannot entail a form of relativism where all human actions, good and bad, are seen as cloaked in dignity. A reconciliatory stance will rather approach all others with an equal respect based on the assumption that all have something important to say and to contribute and we then trust that their actions will bear this out[iii] (Taylor 1994: 66-67). Another implication of human complexity is, as was already noted, that the universalising stance of dignity can lead to a conscious or unconscious assimilation of all alterity into the dominant dispositions in society which must however be resisted through a thoughtful engagement with identity and otherness.

The ethos of the embrace of plurality draws from this twin wellspring of an appreciation of human dignity, that refuses to be indifferent towards or write-off any people, and human complexity, that always remains receptive and open, cultivating a stance that Mikhail Bakhtin (1993: 64) called "loving interested attention" towards the potential richness and depth of the Other.

The place and role of such a required and indispensable reconciliatory norm in the public culture of a diverse society can be well illustrated through the use of the musical metaphor of *cantus firmus* as deployed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his description of the polyphonic nature of human relations (Smith 2006). A *cantus firmus* or fixed song refers to an ever-present melody that forms the basis of a polyphonic musical composition. Though the musical piece introduces constant changes in pitch, style, counterpoint and refrain, the *cantus firmus* is an enduring melody that is always present somewhere in the

composition, sometimes at the forefront, while other times hovering subtly in the background. For Bonhoeffer, life itself is a great piece of symphonic music with the *cantus firmus* as its essence or soul. All the rest of life revolves around it and provides a counterpoint to it and where there is a solid *cantus firmus*, it allows a basis from which this counterpoint can be fully developed. Walter Kemp (1976: 146) explains that when describing the *cantus firmus* as "the controlling and the cohesive force of the motet or Mass movement in which it appeared," neglecting it would bring about "a loss of direction and purpose; as polyphonic art the composition would be invalid." However, the *cantus firmus* must not be construed as an artificial limit on the resulting polyphony. Rather than acting as a controlling force, the *cantus firmus* informs the composition and provides it with a solid grounding in the midst of fluid confusion (Smith 2006: 201).

A strong public ethos of openness and accommodation of difference, emanating from a deep appreciation of both human dignity and human complexity, can play the role of such a *cantus firmus* in a diverse, polyphonic society like South Africa. It can serve as the firm footing, the moral anchor, from which to resist the constant self-protective desire for sameness and homogeneity, and thus entrench an "openness to the multifaceted nature of… human existence" (Smith 2006: 201). This ethos can be such a grounding norm, sometime prominent and intentionally pursued, other times only vaguely inferred, but its familiar presence always lingering. Openness to the other, as the South African *cantus firmus,* can establish a space in which other prominent public norms like justice, *Ubuntu*, freedom and restitutions can co-exist and be wholeheartedly pursued, as long as its embracing melody is never fully silenced. If this were to happen, all the other norms will tend eventually to an exclusionary outcome undermining the polyphony of our society.

Such an enduring willingness to embrace the other, to be open to alterity, and to work towards a high level of togetherness is a high bar for any society to set for itself. Such a substantial level of openness and self-awareness is all too easily overridden and undermined in society by a whole host of factors, be it psychological, military, economic, religious, rationalistic, and even by our grand and hubristic legitimation theories of civilisation (see Tully 2016: 54). But as institutional systems and processes experience increasing strain even to the point of challenging our very notion of 'the political', as was pointed out by Habermas above, this ethos of 'embrace' should again be re-centred as a foundational component of our engagement with both political thought and political practice.

The Humanities and Plurality

> The analytical mind constantly separates, divides, distinguishes, until its whole mental world lies in pieces around it. And where will that mind acquire the energy it needs to put things back together?
> Alan Jacobs. 'How to Think'.

The question that hovers as a challenge over all sectors of South African society, both public and private, is whether we can live lives that are welcoming and open to those we differ from, and not repel or as a default marginalise them through our indifference or aversion. Can the forces of inclusion prevail over those of exclusion? Can we be weavers rather than tearers of the social fabric?

This is a question that also confronts the academic community in South Africa. How should the humanities, including my discipline of Political Theory, engage this challenge? To what extent do our theoretical endeavours to understand and teach the social dynamics we find ourselves in, impact on the still loosely woven fabric of our collective social life? It is not just a matter of engaged or applied theorising vs. disengaged or objective theorising, but it relates to both the character and the substance of our theoretical and teaching engagements with the lived realities of people here in South Africa.

