

Chapter 3

The key issues of Mbeki's Presidency

This chapter charts Mbeki's rise to power, and discusses the following debates and issues in relation to his discourse on race: African Renaissance; The New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad); Mbeki's Two Nations Theory; Black Economic Empowerment (BEE); and Mbeki's debate with Archbishop Desmond Tutu

In an analysis of the discourse on the above issues, the theories of passionate attachment and subjection as well as rigid designator are operationalised by identifying the patterns that emerge.

I. Thabo Mbeki's rise to power within the ANC

It can be argued that Mbeki was born, like a prince of the ANC, to rule. This, however, is not to say his rise to power has not been without its difficulties.

Descriptions⁶¹ of Mbeki have ranged from debonair, eloquent, sophisticated, enigmatic, suave, articulate, intellectual and poetic to enigmatic, elusive, cold, ruthless and expedient.

It is probably a combination of many of these traits, as well as being the political protégé ANC leader Oliver Tambo that saw him assume leadership of the organisation in 1999. It can be argued that a little bit of "good fortune" also played a

⁶¹ See various writers on Mbeki for instance, Jacobs and Calland (2002), Gumede (2005), Du Preez (2003), and Sparks (2003).

role. (One of the leading contenders at the time, Chris Hani, was assassinated in 1993). This left the contest to Mbeki and Ramaphosa⁶².

Mbeki was born on 18 June 1942, in the small village of Mbewuleni, in the Transkei, in the Eastern Cape, the country's poorest province. He was one of four children, the second child of Epainette Moerane (known by her clan name, Ma Mofokeng) and ANC and SACP stalwart Govan Mbeki.

Both Mbeki's parents were educated, part of the Eastern Cape peasant elite, and were considered middle class, even though their material circumstances were poor.

As well as being a political and union activist, Govan Mbeki was also a teacher, who subsequently worked as a newspaper vendor, then as a journalist, the editor of the newspaper *Territorial Magazine* and the director of the *Guardian*. Ma Mofokeng, who was also originally a teacher, ran a general dealer store.

By all accounts, and according to several biographers⁶³, Mbeki's life as a young boy was difficult from a material point of view. He was also lonely and alienated from his father. His relationship with his father is illustrated in an incident recounted by commentator Allister Sparks⁶⁴. "There was mutual admiration but there appeared to be little warmth in the relations. I caught a glimpse of this when Govan Mbeki and other newly released prisoners flew to Lusaka in 1990 to meet with the exiled leaders from whom they had been cut off for more than a quarter of a century. It was an emotional moment. The exiles, with Oliver Tambo at the head, waited in a formal reception line to greet old comrades as they filed down the gangway from the Zambian Airways jet, but as the 78-year-old Walter Sisulu stepped on to the tarmac

⁶² See Jacobs and Calland (2004:10) on who Mandela favoured to be his deputy president.

⁶³ See Gumedé (2005), Jacobs and Calland (2004) and Hadland and Rantao (1999)

⁶⁴ Sparks (2003:273)

his son Max broke from the reception line and ran forward to throw his arms around his father and the two men stood there hugging each other and weeping with joy.

“But when Govan Mbeki appeared, Thabo, who had not seen his father since leaving for Britain 28 years before, did not break ranks. He waited his turn in the reception line and formally shook his father’s hand.”⁶⁵

The year 1952 was significant in terms of the political awakening of the young Mbeki⁶⁶. He was living with his uncle in Queenstown at the time. Between the ages of 10 and 12, write Hadland and Rantao⁶⁷, Mbeki became interested in politics, influenced by the Defiance Campaign of 1952.

Before the Defiance Campaign, the ANC had gone through a time of soul-searching for direction and strategy, especially regarding how inclusive it should be. Gumede⁶⁸ says, “The 1940 conference marked an important ideological turning point for the ANC, which resolved to formulate a comprehensive race relations policy towards ‘Christian Democracy’ and the objective would be to progressively abandon racial discrimination and pursue the logic of equal opportunity”

In 1956, Mbeki, who was studying at Lovedale College in Alice, joined the ANC Youth League, “but not before flirting briefly with the Trotskyite Unity Movement’s Society of Young Africans”, according to Jacobs and Calland.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ When Sparks interviewed Govan Mbeki at a later stage, he asked him about the incident. Mbeki replied: “I don’t think I had a special feeling for seeing him after so long a time. I was meeting a group of young men who we understand were following in our footsteps...We were brought up over a long period of time to fight for a certain cause in a certain way ...We are not going to show our emotions ...” Asked if the bonds of struggle were stronger than the bonds of blood, Govan Mbeki replied: “In a way, I think they are.”(2003:274).

⁶⁶ Hadland and Rantao (1999:16) point to 1952 as the year of political awakening for Mbeki.

⁶⁷ Hadland and Rantao (1999:17)

⁶⁸ Gumede (2004:13)

⁶⁹ Jacobs and Calland (2002:7)

The ANC was banned in 1961 and Mbeki went into exile in 1962, first to Botswana, then Tanzania, then on to London where he stayed with Tambo, with whom he formed a close personal and political relationship.

He wanted to join Umkhonto we Sizwe, but his father encouraged him to enrol at Sussex University, where he obtained a masters degree in economics in 1968.

During his Sussex years, Mbeki was involved in various protests against apartheid. Jacobs and Calland⁷⁰ describe his politics at this time as “contradictory”. According to them, he supported the Labour Party and was critical of the new left revision of Marxism while also remaining a staunch supporter of the Soviet Union.

In 1969 Mbeki received military training in Moscow for a year, after which he returned to Britain to work for the ANC. According to Shubin⁷¹, while Mbeki underwent sophisticated military training in the USSR, his energies were concentrated on political activity. Thereafter, he served in ANC stations in Swaziland, Botswana, Nigeria and finally in Lusaka, Zambia, the movement's headquarters, where he was appointed assistant secretary of the ANC's Revolutionary Council.

In 1975 Mbeki was elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC and in 1978 he became political secretary in the office the ANC president, Oliver Tambo. Shubin ⁷² writes that Mbeki's first important position to the ANC took place at the organisation's NEC meeting in January 1978 when he was allocated position of political secretary in the President's Office and head of the political commission. “That new structure had considerable responsibilities, including studies of the overall political situation internally and internationally, recommendation of new political

⁷⁰ ibid

⁷¹ Shubin (1999:224)

⁷² ibid pp185

initiatives, and training of political cadres. Since then, Thabo Mbeki, serving in various positions, has been at the centre of the political life of the ANC.”

Mbeki wrote speeches for Tambo as well as being involved in discussing strategy and tactics. In 1985, he became the ANC’s director of information and in 1989 was appointed head of the ANC’s department of international affairs.⁷³

It was in the 1980s that Mbeki acquired a reputation for calming the fears of South African businessmen about the relationship of the ANC with the USSR. He headed up the ANC delegation that received various groups from South Africa for “talks about talks”⁷⁴. These were secret diplomatic talks to gauge the political mood of the country’s people and the apartheid regime. Included in the talks were representatives of the apartheid regime, white businessmen, Afrikaans academics, sympathetic and progressive liberals and some journalists. Shubin⁷⁵ writes that the business delegations posed questions about the relationship between the USSR and the ANC. “The businessmen agreed in principle with the need to abolish apartheid and create a united democratic South Africa. Thabo Mbeki’s assessment during his visit to Moscow in October 1985 was that South African big business had drifted away from the National Party rulers, but it was worried at the prospect of nationalisation envisaged in the Freedom Charter. Business desired to transform the ANC into a ‘moderate force’, and to draw in other groups to achieve a ‘moderate’ solution. That would mean that political power would be transferred from the ruling party to ‘moderate’ politicians, and not to the ANC, at least initially.”

⁷³ Jacobs and Calland (2002:8)

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Shubin (1999:296)

It would appear that Mbeki was one of the more astute and politically perceptive leaders within the ANC at the time. Shubin⁷⁶ relates an incident in Moscow, which attests to this. "When both Thabo Mbeki and Chris Hani came to Moscow for a short holiday in 1988 there was a chance to discuss the prospects of a political settlement. 'When will you win?' was a question I put, very informally, to each of them. 'Ten years more,' was Chris's reply. 'We shall be home in 1990,' said Mbeki."

Mbeki won over the business faction. Nobody walked this tightrope act better than he. Journalist and political commentator Max du Preez⁷⁷ writes, "Thabo Mbeki bowled everyone over with his sincerity, sense of humour, intellect, clear thinking, and straight talk, his charm and charisma. I had experienced his charm and diplomatic skills before, but this was a spectacular performance."

Du Preez⁷⁸ also describes a meeting in Dakar in May 1987, when Afrikaners met the ANC to discuss their concerns over the SACP's relationship with the ANC. "... ANC crown prince took the floor. The atmosphere was intense and for an hour Mbeki spoke – probably the most honest, direct and comprehensive explanation of ANC positions ever given to people outside the organisation. Several Afrikaner delegates remarked later that if a transcript of his statements could be released inside South Africa, it would fundamentally change the understanding that most whites have of the ANC."

Jacobs and Calland⁷⁹ concur with Du Preez's perceptions. "Mbeki became known for his sophistication and eloquence. The business people, diplomats, and foreign ministry officials who were in regular contact with him referred him to as a highly

⁷⁶ Shubin (1999:322)

⁷⁷ Du Preez (2004:157)

⁷⁸ *ibid* pp156

⁷⁹ Jacobs and Calland (2002:8)

impressive individual. Media profiles of the period would invariably describe him as pragmatic, rational, scholarly, and above all, urbane.”

In South Africa, Norval⁸⁰ writes, the period from the mid-1980s to February 1990 was marked by an increasing inability of the regime to determine and control the political frontiers and, thus, the nature of social division upon which the political ordering of society rested. It became a “crisis⁸¹ of apartheid hegemony”.

In February 1990, the ANC and the SACP were unbanned and most political prisoners were released.

Between 1990 and 1994, the ANC had to adjust from being a banned liberation movement to a lawful political organisation. Mbeki was elected national chair at the ANC’s first legal conference held in 1991 in Durban. The organisation began to prepare for the first democratic elections.

It was not a clear path to the post of the deputy presidency for Mbeki. At his shoulder was former unionist Ramaphosa, who was at the time ANC secretary general and the organisation’s chief negotiator at the multi-party talks. While some believed Ramaphosa to be Mandela’s obvious choice, supported by the UDF and the trade union movement, others thought it was a race between Mbeki and Hani, often referred to as a “super-hawk”⁸² and a firm favourite of township youth.

