

Graduation address by Francis Wilson at UCT on Tuesday, 14 June 2016

Rhodes must fall! One simple, non-violent, but highly symbolic action not 200 metres from here managed to ignite a public debate which has moved the public consciousness about our past from apartheid to colonisation from dealing not only with the impact of 20th-century Afrikaner nationalism but also with the complex and far-reaching consequences of Dutch and British colonialism.

This is a most welcome shift; for the ambiguity of his character was such that despite being the father, the godfather perhaps, of South Africa's industrial revolution; despite being a major benefactor of UCT and founder of the world's most famous scholarship program; the bottom line is that Cecil Rhodes is the most potent symbol of the cutting edge of British imperialism as it expanded aggressively into the African sub-continent in the 19th century with the conquest of occupied land and the establishment of the oscillating migrant labour system as its two most visible manifestations.

And so we have to grapple with the ambiguity of South African history. There is a new map¹, based on the 2011 census, which shows the well-being of households in every small datazone throughout the country. One glance shows that most of the poorest areas lie within apartheid's Bantustans. This is no accident: for South Africa's migrant labour system was developed, after conquest, by the mining industry from 1867 and expanded by apartheid from 1948. For more than a century the growing economy generated poverty in the areas from which the miners came at the same time as it accumulated wealth in the cities and commercial farms.

Add to this the Colour Bar of 1893, the Land Act of 1913, and the fact that compulsory primary education for white children was introduced 100 years before black children and one sees the deep roots of today's colour-coded poverty and inequality.

Yet we recognise that the mission schools of Lovedale, Healdtown, Tiger Kloof and others which produced the Mandelas, Sobukwes, Tambos, Seretse Khamas, Gaositwe Chiepes and others who led the emancipation of southern Africa from the racist shackles of the past were established by the same empire whose guns defeated Maqoma, Hintsu, Cetshwayo, King Sekhukhune and, let us not forget, Paul Kruger. As South Africans we inherit an incredibly complex, painful and difficult history.

There is much that we would wish to change in our past. But the arrow of time moves in only one direction. We cannot go back. You know the story of the Irish peasant who, asked by the driver of a passing car for directions to Galway, replied "If ye're wanting to get to Galway, I wouldna be starting from here." But we have to start from here; now. A population of some 55 million persons, ten times as many as there were at the beginning of

¹ Created by Michael Noble, Wanga Zembe and Gemma Wright of the Southern African Social Policy Research Institute.

the 20th century, speaking 11 different official languages with a fountain of rich literature and a range of music that is the envy of the world. But also an inheritance of massive unemployment, poverty and inequality.

In 1993 the level of unemployment [including those who wanted work but were too discouraged to continue looking for it] for all South Africans averaged 33% while for young black Africans² it was 65%³. By 2014 one-third of all South Africans who wanted work still could not find it⁴; poverty has been slightly reduced, but the level of inequality has deepened.

In a society with too great a degree of inequality, Raymond Aron has reminded us, human community is impossible. This is the seismic fault underlying South Africa today. In the words of Frantz Fanon⁵:

The fundamental duel which seemed to be that between colonialism and anti-colonialism, and indeed between capitalism and socialism, is already losing some of its importance. What counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question or be shaken to pieces by it.

So what is to be done?

Essentially there are two choices:

1. The use of sustained violence to break down all structures considered to be obstacles on the road to a just society. This is a chilling option not only because of the fragility⁶ of institutions [not least universities] that can take generations to build, but also because it is the path to civil war: a sure road to misery and destruction for all. Consider the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s⁷, Rwanda in the 1990s⁸ or Syria today⁹. Let us not belittle the great achievement of 1994: that the ANC, led by Nelson Mandela, was able to negotiate a fundamental shift in political power based on a universal franchise with human rights protected by a strong constitution. This is the heritage left to us by all those who fought and were whipped, jailed, tortured and killed in the struggle for freedom during the long oppressive years of the 18th, 19th

² Aged 16–24

³ Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development, South Africans Rich & Poor: Baseline Household Statistics, SALDRU, University of Cape Town, 1994 PSLSD, pp. 141 ff.

⁴ While for young Blacks [aged 15–24] the average was still two-thirds. [StatsSA, Labour Force Survey, Oct. 2015] Despite many jobs having been created as the economy picked up after 1994, the entrance of large numbers of women from the rural areas into the labour market seeking jobs meant that the percentage of job-seekers remained high.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, 1968. p. 98

⁶ On the symbiotic relationship between power and fragility see Jean Hamburger, *La Puissance et la Fragilité*, Flammarion, 1972.

⁷ Adam Hochschild, *Spain in our Hearts*, Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, Boston, 2016

⁸ Jean Hatzfeld, *Life laid bare: The survivors in Rwanda speak*, 2007

⁹ Charles Glass, "In the Syrian Deadlands", *New York Review of Books*, 22 October 2015

and 20th centuries. We must protect it. The deliberate burning of buildings, of schools, of libraries must be prevented at all costs. But the anguish, the anger and the frustration that lies behind such actions have to be consciously acknowledged and ways found to remove the causes.

2. A shift in political power is not enough. Economic transformation to match the political democratisation of 1994 is urgent. The mess that we have inherited has to be faced head-on. For example, there is a network of universities [of which UCT is an active member] working with government, business, NGOs and unionised workers on an initiative¹⁰ combining research, dialogue and action seeking to find effective strategies, including new policies, to overcome poverty and inequality¹¹. One major function of universities is to be sites of robust intellectual debate about the challenges facing society.

This is the challenge to all students graduating in South Africa today. Much is expected of you. You are now the best educated members of a new generation who will take our country [and this continent] into the future.

This is the week in which, 40 years ago, young scholars walked out from their schools to demand better education. It was a cause for which they were prepared to die as hundreds of them did¹², over the next decade. Education is fundamental in building the capacity of this country to overcome the poverty and inequality which cripples us. How do we create an educational system – particularly at primary and secondary level, as well as vocational training for school leavers – that does not betray the sacrifice of the 1976 generation ?

But there is more than this. If we look at the 12 most southern countries of Africa and ask ourselves where each of them was in 1960 and where each hoped to be 50 years later, we find that many which were hopeful have failed dismally while two that had the worst prospects, Botswana and Mauritius, have done remarkably well. This is due to several factors but common to all countries is one central fact. **The quality of leadership.** It is this which will determine where South Africa will be 50 years from now.

There is need for a radical creative vision beyond the gods that have failed both on the left and the right. Eastern Europe has tried communism¹³; North America has

¹⁰ Flowing out of the 2012 Towards Carnegie3 Conference held at UCT and launched formally in October 2015 as a partnership with the Nelson Mandela Foundation, this is the Mandela Initiative: Dialogue and Action Against Poverty and Inequality

¹¹ www.mandelainitiative.org.za

¹² Tom Lodge in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 2:1885–1994, CUP, 2012, p. 421

¹³ To understand something of the failure of communism in the 20th century see Tony Judt, *Postwar: Europe 1945–2005*, Pimlico, London, 2005

tried neo-liberalism¹⁴. The results have not been good for either ideology. It is your task to forge that new vision, not least in southern Africa, and to bring it about. As a Russian revolutionary once said, what is needed are hearts on fire and heads on ice.

The future is in your hands.

Ungadinwa nangomso. / Ningadinwa nangomso.

Enkosi; I thank you.

¹⁴ See, for example, "Neo-Liberalism: Oversold?" in *Finance & Development*, vol. 53 no. 2, June 2016