It falls on the various disciplines represented within the broader humanities to think through how this imperative may apply to them and to their specific focus areas, for what may be pertinent to one may not apply to another. Allow me however to illustrate two general considerations that will be helpful in our response to this challenge, one consideration in terms of the presuppositions that inform our theorising and teaching, and one in terms of its substantive engagements. As far as the basic disposition which we bring to the activity of theorising is concerned, one matter in particular stands out: if we are to give due recognition to the need to being dispositionally open to the other then we have to try to avoid suspicion as our default interpretive stance. In order to approach any person, or text we work with in a truly open and receptive manner, we have to be careful that a suspicious stance does not close us off from the other at the very outset of our endeavour. The root of such suspicion can be quite reasonable, for in an apparent post-truth world filled with disinformation, hype and power play, we may want to protect ourselves against deception and manipulation by acquiring a habit of suspicion to protect ourselves from such "bad writing" (Wolmarans

2014: 37). C.S. Lewis, in *An Experiment in Criticism*, argues that such a stance may also make us "impervious… to the good" (1961: 93). This form of "social and ethical hygiene" (Lewis 1961: 124), for all its merits, can be problematic if one wishes to embrace the other. He posits that:

> Even if it is right, we may doubt whether such caution, so fully armed a determination not to be taken in, not to yield to any possible meretricious appeal… is consistent with the surrender needed for the reception of good work. You cannot be armed to the teeth and surrendered at the same moment (Lewis 1961: 127-128).

This interpretive stance of suspicion has actually become more prominent since Lewis wrote the passage cited above. A hermeneutic aimed at showing that neither texts nor human actions, if properly understood, are as innocuous or straightforward as they might seem, but that both are actually reflections of hidden drives, class interests, power networks, and more, has grown in prominence since it was made germane to social theorising by the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx (Wolmarans 2014: 37), who Ricoeur (1970: 32) cites as "masters" of the school of suspicion.

In light of the ideological and partisan nature of much of our politics, a vigilant and suspicious stance seems appropriate for our theoretical engagements. However, it must be recognised that such a habit tends to undermine individual human subjects in that it makes it difficult to acknowledge their distinctiveness. When we consider them through the lens of suspicion, looking for hidden interests and power dynamics, we are often likely to miss the person. It becomes all too easy to reduce the uniqueness of the person, his or her own distinctive voice, to just another function of entrenched power-relations that needs to be unmasked. Lewis explains the risk in the following extract:

> To take a man up sharp, to demand sternly that he explains himself, to dodge to and fro with your questions, to pounce on every apparent inconsistency, may be a good way of exposing a false witness or a malingerer. Unfortunately, it is also the way of making sure that if a shy or tongue-tied man has a true or difficult tale to tell you will never learn it. The armed and suspicious approach which may save you from being bamboozled by a bad [interlocutor] may also blind and deafen you to the shy and elusive merits – especially if they are unfashionable – of a good one (Lewis 1961: 128).

Suspicion can play a valuable role in the scholarly evaluation of what we hear or read from others, but it must not be at the expense of truly receiving from the other what they want to convey to us. As a default starting point, we have to make space within ourselves to truly hear their message to us, before we then respond with thorough appraisal and deep analysis of the person's position. This will then include attempts at identifying possible hidden interests, closed ideological stances and the like, as the nature of true understanding demands.

If we then turn to consider the substance of our theorising within the humanities, we should make sure that we always do justice to the core of our theorising namely humanity itself. We should never sacrifice the contingent, messy complexity and multifariousness of human existence for the neatness of monological and simplistic explanations, no matter how incisive. The temptation of a reductionist and dogmatic view of humanity always hovers over our attempts at understanding and explanations. For example, Bakhtin argues in his exposition of Dostoevsky's ethic that a person is never just the product of external forces. Neither genetics, nor environment, or social construction, singly or together, fully accounts for a human being. Each person retains a "surplus," which constitutes the self's essential element[iv] (Morson 2012). Even a category as broad as the concept "humanity" that I have employed above can force a person into a "schematised" understanding. Bakhtin (1993: 64), argues that only a limited truthfulness will emerge from the imposition of such a pre-set scheme onto people, for it leaves no space for the careful attention to all the details of the person, in which every particular should be carefully attended to and related to all the others, even the smallest, all then sculpted together by means of a patient, intentional and loving volitional act that CS Lewis would call an "obedient imagination"—obedient to every small detail (Wolmarans 2014: 42). When we thus engage in theory building and application, we need to recognise that in all social thought, there is an indeterminacy principle at work, according to which, as one moves from the particular to the general, or from the less general to the more general, one loses the subordinate particular classes, and one loses the individual case at the bottom of the pack (Orr 1983). The French might like cheese, but that does not mean that every individual Frenchman or woman likes cheese. All of this thus implies that we always have to treat another person as capable of surprise, as someone who cannot be explicated at second hand. An automatic adherence to the dominant discourse or a fixed

explanatory paradigm, or just following along in terms of what is fashionable at the moment, should be carefully and self-critically avoided.

It is thus often all too easy to reduce others to a stereotypical and impoverished understanding where we reduce their complexity and multifariousness of being to single categories of explanation, such as class, ethnicity, language or birth cohort. Moreover, as subjective beings, we are particularly inclined to be self-referential in our interpretation of the other, reducing people into conceptions that accrues with our preconception or philosophies of life (Wolmarans 2014: 32-34). We should resist all these temptations in our interpretations and be open to surprising levels of complexity and depth that will constantly overwhelm our current or preferred categories of understanding.