Before Mandela had chosen Mbeki to succeed him, it seemed that within the ANC, Hani was more popular, according to the results of the July 1991, ANC conference in

⁸⁰ Norval (1996:219)

⁸¹ See Norval (1996:220) for a discussion on the kind of crisis that it was and a distinction between “conjunctural” and “organic” crisis.

⁸² See Gumede (2005:31) on Mbeki’s path to power.

Durban, where Hani gained the most votes for the National Executive Committee (NEC), with Mbeki second by a small margin, writes Shubin.⁸³

But Hani was assassinated in 1993 and those in exile who would have supported Hani switched their support to Mbeki. In addition, Gumede⁸⁴ writes, Tambo had made his preference clear to Mandela – back Mbeki. And even though Ramaphosa shone brightly on the centre stage of multi-party talks, and Mandela liked him very much, some have suggested Mandela always knew it would be Mbeki he would choose to maintain the leadership of the ANC in the Tambo tradition.

Mbeki was sworn in as Mandela's first deputy president on 10 May 1994.

II. Mbeki as Mandela's deputy president 1994 – 1999

When Mbeki returned from exile in April 1990, he did not have a significant constituency⁸⁵, but had to build one. It seems as though he targeted the growing black capitalist and middle class, seeing this as a means to deracialise the economy⁸⁶.

In 1999 Mbeki said to the Black Management Forum, "As part of the realisation of the aim to eradicate racism in our country, we must strive to create and strengthen a black capitalist class".⁸⁷

⁸³ Shubin (1999:323)

⁸⁴ Gumede (2005:31)

⁸⁵ See Jacobs and Calland (2003:11). "...Mbeki's key constituency outside the ANC has been the growing middle class. He formed a 'consultative council' dubbed a 'kitchen cabinet' by the media – made up (only) of black politicians, business people, professionals and academics ...Mbeki appointed mostly black people, some of them inexperienced, to his expanding deputy president's office in Pretoria. He encouraged black economic aspirations."

⁸⁶ Gumede (2005:221). Black business also has a special place in Mbeki's heart. He met regularly "with a select group from his black business working group, and things have come long way since the ANC in exile was strongly influenced by the SACP and deeply suspicious of the capitalist local black business community". At a historic three-day conference between the ANC and black business people in October 1993, a decision was taken to establish a mechanism to forge a more dynamic relationship between the two groups. They decided to work together to promote what was still a vague concept, namely black economic empowerment.

⁸⁷ Ibid pp207

Mbeki alienated the ANC's alliance partners, the SACP and Cosatu, when they began to express dissatisfaction with his economic policies, according to labour expert Sakhela Buhlungu.⁸⁸ He argues that the rift occurred in 1996 particularly over the dismantling of the more social democratic aspects within the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which Cosatu had helped formulate, in favour of a new liberal macro economic strategy, the Growth Employment and Redistribution programme.

The biggest single issue for the union federation would be the privatisation of state assets, which Cosatu said would cause job losses. Buhlungu⁸⁹ argues that tensions surfaced "particularly around the government's announcement of its intention to privatise state assets, as well as its macro-economic strategy Gear ... the post 1994 period has resulted in a marked decline in the role and influence of Cosatu within the tripartite alliance, and this decline has coincided with Mbeki's ascent to power, both within the ANC and in government".

While Buhlungu is largely correct, it would seem Mbeki had abandoned socialist principles a while back. In 1984, he is quoted in Gumede⁹⁰ as saying, "The ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, it has never said it was, and it is not trying to be. It will not become one by decree for the purpose of pleasing its 'left' critics."

Mbeki, according to Hadland and Rantao, was keen to change the focus from Mandela's emphasis on national reconciliation⁹¹ to delivery for the black people.

⁸⁸ Buhlungu (2002:184)

⁸⁹ *ibid* pp187

⁹⁰ Gumede (2005:123)

⁹¹ See Mandela's view on national reconciliation quoted in Norval (1996:294). "The time for the healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build upon us ... We enter a

“... Thabo knew that unless direct action was taken, vitally important parts of the state machinery would never be transformed from their apartheid moulds into something appropriate to the new South Africa. “In expression of this, Thabo penned a speech in 1996, outlining the shift in priorities he anticipated putting in place once Mandela’s power had finally waned. The speech declared that the ANC would no longer be content to minister primarily to the fears and needs of whites and the privileged but would now focus on the organisation’s black constituents.”⁹²

So what is the Mbeki project of transformation? Hudson⁹³ writes, “The object of transformation, according to Mbeki, is the establishment of a society characterised by the ‘equality of national groups’ by a proper ‘racial balance’ or ‘representivity’ throughout all its sectors, classes and status orders.”⁹⁴ This society is one in which the importance of ‘affirming the national character’ has been recognised, i.e. the fact that South Africa comprises (sub-national) clusters of individuals and that a determinate mode of co-existence of these is constitutive of an ethically satisfactory social order.”

Hudson says that attaining this objective entails for Mbeki “transforming the entire fabric of social life in South Africa”, and requires – under current circumstances – the policies of preferential treatment for black citizens⁹⁵. Even though Hudson⁹⁶ argues that this is part of the project of “democratic hegemony”, he does note however, that once this transformation is achieved, how such a mode of co-existence is to be maintained is not clear.

covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.”

⁹² Hadland and Rantao (1999:97)

⁹³ Hudson (2000:96) Liberalism, democracy and transformation in South Africa Politikon South African Political Science Association Journal

⁹⁴ See the full text of Mbeki’s speech (1998:286).

⁹⁵ See Hudson (2000). See also Norval (1996:294): “As [Albie] Sachs has argued, non-racialism presupposes a colour-blind constitution, while affirmative action requires a conscious look at the realities between the life chances of whites and blacks.”

⁹⁶ Hudson (2000:96)

While the elucidation given thus far of Mbeki's understanding of the transformation project is compatible with the principles set out in the Constitution⁹⁷, the transformation project in Mbeki's discursive structure has taken other turns. For instance, as Mbeki changed focus from the Mandela era, those who criticised any of his policies (economic policies, HIV/Aids policies and his quiet diplomacy stance on Zimbabwe), be they Cosatu, the SACP, Aids NGOs, whites, and "the elite" and "intellectuals", or even Tutu⁹⁸, all were labelled as opposing "the "people" or "transformation".

From this point onwards, ie during the period of Mbeki's presidency, it will be argued that labelling critics has become the drum Mbeki has beaten consistently, albeit with some contradictions. For instance, responding to an article by journalist Charlene Smith⁹⁹, which questioned official statistics on the high rape statistics in the country, Mbeki¹⁰⁰ wrote, "She [Smith] was saying our cultures, traditions and religions as Africans inherently makes an African man a potential rapist . . . [a] view which defines the African people as barbaric savages."

Smith asserted that the drop shown in the official rape figures was the result of "massaged" statistics¹⁰¹. Smith's point was to show that crime in South Africa was high and that women were particularly vulnerable¹⁰². Smith did not mention race in her article at all.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ The Constitution makes the following provision under the Equality Clause no 2: "Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken."

⁹⁸ The debate with Tutu is given a full treatment in chapter 3. After Tutu, in November 2004, asked questions at the Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture such as: What is black economic empowerment when it seems to benefit not the vast majority, but a small elite that tends to be recycled? Mbeki launched an attack, interpellating him, or hailing him, as "elitist".

⁹⁹ *Sunday Independent* 26 September 2004 Rape has become a sickening way of life in our land

¹⁰⁰ In a statement to the South African Press Association on 1 October 2004

¹⁰¹ But this was, in any case, a moot point given that 113.7 rapes per 100 000 population is very high. For instance, in 2000 the United States rape rate was just over 32 per 100 000. South Africa has a rape rate three-and-a-half times as high as the United States.

¹⁰² The latest SA Police Service Annual Report for 2004-2005, shows that a woman is raped every ten minutes in South Africa, one is beaten up every four minutes – and seven women are murdered a day, on average: Police said

This example shows Mbeki's excess in relation to race. It functions as a master signifier – whereas Smith does not raise the question of race as an issue, Mbeki does. Because Mbeki did not like the fact that “his” country was criticised for the high rape rate, he embarked on giving what Smith had to say a racial slant. In Žižek's framework this indicates the operation of fantasy. What is the social fantasy here? Mbeki sees the statement about the high rape rate as racist, so any criticism of the rape rate means all black men are savages. He ties criticism of the rape rate to criticism of black men.

It Butler's terms this indicates a passionate attachment to race – but it is more. It is a violent melancholic turn in pursuit of wretchedness, a turn back upon oneself. This example illustrates the Butlerian theory of the violent embrace of the terms that injure one, as well as the melancholic turn that is an intrinsic part of subjectification. Mbeki is a black man and he talks so violently about black men. Butler writes¹⁰⁴ that according to the Freudian explanation of “melancholia”, “the ego is said to ‘turn back upon itself’ once love fails to find its object and instead takes itself as not only an object of love but of aggression and hate as well.” The statement of Mbeki that Africans are defined as savages, over Smith's critique of the rape rate, shows the following concepts at work: race functions as a rigid designator, the ideological nodal point to which all other meanings are tied; Mbeki expressing the social fantasy of what he believes whites think; and Mbeki's melancholic turn on himself.

that the actuality is even more “shocking”, because as many as two-thirds of all rapes are probably not reported. (*Sunday Times* 25 September 2005 SA brutalises women, girls)

¹⁰³ Smith's opinion of the drop in rape statistics in 2004 must surely be vindicated with the latest release of crime statistics released in September 2005. The South African Police Service Annual report for 2004-2005 showed that rape increased nationally by 4.5% between April 2004 and March 2005; from 52 733 cases to 55 114 reported cases; 60% of the victims were adult women, and 40% children. (*Sunday Times* 25 September 2005 SA brutalises women, girls)

¹⁰⁴ Butler (1997:168)

III. Mbeki's Presidency

“If we believe in something, then surely we will be ready to defend it rationally, hoping to persuade those opposed, to change their point of view ... We should not too quickly want to pull rank and to demand an uncritical, sycophantic, obsequious conformity.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture

23 November 2004

This section considers the following issues in relation to the role of race in Mbeki's discourse: African Renaissance; the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad); Mbeki's Two Nations Theory; Black Economic Empowerment (BEE); Mbeki's debate with Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Essop Pahad, Minister in the Office of the President, comments in the forward to Mbeki's book Africa Define Yourself¹⁰⁵. It is “no secret that it is President Mbeki himself who burns the midnight oil over most of his speeches”. The book is a collection of Mbeki's speeches from 1999, when he assumed office as president.

Pahad's comment can be taken seriously for two reasons: first, he is one of Mbeki's closest friends¹⁰⁶, one who has known him for about four decades, and he would be *au fait* with Mbeki's idiosyncrasies; second, it means Mbeki is painstaking about what he writes and says, meticulously selecting his words and therefore intending certain effects. This suggests that his discourse is neither careless nor spontaneous, but while it is meaningful it is not at the same time reducible to the conscious intentions of Mbeki. Otherwise there wouldn't be such passionate attachments, race wouldn't

¹⁰⁵ Mbeki (2002)

¹⁰⁶ For a fuller description of the relationship between Pahad and Mbeki see Hadland and Rantao (1999:32).

be a rigid designator and his discourse wouldn't indicate the operation of social fantasy. From a selection of speeches examined in this chapter, a set of patterns emerge, fitting closely into Butler's theories of subjection. There is a paradoxical embrace on the part of the subject, of the very terms that injure it.

On the ANC's election victory on 3 June 1999, Mbeki¹⁰⁷, using the language of the Freedom Charter, said, "Our people, both black and white, have mandated us to remain firm in the pursuit of a vision of a non-racial society and the important goal of national reconciliation." He continued, "The people have given clear orders that we move faster to build a non-racial and non-sexist society."

Two weeks later, on 14 June 1999, in his address to the National Assembly after accepting his election as president of South Africa, Mbeki¹⁰⁸ again began in the vein of the Freedom Charter, "... give a chance for the curtains to part, so that we see the world beyond, the world of progress and human dignity in a country which truly belongs to all who live in it, both black and white, both women and men".

These words can be interpreted as showing possibilities for a positive future in South Africa. Towards the end of this speech, however, Mbeki¹⁰⁹ says, "And yet all of us are aware that our country continues to be divided along racial and other lines and is, therefore, that much more difficult to unite around common objectives." This is self-evident but it emerges as a theme in many, if not most, of Mbeki's discourses as the president, shows a rather stubborn attachment to apartheid and its residues.

It also appears to be the harbinger of what has become known as his Two Nations theory, which began at the inception of his presidency.

¹⁰⁷ Mbeki (1999:20)

¹⁰⁸ *ibid* pp23

¹⁰⁹ *ibid* pp25

The difference between Mandela's and Mbeki's presidencies has been widely acknowledged¹¹⁰ as the following: Mandela focused on national reconciliation and unity of the nation, while Mbeki's focus has been on delivery, implementation, African Renaissance and BEE.

i. African Renaissance

In Mbeki's discussions on reconciliation and transformation, there is much that is pessimistic, as is clear in his discourse on the African Renaissance.

At his inauguration as president on 16 June 1999, Mbeki¹¹¹ presented South Africans, and other Africans, as well as many overseas politicians, with the core of his beliefs encapsulated within the concept of the African Renaissance. Filled with pride and hope, he talked about the future of the African continent and South Africa's place in it. "As Africans, we are children of the abyss, who have sustained a backward march for half a millennium. We have been a source of human slaves ... No longer capable of being falsely defined as a European outpost in Africa; we are an African nation in the complex process simultaneously of formation and renewal."

The image of slaves is a theme that persists in Mbeki's discourse, harking back to a past of suffering, pain, and wretchedness. It is a melancholic turn to the past, remembered wretchedness and, in Butlerian terms, it is about embracing the terms of injury. It is within this embrace that there is the possibility of resignification, of turning the suffering around. For Butler, it is through the reiteration of norms that resignification can take place, but only if these reiterations take an unpredictable form or an unpredictable path.

¹¹⁰ For the differences between the presidencies of Mandela and Mbeki see Sparks (2003) and Gumede (2005). In the chapter *Escaping Mandela's shadow*, Gumede (2005:56) writes that Mbeki, like Mandela, was extremely conscious of his place in history. Mandela, in an address at Potchefstroom University, in February 1996, said, "I will pass through this world but once, and I do not want to divert my attention from my task – which is to unite the nation." Mbeki, by contrast, Gumede writes (2005:56), is a visionary with a focus on hands-on governance and management, fine tuning new institutions, and establishing and entrenching new power blocs and political relations, with his main a focus on the transformation of the economy.

¹¹¹ Mbeki (1999:29)

Peter Vale and Sipho Maseko¹¹², in a chapter entitled Thabo Mbeki, South Africa and the Idea of an African Renaissance, discuss the ideas behind Mbeki's vision of the African Renaissance and argue that the idea of African Renaissance, a term chosen to denote a spirit of awakening in Africa in the late 20th century, appears to be more promise than policy and that its essential features remain deliberately vague. There seems to be "little of substance to anchor a fine idea".¹¹³

They point to two streams of the African Renaissance vision. The first, the globalist interpretation, links South Africa's interests to Africa, while the second "involves using the African Renaissance to unlock a series of complex social constructions that are more immediate, and turn on issues of identity".¹¹⁴ In their discussion of the second stream, they comment that this is rooted in unexplored and hidden links in culture, literature and folklore.

Vale *et al*¹¹⁵ then proceed to quote South African writer and vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Njabulo Ndebele, "... the return to mythical roots ceases to be a compelling factor of mobilisation in the face of the sheer weight of existing socio-cultural realities that demand to be addressed on their own terms ... the call for black roots has less effect than the provision of water sanitation, electricity, telephones, houses, clinics, transport, schools, jobs". Vale *et al* endorse the argument to which such a turn to the past is not rationally justifiable.

While Ndebele's view has merit, this should not be equated with discrediting the idea of an African Renaissance. It is a positive visionary concept indeed, but Mbeki's attachment to the idea may well reveal his attachment to the issue of race, hence his Two Nations theory, where race and colour take precedence over other social dynamics such as class.

¹¹² Vale and Maseko (2002)

¹¹³ *ibid* pp124

¹¹⁴ *ibid* pp126

¹¹⁵ *ibid* pp129

On the other hand, to say that Mbeki's view of the African Renaissance is based on cultural roots related to race might be too simplistic as there are instances when he includes all races in his notion of "Africanness"¹¹⁶.

Mbeki¹¹⁷ spells out what he means, at least in one sense, by the concept of the African Renaissance in his State of the Nation address to the National Assembly on 9 February 2001, entitled "What can I do to build a better South Africa?" In essence, the aim here is to lift the continent out of its despair and poverty and it includes all races.

"We have entered the 21st century having resolved and declared to ourselves as Africans, and the rest of the world that primarily none but ourselves can extricate us and our continent from the curse of poverty, underdevelopment and marginalisation ... As these Africans, of many races and colours, we will and must work with the rest of the continent and our partners across the globe to give life to a new Millennium African Recovery Programme."¹¹⁸

Here as well as positing an inclusive notion of race, it also suggested that Africa must find its place within the international economic context of globalisation. It is based on a resolve to end the marginalisation of Africa and the exclusion of her people from the process of globalisation. The purpose of Mbeki's melancholic reflexive turn back, it can be argued, is to move forwards.

¹¹⁶ See Mbeki's (1999:153) "I am an African" speech on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of the Republic of South Africa 8 May 1996: "...I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East"

¹¹⁷ Mbeki (2001)

¹¹⁸ *ibid* pp70

However, in Mbeki's next significant address on the issue, "The African Renaissance: Africans Defining Themselves" at the University of Havana, Cuba, on 27 March 2001, there are suggestions of his passionate attachment to the issue of race and that race functions as a rigid designator. His theme is about stereotypes and perceptions of the darker races among the western and northern countries of the world. For instance, dark skinned people were "emotional", quick tempered, unimaginative, unintelligent, dishonest and inefficient", Mbeki¹¹⁹ said, quoting a survey (Modern Latin America).

While these stereotypes still exist, the question is whether they exist to the extent that Mbeki seems to believe. Constant reference to negative stereotypes may have the unintended consequences of reinforcing them. Mbeki clearly despises the stereotypes but it appears he cannot break free from such thinking himself. Butler would say that this is an attachment to and the reiteration of norms, not, though, necessarily of his own making. Invoking the ideas of dark skinned people as "quick tempered" and "unimaginative" shows a turning back on himself – he too is a dark skinned person.

Mbeki begins his speech by referring to an opinion poll conducted in the United States in 1940. He tells his audience that when people in North America were asked whether people in Central and South America were dark-skinned, 80% of the respondents said yes. Asked whether they were quick tempered and emotional, about 50% said yes. Asked whether these people were intelligent, only 15% said yes; if they were honest, only 13% said yes; whether they were imaginative, 23% said yes; and asked whether people in these regions were efficient, only 5% said yes.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ ibid pp72

¹²⁰ ibid pp73

"If the same survey about Africa today was conducted in some countries of the North, I would not be surprised if we got exactly the same outcome."¹²¹

There are three salient points to be made about this statement. First, the survey took place in 1940. Since perceptions change all the time, these outcomes may well have changed over the years. Second, there is no evidence to conclude that this is how Africans are perceived today. He merely perceives that this might be the case. Is Mbeki, therefore, not falling into the trap of basing his claims on his subjective gaze? With this interpretation of how whites view blacks, the signifier, "race", is fixed and Mbeki is in a world where his "gaze" is from his perception of how white people view black people.¹²² Race, therefore, functions as a master signifier. He has embraced the terms of colonialism to show his rage against the racism of colonialism.

Moreover, it can be argued, using Butler's argument about passionate attachment, that a subject is passionately attached to his or her own subordination.¹²³ She asserts that the subject is formed by a will that turns back upon itself, a sort of reflexivity, meaning that the subject is the effect of power *in recoil*. In discussing submission Butler says¹²⁴, "vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists, always to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality".

Mbeki turns to old norms (1940) and repeats them, as though the world has not changed at all. And as Butler indicates, while these norms are not of the subject's own making, they are norms that get repeated, thus involving the subject's turning back on itself.

¹²¹ *ibid*

¹²² See also Žižek (1989:107) on the concept of "the gaze". How is it that in Charlie Chaplin's films children are always vicious and nasty, teased, mocked at and so forth? he asks. "The question to ask is from what point of view must we look at children so that they appear to us as objects of teasing and mocking, not as gentle creatures needing protection? The answer, of course, is from the gaze of the children themselves."

¹²³ Butler (1997:6)

¹²⁴ *ibid* pp28

The following excerpt from Mbeki's "The African Renaissance: Africans Defining Themselves" speech shows another aspect to his over-sensitivities about race and Africa. "The critical matter however is that we have a duty to define ourselves. We speak about the need for the African Renaissance in part so that we ourselves, and not another, determine who we are, what we stand for, what our visions and hopes are, how we do things, what programmes we adopt to make our lives worth living, who we relate to and how."¹²⁵

Contradictions start to emerge in Mbeki's discourse. On the one hand, he appears to be desperate to integrate Africa into the rest of the world, accepting the principles of internationalism and human rights. On the other, it is precisely views such as this that hold Mbeki back. His discourse on race illustrates a passionate investment, a stubbornness about race that shows an obsessive attachment to it.