The humanities are generally well equipped to engage its subject matter through its wide range of disciplines, methodologies and approaches, which are becoming richer by the day as more seemingly peripheral discourse and approaches are included under its umbrella. If this variegated pursuit of knowledge is then combined with a loving, non-suspicious disposition along with a willingness to not be superficial and reductionist in our study of people, then the way is open for it to help reconcile our societies with themselves. This is especially pertinent in that the humanities, like no other, can help enrich our imaginations and this should not be undervalued, for as Marilynne Robinson (2012: 26) asserts in an essay on the building of strong communities, "the broadest possible exercise of imagination is the thing most conducive to human health, individual and global[v]". With the broadening of our imagination and understanding of the other, we gain a greater sense of the possible. Our innate human creativity can thus be stirred not just in the direction of individual advancement but also towards that of our society so that it can flourish in the midst of its diversities.

We thus need to foster the ability to truly imagine the worth and the wonder of our neighbours and fellow citizens, even in the midst of the selfishness, bad judgement and even blatant evil that so often characterise their behaviour. We need to bolster the empathetic imaginary transposition and epistemic humility (see Tully 2016: 62-63) we so need if we want to engage respectfully and meaningfully with the other even across deeply different identities. It is in this that the humanities can and should act as a constructive, bridge-building agent through its ability to not only identify marginalisation and injustice but to also imaginatively

chart ways of living together well in the midst of our differences and disagreements.

It is thus the task of the humanities to fully stir the human imagination so that it can fully embrace the breath and the deep value of life. If we are not constantly reminded and our academic and political imaginations stretched in this direction, we will so easily slip into an indifferent and solipsistic view of civic life and of the other. In the battle against the darkness of the human nightmare, in our striving for deep harmony and full flourishing, this is one of the main frontiers where the humanities must exert itself.

Conclusion

The challenge of peaceful and harmonious co-existence in the midst of enduring racial, cultural, religious, and other forms of diversity can appear daunting in our current national and global context, especially in light of the increasing nature of this fragmentation and the seeming dominance of centrifugal social force over those of harmony and cohesion. This challenge should however not be viewed as a problem *per se* for there can be great value in this in terms of, for example, the space for recognition it affords and the creative potential it can stimulate. The challenge that this increasing plurality does pose is that it makes the achievement of collective action, including that of public and political ordering, much more complicated, especially since the measures that have aided in the establishment of the necessary cohesion in the past are increasingly under strain.

The challenges posed by diversity do not necessarily come as a surprise to the field of Political Theory and much insight and clarity have been produced in this regard, some of it evident in this article. The task incumbent on us as citizens of political associations is to translate these insights into the functioning of our political and governance institutions and into our processes of engagement with power and our fellow citizens.

We thus find ourselves in a time where we as citizens, and maybe as political practitioners, need to creatively stretch our imaginations as to new and innovative ways of thinking about the political so as to ensure that it can accommodate and undergird well our continuing desire for harmony, freedom and well-being in the midst of this plurality. All societies, including South Africa's, need to identify shared norms and values around which they can cohere in spite of their great diversities.

However, these norms and values must flow from an openness to plurality, a welcoming attitude to difference, whereby we are not just willing to tolerate the other but are willing to engage meaningfully with them and share life with them. A moral stance of appreciating the value of diversity and of seeing the possibility of the good in the other must frame our normative public culture so as to ensure that exclusion, marginalisation and oppression do not define our inter-human relations.

This call for openness to the other is a very challenging one for there seems to be so much that mitigates against it. We will deliberately and intentionally have to lean against the tendency to live lives folded in on the self. The humanities are particularly well suited to play a significant role in this for it can help stimulate our imaginations and stir our creativity in this direction of embrace. It should help us to realise that "rational behaviour in communal action is primarily a moral and not an intellectual achievement".[vii] The rationality of living well with, and making space for, difference will always be intellectually complex, but the morality thereof should at least be clear.

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[i] Such a thicker understanding of difference is evident in a brief commentary by Stanley Fish. He stated that '[w]hen Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion' (Fish 2005). By this he was not saying that differences of race, class and gender where fading away and were no longer significant. He argues that fragmentation will become even more complicated and that deep metaphysical difference will be of increased relevance to the future well-being of societies. In effect he is saying that diversity of substantive ideas of the good will become as pronounced as those of race, class and gender. The challenge, for the academy and for society at large, will be how to deal with, and live with, this irreducible difference. Will our theoretical and political imagination be able to absorb and come to terms with it?

[ii] In South Africa a notion such as 'colour blind', namely treating all people the same without refers to or acknowledgement of their race, is an example of a universalist attempt at justice which does not always recognise the complexity of the historically constructed character of the moment.

[iii] Volf's stance on embrace expresses the predispositional nature of this stance well for he argues that it entails "the will to give ourselves to others and "welcome" them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity" (Volf 1996: 29). This is however only attainable he asserts within a specific spiritual motivational context.

[iv] Morson continues that some people, and much of social sciences deny the surplus. But they apply their theories only to others. No matter what he professes, nobody experiences himself as a mere play of external forces (see Morson 2012).

[v] Robinson's view here should serve as a rallying cry in the midst of the increasing antagonism that is so pervasive in our societal debates which another novelist, Doris Lessing (2014), describe as being plagued by the "atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun".

[vi] From Langdon Gilkey's (1966: 93) conclusion at the end of his reflections on life in an internment camp in China during World War II.