A further example, related to the African Renaissance, illustrates the point. In his address "Defeating African Underdevelopment" at the Third African Renaissance Festival in Durban on 31 March 2001, Mbeki¹²⁶ begins by denouncing poverty and underdevelopment in Africa, citing statistics comparing poverty in Africa to that of northern or western countries. Then he says, "Add to this the particular additional constraint that faces us as Africans, arising out of our history over the last 40 years or so. That history has created an image of our continent as one that is naturally prone to wars, military coups and dictatorships, denial of human rights, corruption, permanent dependence on aid and humanitarian assistance, and more recently, an Aids pandemic, caused it is said, by rampant sexual promiscuity and endemic amorality"¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Mbeki (2001:72)

¹²⁶ *ibid* pp82

¹²⁷ *ibid* pp88

The fact that this discourse has become a pattern and theme is indicative, I argue, of a form of political subjectivity that is trapped in the same stereotyped thinking and, ironically, the type of thinking that Mbeki has called on others to break free from.

One cannot take too seriously comments that war is intrinsically or inherently an African thing, when many wars have occurred in overseas countries; or that Aids is an African disease, when there is Aids in Asia and Europe; that dictatorship is a black phenomenon, when such political phenomena have occurred in Europe, Asia and Eastern Europe. So why would Mbeki take such stereotypes so seriously? As Žižek would say *Che Vuoi?*¹²⁸

In between this kind of discourse, where race plays a major role, we witness, however, glimpses of a more expansive and less politically defensive Mbeki. Two months after the Third African Renaissance Festival, Mbeki spoke in a Freedom Day address on 27 April 2001 in Polokwane (then Pietersburg). In a speech entitled “Unite in Action for Change” he said, “I know that the majority of white South Africans are committed to contributing towards the transformation of our society. These fellow South Africans work very hard, every day and in many ways, to make a success of this beautiful country ... On this Freedom Day we repeat our call to all South Africans, black and white, together to confront the on-going legacy of racism and to build a non-racial society.”¹²⁹

When Mbeki has been criticised for emphasising race, his response is that some, for instance the DA would rather pretend that racism does not exist, as seen below in the exchange with DA leader Tony Leon. The latter has repeatedly said in parliamentary debates that the effect of Mbeki’s discourse on race is the further “re-

¹²⁸ Žižek (1989:111) Žižek uses this term to illustrate ideology at work: “You’re telling that, but what do you want me to do with it, what are you aiming at?”

¹²⁹ Mbeki (2001:106)

racialising” of the country. In December 2004, Leon¹³⁰ urged South Africa to celebrate its diversity and to guard against the politics of being mobilised on the basis of race. He said South Africans should place reconciliation and non-racialism at the centre of the national discourse. “On occasion, the race card is played for political purposes and the promotion of equality has been reduced to an exercise in racial bean-counting.”¹³¹

Mbeki addressed this type of criticism in an address to the National Assembly on 22 June 2001. Reiterating his critics, he said the charge is that “far too often we use the so-called race card; that what we do and say leads to feelings of marginalisation and disempowerment ... that discussions of racism leads to mutual accusations, more racism and new tensions, and that the real issue in the country is poverty, which can only be addressed through economic growth”.¹³²

Mbeki¹³³ then accused his critics of wanting a “colour-blind national reconciliation and a colour-blind poverty.... We must go on to say that the racial socio-economic legacy from our apartheid past is no longer a distinguishing feature in our society. We would then proceed to say that in reality South Africa is a society of equals, regardless of race, colour and gender.... We will not be persuaded that the best way to deal with racism is to pretend that it does not exist.”

While Mbeki is correct to the extent that there are some who have argued for a colour-blind national reconciliation¹³⁴, his argument lacks depth. Very few would dispute the fact that the majority of black South Africans remain poor after just over

¹³⁰ *Business Day* 17 December 2004 Look Beyond hatred to celebrate SA's success - Mbeki

¹³¹ *Ibid*

¹³² Mbeki (2001:115)

¹³³ *ibid* pp116

¹³⁴ For example, as shown in Chapter 2 in the note on the DA, as highlighted by Jeffrey in the *Mail & Guardian*: 25-31 August, 2001 The fight against racism should be colour-blind

10 years of democracy¹³⁵ and that race indeed continues to intersect with class¹³⁶. The protests in 2005 by black poor people in townships against the lack of service delivery by local municipalities are a good example of how indeed race continues to intersect with class in South Africa.¹³⁷ Mbeki does not, however, refer to the fact of the growing new black middle class, nor does he spell out any critique of the current narrow BEE, nor does he respond to the questions about whether South Africa is moving towards “crony capitalism”,¹³⁸ nor does he answer the question, “at what point does a black billionaire cease to be ‘historically disadvantaged’?”¹³⁹

In his opening address to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, “The Walls of Racism Must Come Down”, on 28 August 2001, Mbeki¹⁴⁰ made a plea for freedom from colonialism, racism, sexism and poverty towards a new world based on justice, equality and dignity of all human beings. He told delegates that as discussions and debates arise, not only will they have to spell out what they fight for but they will also have to explain “who or what is the enemy or enemies that we fight against”.

Mbeki named his enemy as “denial”¹⁴¹, an ironic response given Mbeki’s own discourse would appear to be patterned with denial¹⁴². “There are some in our country and others elsewhere in the world, which for various reasons, argue that

¹³⁵ Not only have the majority of South Africans remained poor, Magasela (2006:47) argues that poverty has in fact increased. He cites the report “Earning and Spending in South Africa: Selected Findings” that comparisons from the income and expenditure surveys of October 1995 and October 2000 is taken to provide evidence of increases in poverty between 1995 and 2000. Other researchers have corroborated the findings of this report.

¹³⁶ See Erasmus (2005:11) on class and race intersecting.

¹³⁷ In the year 2005, there were numerous protests all over the country against the lack of service delivery. In January in Bayview in Chatsworth, residents protest over the disconnection of water meters; In February in Phomolong in the Free State residents protest by burning tyres, over a lack of service delivery; in March in Embalenhle in Mpumalanga residents take to the streets over a lack of service delivery; in April Phomolong erupts again over the bucket sewage system; in May in Port Elizabeth residents block streets with burning tyres against the delivery of housing. (*Mail & Guardian* 27 May - 2 June 2005 *A winter of Discontent*) In May, there were protests in Khayelitsha and Mamelodi over a lack of sanitation (*Sunday Times* 29 May 2005 *Protests reflect a crisis of dignity*)

¹³⁸ Southall (2005:470) in a chapter Black Empowerment and Corporate Capital discusses whether South Africa is moving towards “crony capitalism”. It is, he writes, precisely the centrality of the state to the current promotion of BEE and a black bourgeoisie that with fair regularity leads to the charge that South Africa is in danger of moving towards “crony capitalism”.

¹³⁹ Cronin (2005) *The People shall Govern – class struggles and the post-1994 state in South Africa*

¹⁴⁰ Mbeki (2001:132)

¹⁴¹ *ibid* pp136

¹⁴² Mbeki and denialism are examined in greater detail in Chapter 5 in the investigation of Mbeki and HIV/Aids.

class rather than race is the issue we should focus on if we are to understand the huge inequalities that characterise contemporary human society.”

In his next sentence, he conceded that race and class are interlinked but added that one should not be used to deny the impact of the other. Mbeki talked of globalisation and its positive effects for the world but how the negative consequences continue to be felt by the poor, and those who are not white.

In his conclusion to this speech Mbeki¹⁴³ referred to silent and hidden enemies, or those who did not wish to see racism eradicated. “We should not allow ourselves to be diverted by those who are opposed to this outcome of the eradication of the legacy and practice of slavery, colonialism and racism.” In Mouffe's critique of Schmitt¹⁴⁴ she analyses the same issue. Schmitt, she says, in his quest for political stability which can be achieved through the political unity of the state, does not make an adequate distinction between legitimate adversaries and enemies. The same can be said of Mbeki. Such is his sensitivity/vulnerability in terms of identity that acknowledging any difference will threaten his identity. In other words, he can't as he is, recognise legitimate difference, or distinguish between legitimate adversary and antagonist.

At the same conference, three days later, Mbeki delivered a speech in which he said that black people suffer indignity and humiliation because they are not white. But the speech then takes on what could be called an excessive emotional inflexion when Mbeki says, “Their cultures and traditions are despised as savage and primitive and their identities denied ...Of them it is said they are human but black, whereas others are described as human and white. ... To those who have to bear the pain of this real

¹⁴³ Mbeki (2001:138)

¹⁴⁴ Mouffe (1999:5)

world, it seems the blues singers were right when they decried: 'if you're white, you're alright; if you are brown stick around; if you are black, oh brother, get back, get back, get back'."¹⁴⁵ He continues, "I speak in these terms, which some may think are too harsh and stark, because I come from a people that have known the bitter experience of slavery, colonialism and racism."¹⁴⁶

The passion invested in race in the above excerpt exceeds expectations. The discourse shows a rage. Butler would argue, as indicated in her chapter on Melancholy, Ambivalence and Rage¹⁴⁷, that this is a fall into an unhappy consciousness marked by reflexivity. In operation it is the paradoxical embracing of the *very* terms that injure one.

The pattern and trend that emerged from his discourse on the African Renaissance and during the Conference against Racism is one that shows clearly that Mbeki is overly attached to the idea of ending Afro-pessimism and racist stereotypes. In his discourse the signifier race is an absolute and functions as a rigid designator, a thing to mark all things, showing no shades of grey but rather just black and white. In Afro-pessimism there could be various floating signifiers. And as Žižek writes, the *point de caption* is the point through which the subject is 'sewn' to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master signifier ('Communism', 'God', 'Freedom', 'America').¹⁴⁸ In Mbeki's case this master signifier is race.

¹⁴⁵ Mbeki (2001:140)

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*

¹⁴⁷ Butler (1997:169)

¹⁴⁸ Žižek (1989:101)

ii. Nepad

Mbeki is the primary architect of Nepad, the plan of the African Renaissance, which is built on the same ideological foundations. Its aim is to speed up economic development, to encourage investment in the continent, to create a trade free zone in the SADC region, to rid Africa of its “corrupt image”, to drag the continent out of its despair and poverty, to end wars and disease, and to create political, economic and spiritual renewal given that Africa’s economic development continues to lag behind global averages. According to Grant Masterson¹⁴⁹, “Despite a sizeable population of nearly 800-million people, spread among 53 states (the most on any single continent), Africa contributed less than 2% of the global trade balance in 2001.”

It is within this context that the Nepad initiative was conceived of in 2001. However, some critics, for instance Gumede, have called Nepad another example of Mbeki needing to impress the world with initiatives that will end Afro-pessimism. Some say that he would probably gain better stature if he attended to more domestic delivery. Gumede¹⁵⁰ is scathing. “Nepad was touted as nothing less than the African equivalent of the America’s Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe after the Second World War. Manuel [Trevor Manuel, minister of finance] waxed lyrical over the emergence of Nepad ‘when the global economy is pregnant with favourable opportunities’. Its true purpose, however, is to serve as the centre piece of the Mbeki government’s initiatives ‘to address what is wrong in the world’ as Manuel put it. Initial response from the ANC’s left was derisive - it argued, by putting his energy into domestic delivery as the best antidote to negative perceptions and Afro-pessimism.”

A second criticism lies with the fact that there was little consultation with the organs of civil society in this plan. Cosatu, for example, felt excluded from the inception.

¹⁴⁹ Masterson (2005:1)

¹⁵⁰ Gumede (2005:205)

“Without African grassroots support, Nepad is doomed to sink beneath a quicksand of a credibility gap.”¹⁵¹ Thirdly, Gumede¹⁵² points to the fact that the plan says little about human rights for example or the crippling HIV/Aids pandemic.

While Mbeki appears to be passionate about Africa’s renewal, as shown in all the above addresses on African Renaissance, and seems to show commitment to wanting to change the negative perceptions about Africans and African governance, he might well have done better had he reacted appropriately to certain critical events or issues as they presented themselves¹⁵³. This will be discussed in relation to Zimbabwe, in the chapters entitled, Letters from the President and HIV/Aids.

iii. The Two Nations Theory

Mbeki¹⁵⁴ in opening the debate on reconciliation and nation building in the National Assembly on 29 May 1998 said, “... South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographical dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development of opportunity, and the development opportunities to which the Constitution of 1993 committed our country.

“The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, the worst affected being women in rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical,

¹⁵¹ *ibid* pp212

¹⁵² *ibid*

¹⁵³ Mbeki’s critical opportunities are discussed in the chapter on HIV/Aids; reference is also made to the issue of Zimbabwe as discussed in Chapter 4 on “Letters from the President”.

¹⁵⁴ Mbeki (1998:188)

educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realisation.

“This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed we are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation.”

The way Mbeki approaches his Two Nations theory, shows that race functions as a rigid designator, that whites are rich and that blacks are poor, perpetuating the stereotype of the old South Africa. This, then, makes it, by definition, divisive and exclusionary rather than inclusive, and it makes race the master signifier by setting up two opposing dichotomies in the basis race. Left-wing academic Raymond Suttner has recently argued¹⁵⁵ that the use of binary opposites is a common barrier to understanding, setting up dichotomies that can be viewed as “prison houses”¹⁵⁶. Besides the academic literature where these prison houses are prevalent, he asserts, they can also be found in “government discourse, for example, the talk of “two economies”, when they are in fact inextricably bound to one another. In using this particular dichotomy is one not taking us back to a paradigm that belongs to a less transformative discourse than we need or purport to have as our national vision?” asks Suttner.

The South African Communist Party’s Jeremy Cronin critiques the Two Nations Thesis noting how the “parasitic bourgeoisie” is ignored in the thesis. Using the terminology of “representative vanguardism” and “righteous vanguardism” he argues

¹⁵⁶ Suttner (2005:2) Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture presented in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town: Talking to the Ancestors: National Heritage, the Freedom Charter and nation-building in South Africa in 2005

that while the “restorative project” of transformation under Mbeki is progressive, there are problems within this project, for instance the largely parasitic nature of BEE.¹⁵⁷

Cronin says the prevalent logic is articulated in this way: The “developmental state” needs leverage over capitalists who are mainly white and foreign; therefore we need to deploy “some of our own people” into the sites of capital accumulation, those deployed will represent us, ie blacks in general and Africans in particular. But at what point, Cronin asks, does a black billionaire cease to be “historically disadvantaged”? According to “righteous representative vanguardism” blacks in general remain hugely disadvantaged. There has been no trickle down effect, he says, and emerging BEE capital is not a national/patriotic bourgeoisie.

In Butlerian terms, Mbeki’s Two Nations Theory is the reiteration of norms, of old social and political identities, which are fixed, showing no signs of the resignifications that have now emerged, for instance emerging black capital. In Žižek’s terms race is rigidly designated through the setting up of two binary opposites. Mbeki’s last statement, “And neither are we becoming one nation”, is probably the most pessimistic of all. It is definitive and does not allow room for resignifications and new possibilities.

From Mbeki’s discourse on race, it is clear that he has become more and more stubbornly attached to his ideas of racial stereotypes and that these ideas have informed the development, in 1998, of his Two Nations thesis. This, in turn, seems to have informed, in the 2000s, his on-line offering to the public, “Letter from the President”. Mbeki’s words in these weekly letters are more racially emotive than any of his previous public utterances.

¹⁵⁷ Cronin (2005) The People Shall Govern – class struggles and the post1-994 state in South Africa

The Two Nations theory is theoretically unsound, particularly in terms of the present economic situation in South Africa, which has seen the rise of the new black middle, upper middle, and even, billionaire class. Mbeki does refer¹⁵⁸ to this issue, but his reference is dismissive. "Our country is also divided between the rich and the poor. Precisely because of apartheid, the rich are largely white and the poor black. Of course there are today poor whites and rich blacks. But their numbers are so small that they do not affect the aggregate racial imbalance in wealth and income." Here, he attempts to ignore the significance of the new black elite, which is, by definition, an unpatriotic class. Apart from Cronin, Moodley and Adam¹⁵⁹ also note this: "When Thabo Mbeki speaks of the South Africa consisting of two nations – a rich white and a poor black one – he ignores the black bourgeoisie. He implicitly denies the success of black empowerment by racializing class. Unfortunately, legitimate questions around empowerment and Afro-pessimism are quickly racialised. The colour of Afro-pessimism should be irrelevant as whether black fat cats emulate white fat cats. What matters are their common exploitation ...and their conspicuous consumption in the midst of extreme poverty."

The reason Mbeki does not criticise the unpatriotic black bourgeoisie, in my thesis, is that it goes against the grain of his social fantasy where all blacks are poor and all whites are rich. It, therefore, goes against the grain of his Two Nations Theory, where race functions as the transcendental signifier. Race cannot be a fixed, transcendental signifier if one has to acknowledge that the lines of race in relation to wealth creation have become somewhat blurred with the growth of a black middle class.

Research figures released recently by the South African Advertising Research Foundation on Life Style Measures (LSM) showed a growing middle class: since 1998 3-million people graduated from LSM4 to LSM 5, and from LSM5 to LSM6.

¹⁵⁸ Letters from the President Vol.1 No.22 2001

¹⁵⁹ Moodley and Adam (2000:64)

LSM4 indicates formal poverty. This means that 3-million people have moved out of the formal poverty category into the middle class category.

The millionaire class is most certainly small in comparison to the majority of South Africans who are indeed black and poor. To ignore it, however, would be disingenuous because large quantities of wealth have been accumulated in the hands of a few. Nevertheless, to over-emphasise this class would be equally artificial. *Time* magazine¹⁶⁰ names some of the members of this class, dubbed the “Fabulous Four”. They are Cyril Ramaphosa, Saki Macozoma, Tokyo Sexwale and Patrice Motsepe. Of the four, only Motsepe does not hail from an ANC leadership position (but nonetheless he has very close organisational ties). His wealth is estimated to be more than US\$500-million.¹⁶¹

One can trace back the Two Nations Theory back to nearly three decades ago, when Mbeki¹⁶² debunked conventional Marxist theory as he wrestled with the contradictions of the type of society that characterised South Africa. In a speech delivered at a seminar in Ottawa, Canada in February 1978 he criticised the view that “to understand South Africa we must appreciate the fact and fix it firmly in our minds that here we are dealing with a class society. In South Africa the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, are the dominant class. Therefore the state, other forms of social organisation and the ‘official’ ideas are conditioned by this one fact of the supremacy of the bourgeoisie”. He argued that this is an inadequate explanation given the unique realities of South Africa.

Further in the speech, he expounds his own view, which has contemporary resonance. “The act of negating the theory and practice of white apartheid racism, the revolutionary position, is exactly to take the issue of colour, race, national and

¹⁶⁰ 6 June 2005 [The New Rand Lords](#)

¹⁶¹ *Time* 6 June 2005 [The New Rand Lords](#)

¹⁶² Mbeki (1998:9)

sex differentiation out of the sphere of rational human thinking and behaviour, and thereby expose all colour, race, nation and sex prejudice as irrational.”¹⁶³

If one compares the ideas in this speech to those contained in Mbeki’s speeches some 30 years later, they are very similar in emphasis. There is a consistent pattern that runs throughout Mbeki’s discourse.

In his address to the National Assembly on the occasion of the budget vote for the office of the deputy president of the majority party on 22 September 1994, Mbeki talked about how the public service reflected the apartheid past and about how there was a need for change. “The pursuit of non-racialism and non-sexism demands that it [the public service] should be changed. We must of necessity build this into our thinking and our comprehension: that change cannot be carried out without some pain to some. The replacement of a white, male director-general by one that is black and female may indeed be an unpleasant experience to the outgoing incumbent. But the question must be asked: How else shall we produce a representative leadership of the civil service if we do not go through such processes? The questions must also be asked: When will it be the right time to begin these processes? And with what speed should they be executed?”¹⁶⁴

These questions, related to the complex national transformation project, are valid: the tensions and contradictions that Mbeki emphasised are themes that resonate in almost all of his speeches that follow, from 1995 to 2005. While the issue of race is critical to transformation, it is how Mbeki deals with it, and what his emphases are, that provides the critical insights into how he perceives the contradictions.

¹⁶³ *ibid* pp23

¹⁶⁴ Mbeki (1994:90)

On 27 April 1995, at the Global Cultural Diversity Conference in Sydney, Australia, Mbeki spoke on “Alliances and Allegiances: Rebuilding South Africa”. He expanded on the notion of accommodation. “I believe it would be true of all multicultural societies that peace, stability and good neighbourliness must necessarily be based on such striving towards reconciliation. But, inevitably, because we invariably have to deal with societies in which inequality and frustrated aspirations already exist, we have to twin the concept of reconciliation and with the equally critical objectives of transformation....”¹⁶⁵

He then proceeds to espouse the ANC’s policies of non-racialism, one nation and the acceptance of cultural diversity, “... arising directly from our determination to end the racial oppression and racial and ethnic divisions imposed on our people by the system of apartheid, are the concepts of national unity and nation building which would, at the same time, recognize, respect, defend and honour the cultural diversity of this one nation.”¹⁶⁶

In support of his case for cultural diversity, Mbeki points to the various ways in which the ANC has accommodated different cultural, religious and political interest groups for instance, the Zulu and Afrikaner nations’ partial self-determinism¹⁶⁷, as well as the acceptance of traditional leaders and the respect and tolerance of all religions, among other issues.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Mbeki (1995:55)

¹⁶⁶ Mbeki (1995:56)

¹⁶⁷ This will be discussed in the Chapter 4: Letters from the President.

The next part of his speech deals with “alliances”, “allegiances” and “legitimacy”. This is important because it isolates the roots of Mbeki’s views today on dissent and criticism of the ANC¹⁶⁹.

“That same democratic, open and meaningful participation in the process of determining the future of our country also enables all role players, however small, to put their concerns on the national agenda. In the process of the evolution of the democratic settlement which came into force one year ago today, once more we relied not on the power of the powerful to dictate this settlement, but on engaging in a process characterised by a democratic, open and meaningful participation by all, regardless of their size.

“What we are trying to describe is an alliance of the people and their organized formations around the important matter of ‘process’, which because it is inclusive, should lead to an outcome that enjoys legitimacy and therefore inspires the allegiance of the people as a whole. Consequently, it should follow that even those who might feel that they did not obtain what they sought in this process would nevertheless be prepared to live with this outcome.”¹⁷⁰ By stating that people should “nevertheless be prepared to live with this outcome” is to close off forms of conflictual pluralism. The need for loyalty to the ANC, because it came into power through a legitimate process, means therefore, for Mbeki that debate is not really necessary. Mouffe writes that in one particular view of deliberative democracy, sceptical about the virtues of political participation, “they want to introduce questions of morality and justice into politics”.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Mbeki (1995:57)

¹⁷¹ Mouffe (1999:44)

These are perhaps the more theoretical whispers of what became louder barks from Mbeki in his need for loyalty to the ANC - a politically subjective position that this is not interest-based politics but rather moral and legitimate politics - to be discussed more fully in the next chapter in the section: Debate with Tutu. A decade later, in 2005, in "Letters from the President", Mbeki attacks and labels those who criticise his policies as disloyal, elite, agents of white colonialism and so forth¹⁷².

In an address, "Breaking with the Past", to the university forum at the University of Natal, 7 March 1996, a similar theme emerges. Here he spelt out the "dialectical relationship" between reconciliation and transformation. "Simultaneously, as we speak of national reconciliation, so must we speak of transformation. As we vigorously strive to realise the national objective, so must we understand fully that we have a responsibility also to pursue this second and equally important goal of fundamental change."¹⁷³

However, on 3 April 1996, at a banquet in Cape Town to celebrate the 120th anniversary of the *Cape Times*, Mbeki¹⁷⁴ made another speech where he is less measured and more emotional about the issue of race. In this speech, called "Confronting Racism in Our Thinking", he talks about the "cold fear" that grips his heart when he thinks of racism. He makes the valid point that, after a year or two, it is not possible to wipe out centuries of South Africa's history of racism and notions of racial superiority from the consciousness of many. Mbeki was talking at this occasion at the same time that the country's currency, the rand, was sliding or "doing a mad dance" as he put it.

¹⁷² As will be shown in the "Letters from the President" and the debate with Tutu.

¹⁷³ Mbeki (1996:41)

¹⁷⁴ Mbeki (1996:113)

Mbeki's own perception on the issue was "...I thought¹⁷⁵ I heard the lyrics which contained the refrain: This, after all, is just another African country! And the recollection came flooding back of a now forgotten phrase: 'the white man's burden'. All this happens because there seems to be an accusation that is being made that a majority black government cannot properly manage an economy as sophisticated as ours. After all, look at the rest of Africa! And so it must remain the white man's burden ...to preside over the economy, as the black are condemned to a predilection and a hereditary instinct to abuse political power for purposes that are inimical to the objective of a healthy and growing economy! Cold fear grips my heart even as I say this, because I can hear the deluge of criticism that will wash over me. Some will say that that all I did was to make racist remarks. Others will ask: What did you expect from an Africanist? Yet others will say: Why does he not understand that what the colour blind market is reacting to is the inexperience of the new government and not its racial complexion?"¹⁷⁶

There are a several issues to deconstruct here. Firstly, as with his speeches on the African Renaissance, Mbeki is again falling into the same trap he accuses others of. This is again a case of being attached to the norms that oppress one, a case of a passionate attachment to race.

Secondly, the repeated references to race merely reinforce stereotypes that Mbeki, in other statements, suggests he is keen to eliminate. It is a case, to use Butler, of embracing the terms that injure one, of the paradoxical subjection to norms, of a reiteration of norms, and of the fall into the unhappy consciousness. Is he actually keen to eliminate these norms though? If he stopped reiterating the norms, there

¹⁷⁵ What is telling here is that Mbeki "thought" he heard the lyrics "After all this is just another African country". I will refer to this when I discuss Žižek and the concept of ideological fantasy in relation to Mbeki in Chapter 6, in my conclusions.

¹⁷⁶ Mbeki (1996:113)

would be a loss of identity Butler would argue. Mbeki has to hold on to these norms of subjection for his identity to remain intact.

Thirdly, his statements are clearly a case of an obsession with race, showing an enormous passionate investment in the signifier race. His harking back to the phrase 'the white man's burden' is a harking back to the past and to the terms that injured him. It is a clear case of the subject subjecting himself to his own oppression.

"A major component part of the issue of reconciliation and nation building is defined by and derives from the material conditions in our society which have divided our country into two nations, the one black and the other white."¹⁷⁷

This is the logic he employs when he proceeds to say that South Africa is a country of two nations, black and white. Again the pattern of race functioning as a rigid designator is evident and, again, Mbeki does not make reference to the changing nature of the class component in South Africa. He does not make reference any resignifications, for instance the growing black middle class, nor does he make reference to the parasitic black bourgeoisie. This renders the black/white approach of the Two Nations thesis expedient in terms of his attachment to a specific social fantasy. In failing to make reference to the shifts and changes in the class and race composition, Mbeki shows the limits imposed by the attachment to the signifier, race. The Two Nations thesis reveals, therefore how the signifier, race, functions as the master signifier in his discourse rather than a floating signifier.

In conclusion, his Two Nations speech takes a fairly pessimistic view of the notions of reconciliation and transformation in South Africa. He asks a few critical questions and then answers these in the negative. To the question "are we making the requisite

¹⁷⁷ Mbeki (1998:71)

progress towards achieving the objective of nation building?"¹⁷⁸ His response is an emphatic "No!" Mamphela Ramphele, senior advisor to the president of the World Bank and a former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, offers a more generous perception of Mbeki's Two Nations theory. She puts his theory into perspective but at the same time shows another path with more positive potential. She writes¹⁷⁹, "It seems to me that the statement made by the President about the two economies was really a necessary shock therapy. It was needed to get us out of the complacency of thinking that having done away with Apartheid, all's well. Having received the shock therapy, perhaps it is time for us to review and say that at the end of the day we have only one economy. What we have is a South African economy." Underlying her comment there is a subtle warning that the country needs to avoid harking back to old the dualisms, of black and white, just as Suttner argues that binary opposites are not particularly useful or progressive. "So we really need to recover from the President's therapy, acknowledge that we needed it, and go on to ask: Now how do we deal with this one economy?"¹⁸⁰ Ramphele asks.

iv. Black Economic Empowerment

The political backdrop to Mbeki's discourse on race is the country's economic transformation policy framework of BEE. Given that wealth is still concentrated largely in white hands, economic transformation, particularly empowering the poor who are mainly black, is critical. That this is necessary is hardly in dispute, but where controversy occurs is in the manner in which BEE is taking place. The criticisms fuelling these controversies emanate from across the colour and ideological spectrum.

¹⁷⁸ Mbeki (1998:74)

¹⁷⁹ *Mail & Guardian* 26 November 2004: Looking Back at the Road Ahead

¹⁸⁰ Ramphele (2004)

An overview of the debates that surround BEE is given below to place Mbeki's comments on the subject into a context.¹⁸¹

The government, in a document on "South Africa's economic transformation: a strategy for Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment" by the Department of Trade and Industry¹⁸², defines BEE as "an integrated and coherent socio-economic process that directly contributes to the economic transformation of South Africa and brings about significant increases in the numbers of black people that manage, own and control the country's economy, as well as significant decreases in income inequalities".

Provision is made for BEE within the Constitution's equality clause that states, "Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons', or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken."

The aim of BEE is to economically empower blacks or the previously disadvantaged population groups (Africans, coloureds and Indians) within specific sectors. It is mainly measured through a scorecard approach based on ownership, management, employment equity, skills development, corporate social responsibility and procurement. Targets for aspects of empowerment are set with the particular players within a particular industry, in consultation with the government.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ This dissertation does not investigate the whole area of BEE but merely points to the different aspects of the debate to place Mbeki's discourse against the political backdrop of transformation.

¹⁸² Enterprise magazine: April 2003

¹⁸³ Department of Trade and Industry document quoted in Enterprise magazine April 2003

One of the central issues of contention is that the prevalent type of BEE is narrow and has thus far benefited a few.¹⁸⁴ This type of BEE is opposed to the policy favoured by the government of a broad-based empowerment approach that will benefit the majority of South Africans, who are poor. Recent research reports¹⁸⁵ show that, poverty has grown between 1995 and 2000.

Some argue that economic transformation is not happening at the pace it should. Cosatu, the largest trade union movement in South Africa, with 1,8-million members, and also the ANC's alliance partner, has been critical of the present type of BEE. Cosatu secretary-general Zwelinzima Vavi¹⁸⁶, quoted by Gumede¹⁸⁷, told an ANC workshop, "We do not see BEE narrowly as the enrichment of a few black individuals. Rather we see it as empowerment of the black majority in the context of dealing with the legacy of apartheid. We accept that the process of dealing with (economic) discrimination may ultimately lead to the development of a black bourgeoisie. Our approach, however, is that for BEE to make sense for the majority of our people, the emphasis must be on blacks as a whole."

In 1998 Mbeki set up a commission in an attempt to end the confusion about what type of BEE the country needed. The Black Economic Empowerment Commission (BEECom) was set up in 1998 under Ramaphosa's chairpersonship after complaints from the Black Management Forum about the slow pace of transformation in the economic sphere of the country.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ See Southall's (2005:175) argument in the HSRC's State of the Nation 2005-06 in a chapter entitled Black Empowerment and limits to a more democratic capitalism: "...a small elite of black business men were the beneficiaries of one deal after another ..."

¹⁸⁵ Magasela (2006:46) in a chapter: Towards a Constitution-based definition of poverty in post-apartheid South Africa.

¹⁸⁶ Vavi's view echoes the sentiments of Hani (Gumede 2005:215), who was quoted in *Beeld* 29 October 1999 as saying, "What I fear is that the liberators emerge as elitists ... who drive around in Mercedes Benzes and use the resources of this country ... to live in palaces and to gather riches."

¹⁸⁷ Gumede (2002:211)

¹⁸⁸ *Enterprise* magazine April 2003 BEE: Erwin Unravels Government's Strategy

The BEECom¹⁸⁹ presented its first report to Mbeki in April 2001. While, in essence the report consisted of employing industrial sector empowerment charters, with implementation targets to be monitored by a BEE commission in the Office of the Presidency, the commission also agreed to a broad-based definition of BEE.

However, the actual implementation of a broad-based empowerment has not happened according to Cosatu's chief economist Neva Makgetla who argued in a report¹⁹⁰ in 2003, "According to Statistics South Africa's Earning and Spending in South Africa, between 1995 and 2000 African incomes fell by 19%, while white incomes – particularly for the best paid – rose by 15%. As a result, the average African household income dropped from a quarter of the average white income to a sixth. In particular the poorest households lost out. The share of the poorest 40% in total incomes dropped by 16%, from 7,3% to 6,1%. The main reason for this is soaring unemployment. Between 1995 and today, the unemployment rose from 16% to almost 30%, using the 'official' definition that counts only those workers who are not too discouraged actively to seek work."

In theory it seems, from what Makgetla is arguing, that while Cosatu and the government have the same views on advocating a broad-based form of BEE, in practice Cosatu believes the government is biased in favour of black business. Makgetla argues, "In recent years, government departments have sometimes seemed to reduce black economic empowerment to support for black capital, without challenging overall inequality ... This runs contrary to ANC explicit policy, expressed primarily through the definition of BEE ... The role of the state in backing black entrepreneurs has important implications for class formation. It has greatly increased inequalities within the black community. Yet it cannot initiate the restructuring of the

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*

¹⁹⁰ A report on the proceedings of a Black Management Forum symposium on 25 August 2003.

economy required to accelerate growth and employment creation. Moreover, this approach creates a conflict of interest between those who want to use the state to profit themselves and their allies, and the majority of poor communities who would prefer affordable services and job creation.”

Gumede¹⁹¹ has also been critical of the government’s stance on BEE and singles out Mbeki as viewing BEE as a “crucial route to the formation of a black capitalist class which he sees, in turn, as a key aspect of deracialising South African society”. The paradox is that this class is ignored in the Two Nations’ thesis because it does not concur with the theory that blacks are poor and whites are rich, the dualism of old South Africa.

Mbeki¹⁹² told a Black Management Forum in 1999, “As part of the realisation of the aim to eradicate racism in our country, we must strive to create and strengthen a black capitalist class. A critical part to create a non-racial society is the deracialisation of the ownership of productive property.”

While broad-based empowerment is now part of the country’s legislation, it is not in evidence, especially if one examines a Statistics South Africa’s research report “Achieving a Better Life for All”.¹⁹³ The report says that those households living in shacks remained “stubbornly constant” at 16.4%, lending credibility to the argument that a narrow-based BEE is endemic.

A second area of contention is over who the government blames for the lack of broad-based BEE. For its part, the government says it is doing its fair share through its state procurement policies, often stating that the business sector has not shown

¹⁹¹ Gumede (2002:207)

¹⁹² Mbeki (2002:207)

¹⁹³ Report Progress between Census 1996 and 2001: Source: [http://www.statssa.go.za/Publications/Report 03-02-6](http://www.statssa.go.za/Publications/Report%2003-02-6)

enough commitment to BEE. Mbeki¹⁹⁴ states, “However, government does not have sufficient resources to ensure large-scale participation of black people at all levels of the economy. We therefore urge that business should be partners in this effort, by taking very serious steps to make sure that black economic empowerment is not postponed for another day.”

The third big issue in re to BEE is what Cronin refers to as the “compradorist” and “parasitic” nature of emerging black capital. Compradorism reflects the reliance on patronage of established capital. There is reliance on special share deals, BEE, affirmative action, quotas, privatisation and so forth rather than through the unleashing of productive processes. Parasitism is reflected in the reliance on the symbiotic relationship with the upper echelons of the state apparatuses. “This black capitalist faction is not galvanising a national development effort. It is, in fact, highly fractionalised, incapable of uniting itself, and therefore, increasingly incapable of uniting a national bloc behind its hegemonic leadership.”¹⁹⁵

In a similar vein, Ravi Naidoo, interviewed¹⁹⁶ in 2004, while he was director of the non-governmental organisation Naledi, the research wing of Cosatu, said, “It’s unfortunate that South Africa is so fixated on race. What we don’t want is what we already have – a small rich class, which is non-racial. At the top end we have 10% spending 50% of the country’s money, and at the bottom, 40% of the country’s people spending 10% of the country’s money, and a small middle class somewhere in between.”

He added, “So this is the direction we are going – those households that are earning R800 a month has now grown to 4-million people between 1999 and 2002. This is

¹⁹⁴ Letters from the President Vol.1 No.22 2001

¹⁹⁵ Cronin (2005) The People shall govern, class struggles and the post 94 state in SA

¹⁹⁶ Unpublished interview by Daniels, 2004.

South Africa right now – a highly unequal market economy. But it's becoming less and less about race. It's going to be more and more about the rich and the poor.”

In a similar stance, other critics of the present narrow-based empowerment, for instance the SACP, argue that the “trickle down effect” to the majority, who are poor, is not happening. SACP secretary-general Blade Nzimande¹⁹⁷ said that the majority of BEE deals over the past decade probably had a negative effect on addressing the real transformation issues in the country. “Even in terms of the new Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act, the dominant approach remains narrow, focusing on multibillion rand ownership deals that advanced only a small exclusive black minority through equity acquisition and individual promotion into senior management ranks.”

He also took issue with the scorecard approach. “Empowerment is reduced to quotas, to scorecards and to ticking boxes.”¹⁹⁸

In Mbeki's State of the Nation address in 2005¹⁹⁹ he began to articulate the contradictions that have been shown above: “... All of us as South Africans need to understand that as the struggle for freedom from white minority domination had its price, so will our efforts to achieve non-racism and national reconciliation have their price.

“We will therefore deliberately, regularly and consistently seek answers to a whole variety of questions to understand whether our policies and programmes are succeeding to achieve the objectives in our constitution.

¹⁹⁷ *Business Day* 5 May 2005 SACP lashes ‘empowerment for elite’

¹⁹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹⁹ Mbeki (2005)

“Among others, we will ask: how many black people have moved across the poverty line? How many black people are employed and unemployed? How many people matriculate with exemptions in mathematics and the sciences? How many black people are skilled and have attained professional qualifications? How many black people occupy managerial positions in the public and private sectors? How many black people have gained access to land?”

While the questions Mbeki raises are valid, what is the motive behind them? Given the pattern of race functioning as a rigid designator in his discourse, I suggest it does not suit Mbeki’s social fantasy and Two Nations theory to acknowledge that some black people have made inroads on the economic front, moving into the middle class and exploit other black people in the same way that white capitalists did and do.

Southall, however, points to the various pitfalls in the debate about the kinds of BEE prevalent in the country. Southall²⁰⁰ argues that neither the broad-based nor the narrow-based definitions are adequate. First, if BEE has come to mean empowerment within the private sector, what of the public sector? Second, within the inclusive approach, BEE can be defined in general terms that could even include an increase in the availability of menial jobs. The use of an inclusive approach risks defining BEE in broad terms so that any black economic activity is included. Yet, more often than not, people in these modes have been pushed out of jobs through retrenchment and are often in a survivalist rather than an empowered mode.

Gumede²⁰¹ has also added his voice to the fray. “Many new black business leaders are former (usually materially poor) activists turned ANC politicians, who following their migration from politics to business, have become extremely wealthy ... The new

²⁰⁰ Southall (2005:456)

²⁰¹ Gumede (2002:208)

breed of black entrepreneurs continue to reinforce the notion that, instead benefiting the previously disadvantaged black community, BEE has generated into the self-enrichment of a few.”

Mbeki does not suffer criticism gladly. Criticisms of the kind of BEE taking place in the country have come from many quarters, including Tutu. Although a black clergyman, Mbeki ends up hailing Tutu as an “elitist” for his adversarial but legitimate positions aimed at deepening democracy; and the ANC ends up labelling Tutu as a racist.

v. Mbeki’s debate with Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Mbeki’s response to Tutu’s criticism of the kind of BEE taking place in the country provides an important insight into Mbeki’s discourse on race. What emerges when the debate between the two is examined is that defensiveness and denialism informs Mbeki’s approach and, in a rather convoluted and curious way, Tutu ends up being labelled as a racist.

At the Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture in Johannesburg towards the end of 2004 Tutu asked, “What is black empowerment when it seems to benefit not the vast majority, but a small elite that tends to get recycled? Are we not building much resentment that we may rue later? It will not do to say people did not complain when whites were enriched. When was the old regime our standard? And remember what some of the most influential values spoke about.”²⁰²

Tutu also tackled five other issues of critical importance: the lack of open debate in the country; the situation in Zimbabwe; the HIV/Aids pandemic; national security and arms procurement; social grants; and sustainable development.

²⁰² *Business Day* 24 November 2004 [SA needs to look beyond its borders to realise its own triumphs](#)

After Tutu's lecture Mbeki²⁰³ launched what could only be described as a vitriolic attack on the archbishop. Firstly, he said that while he agreed with Tutu on a number of issues, such as the need for open debate, he found it "puzzling" that Tutu accused the ANC of a lack of debate. He then said, "The Archbishop has never been a member of the ANC, and would have very little knowledge of what happens even in an ANC branch."²⁰⁴ Does this mean, as it seems to, that Mbeki believes anyone who has not been, or is not, a member of the ANC does not have the right to comment on transformation?

In his response to Tutu on current BEE developments Mbeki recognises, "Quite correctly, the Archbishop argues against 'black empowerment when it seems to benefit not the vast majority but a small elite that tends to get recycled'." However, Mbeki went on, "The black business elite that has been the focus of negative comment has made its progress through its own private initiative. None among its ranks has been funded or promoted by the government, enabling them to access such deals as they may have secured."²⁰⁵

Mbeki then lists the procurement budgets of state-owned enterprises. For example, from 1998 to 2004 Eskom spent R26,6bn on BEE; Telkom spent nearly R24bn on BEE; and Transnet's target that at least 50% of its discretionary funds must be spent on BEE by 2005, was actually met in 2003. He concludes, "Factually, the assertion that all that BEE amounts to is benefiting a small elite that tends to be recycled is entirely false."²⁰⁶

²⁰³ *Sunday Independent* 28 November 2004 [Opposition Parties pick up Tutu's gauntlet](#)

²⁰⁴ *Sunday Independent* 28 November 2004 [Opposition Parties pick up Tutu's gauntlet](#)

²⁰⁵ *Sunday Times* 28 November 2004 [The President vs the preacher](#)

²⁰⁶ *Sunday Independent* 28 November 2004 [Let's start with the facts, archbishop](#)

He subsequently said Tutu should demonstrate “a decent respect for the truth” rather than resort to “empty rhetoric”. Such statements are strong, defensive – and offensive.

It seems fair to assume that, if Mbeki had left Tutu to voice his concerns about the way in which transformation was taking place the resultant furore would not have occurred. The fact that the subsequent debate took up masses of column centimetres in the newspapers showed that many – from across the ideological spectrum, from political analysts and newspaper columnists, to opposition parties, the trade union movement, and NGOs – were merely waiting for the opportunity to voice concerns similar to those of Tutu. It was as though a pressure-valve had been opened.

Cosatu was among the first to speak out.²⁰⁷ The federation praised Tutu for making an “important intervention” on same issues of concern to the union movement, particularly the need for the Basic Social Income Grant. Cosatu said that it was being “sidelined” by the ANC because it had criticised the party’s economic policies, as well as its stances on HIV/Aids and Zimbabwe. It said that when it raised concerns over these issues it was accused of being “counter-revolutionary”, “ultra-leftist”, and under the control of opposition parties and the West.

Opposition parties also entered the debate. The DA’s Leon²⁰⁸ endorsed Tutu’s call for a national debate around issues of HIV/Aids, Zimbabwe and BEE. Leader of the Independent Democrats Patricia de Lille²⁰⁹ concurred with Leon, adding that her party wanted more debate on key national issues that affect the poor, while the

²⁰⁷ *Sunday Times* 28 November 2004 Allies gang up on Mbeki

²⁰⁸ *Sunday Independent* 28 November 2004 Opposition parties to pick up Tutu’s gauntlet

²⁰⁹ *ibid*

African Christian Democratic Party's Selby Khumalo said his party "welcomed" the archbishop's comments.

As more and more column centimetres in the newspapers became devoted to the issue, Tutu unfortunately backed down with a spiritual rather than political response. Hoping to end the debate, Tutu²¹⁰ said he was "saddened" by the issue, adding later that he would "pray" for Mbeki.

The debate did not end. The ANC Today²¹¹, the on-line publication of the ruling party, said that the problem was that "people had conferred the status of icon onto Tutu".

Newspaper columnists and political analysts also took up the issue, most of them making valuable contributions to the debate. Many of the comments included that Mbeki was over-defensive, that he treated Tutu with dismissive contempt, showing he did not have the confidence to allow healthy and lively debate that he could not accept challenge and that Mbeki and his government yearn for uniformity.

The head of the political information and monitoring service at the Institute for Democracy (Idasa), Judith February, made two important points when she wrote that, "Mbeki's is a government of the people, duly elected with an overwhelming mandate, defensiveness is therefore unnecessary." She continued that it was not only the "job of politicians to fill the public space – ordinary citizens and civil society organisations need to step into the breach by raising concerns and offering solutions to the important issues of the day. The public debate can be shut down only with all our consent."²¹²

²¹⁰ *Sunday Independent* 6 February 2005 Tutu saddened but not stumped by spat

²¹¹ Vol.5, No.4 28January-3 February 2005. This ANC Today newsletter is entitled: The Sociology of the Public Discourse in Democratic South Africa: Shut up Mr President! This is not a Letter from the President, but is a response from the ANC on the Mbeki/Tutu debate.

²¹² *Business Day* 7 December 2004 Public Debate for and by the people

Xolela Mangcu, the head of the Steve Biko Foundation, also offered some insight to the issue, saying that, yes, by the nature of his standing in the community, Tutu was indeed a member of the “elite” but then so were many others.²¹³ He cites Pixley ka Seme, John Dube, Sol Plaatjie, Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko – and Thabo Mbeki. The history of the ANC, he reminded readers, was one of an elite nature. Mangcu also noted the contradictory positions of the ANC and Mbeki on the subject of elites. He wrote, that at times “the President has strongly rebuked ‘the elite’ for its crass materialism and at other times he has defended the black elite for its private enterprise, and even called for the creation of a black capitalist class. The understanding of elites is so fluid that some elites are more acceptable than others, depending on how critical they are of government policies.”

The ANC, from the time of the Tutu/Mbeki debate, began to take its on-line discourse with the public more seriously. But, I argue, the offerings have taken on a bizarre turn, evinced in a section on the site The ANC Today in an article entitled “The Sociology of Public Discourse in Democratic South Africa”. This section has become longer, more long-winded and confused. A *Mail & Guardian* editorial²¹⁴ refers to it as a “muddle of 19th century racist colonial theory”.

The race issue surfaced in Mbeki’s debate with Tutu. “Tutu and other mentioned icons [read Mandela] are the ‘creations of a white elite’ assisted by ‘black opinion makers’. Tutu is the ‘manipulable mascot in the hands of western powers’.”²¹⁵

The ANC Today²¹⁶ proceeds: “We have asserted that the second lesson that should be drawn from the Tutu-Mbeki debate is that part of the sociology of the public discourse in our country is the resolve of the elite to silence the voices of the those

²¹³ *Business Day* 3 February 2005 ‘Elitist’ Tutu, maybe, but what of ‘elitist’ Mandela, Mbeki, Biko?

²¹⁴ 8 January-3 February 2005

²¹⁵ The Sociology of the Public Discourse in Democratic South Africa: Shut up Mr President! ANC Today Vol.5 No.4 28 January-3 February 2005.

²¹⁶ *ibid*

who might have the credibility and the standing to challenge its views and those it considers as icons. ...Of the greatest significance in this regard is the fact that as leader of our movement, ANC President Mbeki has an absolute and binding obligation to defend the ANC against its detractors.”

Was Tutu not merely exercising his right to a different view from Mbeki and from the ANC, thereby creating the space for the deepening of democracy? Hailing him as “the creation of a white elite, assisted by black opinion makers”, shows the excess attached to race in the government discourse. Does Mbeki really need to “defend the ANC against its detractors”? Is Tutu really a serious detractor or merely a legitimate adversary, adding a new voice on issues of transformation, extending democracy?

This is an excellent example of the hegemonic nature of Mbeki’s discourse, where the “rigid designator” is in operation. Žizek²¹⁷ contends that in the “Stalinist universe” the “real member of the people is only he who supports the rule of the Party: those who work against its rule are automatically excluded from the People; they become ‘enemies of the People’”.²¹⁸

In other words, if you do not support the Party *in toto*, you are not with us. Mbeki’s response to Tutu’s concerns, in fact Tutu’s “thinking for himself”²¹⁹, was that “The Archbishop has never been a member of the ANC, and would have very little knowledge of what happens even in an ANC branch”. The ideological effect of Mbeki’s discourse is that Tutu becomes “the other” and the “bad subject”. Pecheux²²⁰ explains this issue thus: in short, the ‘bad subject’ is ‘a trouble maker’, a subject

²¹⁷ Žizek (1989:147)

²¹⁸ See also Laclau and Mouffe (1985:192) for their argument concerning the plurality of spaces and keeping the social ‘open’.

²¹⁹ See also Pecheux (1982:220), who states, “There is no domination without resistance, and ‘one must dare to rebel’. “Nobody can think in anyone else’s place” ...which means one must put up with what comes to be thought, i.e. one must ‘dare to think for oneself’.”

²²⁰ Pecheux (1982:157)

which counter-identifies against the discursive formation imposed on him by “inter-discourse” or a political form of “*discourse-against*”. But the only discourse that Tutu can be seen as opposing is Mbeki’s and it is only within the exclusionist framework of this that Tutu can be seen as an antagonist rather than as a friendly adversary.

In the end, whether Tutu is actually articulating a *discourse- against* in the true sense of rebellion or is not, is irrelevant. He is merely expressing concerns about a lack of debate and a “sycophantic, obsequious conformity” but this is perceived by Mbeki as a *discourse- against*.

Mbeki did not make a distinction between a legitimate adversary, as Tutu is, instead he regarded him as an antagonist. Mouffe in her critique of Carl Schmitt says that his thesis does not permit a differential treatment of conflictuality. “It can manifest itself only in the mode of antagonism, where the two sides are in complete opposition and no common symbolic ground exists between them. According to Schmitt, there is no possibility of pluralism – that is, legitimate dissent among friends – and conflictuality is relegated to the exterior of political unity.”²²¹ Mbeki’s reaction to Tutu was, in this sense, Schmittian.

The point is that Tutu was “silenced” by Mbeki because he expressed a different view from that of the Party, the ANC. And in the end, Mbeki’s subject, Tutu, is interpellated as “a manipulable mascot” in the hands of western powers, a “creation of a white elite”.

En passant, Tutu succumbed to power by responding that he was “saddened” and that he would pray for Mbeki. Tutu was hailed and brought into line, he turned towards the voice of power in the same way that Althusser’s passer-by turned

²²¹ Mouffe (1999:5)

towards the voice of the policeman who said “hey you!” In this often quoted example, the man on the street does not know who the policeman is hailing but he turns around anyway as though it is him. Althusser’s central thesis is that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects²²². Butler explains Althusser’s example to say that the subordination of the subject takes place through language, as the effect of the authoritative voice that hails the individual. In the case of Mbeki and Tutu, not only was Tutu interpellated, he was hailed as an antagonist and in this way Mbeki set Tutu up in binary opposition to himself.

In the case of Mbeki as subject vis-à-vis his discourse on African Renaissance, Nepad, BEE and Two Nations, Butler’s theory that the subject’s identification is dependent on the reiteration of norms, that the process of signification is through performative reiteration, has been shown. Her argument is that the subject is produced by a melancholic turn rather than being based on material oppression or primary oppression. While Butler’s argument is based on gender and identity, the same can be applied to race. But is she ignoring the reality of sexism, or in the case of this subject, Mbeki, the reality of racism? For Mbeki, the reality of apartheid is still prevalent today, the turning back to colonialism is very definitely a turn to past conditions. This is his traumatic wound. However, Butler does allow for contingency. Mbeki’s discourse is a social one, and a social discourse is historical. This analysis of his discourse is also based at a particular point in time – transformation politics – who is to say that his discourse will remain fixed and without new resignifications, that the status of race might one day take on that of a floating signifier, rather than a master signifier, that norms might not be repeated in unpredictable ways in his future discourse?

²²² Pecheux (1994:145)