

The Best of All Possible Worlds: Optimism, Pessimism and Nationalism



Gareth van Onselen

obtained a Masters degree in sociology at Wits University before moving to Cape Town in 2001 and, for the next ten years, worked for the Democratic Alliance in South Africa's parliament. Among other things, he oversaw the party's research and communications, as an Executive Director. At the beginning of 2013 he left the party and moved into journalism. He now writes a column for the *Business Day* and works as a Senior Reporter for the *Sunday Times*. He has published one other title, *Clever Blacks, Jesus and Nkandla: The real Jacob Zuma in his own words* (2014), a collection of controversial quotes from South African President Jacob Zuma, that reveal his private convictions and beliefs. His second book, *Holy Cows: The Ambiguities of Being South African*, was released by Tafelberg earlier in 2015.

*But how conceive a God, the source of love
Who on man lavished blessings from above
Then would the race with various plagues confound
Can mortals penetrate His views profound?
Ill could not from a perfect being spring
Nor from another, since God's sovereign king;
And yet, sad truth! in this our world 'tis found
What contradictions here my soul confound!*

*Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne
(Poem on the Lisbon Disaster)
Voltaire; December 1756*

Voltaire's poem, a precursor to his magnum opus *Candide*, was written in response to the Lisbon earthquake of November 1755. However, although born of the same tragedy, unlike *Candide* it is a bleak affair – a savagely serious attack on the philosophy of optimism. No irony or ridicule hides between its lines. In it he argues evil is not the will of a benevolent God – an understandable response to sin – but rather that we all are victims, of fate and randomness and misfortune in turn. The nature of the world is a cruel one, he laments, and optimism, rather than being a fountain of hope, is a well of despair in which the ignorant swim.

A book that left an indelible mark on philosophy and literature alike – less so in South Africa, where it is rarely cited – *Candide* is a more light-hearted affair. Nevertheless, it is no less effective an assault on optimism. Like *Animal Farm* long after it, its simple satire cut deep. Certainly it left the philosophy of optimism bleeding everywhere. With it, its central tenet – that we live “in the best of all possible worlds” – was dealt a defining blow.

These days optimism is no longer a coherent philosophical theory that is practised in any serious way. It is generally regarded as little more than an attitude, a hopeful temperament. And, rather than being exclusively focused on the here and now, it tends towards the future: an allusion to better things still to come. It has become more of a belief than an analytical tool. In the new South Africa, it found a playground ideally suited to the particular outlook it offered. It thrived, fairly hardwiring itself into the national disposition.

All through the 1990s, in grand ideals like “the rainbow nation” and “the African renaissance”, a sense of optimism fed off and fuelled the belief that the country, even the continent, was moving inextricably away from a dark past and toward an ever-brighter future. But the 2000s brought with them a series of profound problems, no less grand in scale or significance. Each would reach full maturity

in the 2010s. As a result, today the increasingly prevalent assumption is that the country's once bright future is now at serious risk of having its guiding light snuffed out completely.

At the centre of this shift in the national mood sits the African National Congress. Politics suffers a somewhat schizophrenic relationship with optimism. On the one hand, any political party needs to advocate for a better tomorrow if it is to successfully enthuse voters; on the other hand, a party must be able to defend its record and make a case that, as a result of its influence, we do indeed live in the best of all possible worlds. Nationalistic thought, however, particularly when practised by a revolutionary movement, has one additional obstacle it must surmount. To be convincing, it needs to instil a sense of inevitability; for if it is a pure and unadulterated extension of the will of the people, it cannot ever be anything but successful. Were it otherwise, the people themselves would be wrong and its own *raison d'être* rendered inherently contradictory.

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"The organisation is Biblical in every respect", ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe has said, "The number three is very important, as is the number 12. Jesus had 12 disciples and in its first 100 years the ANC has had 12 presidents. We also had our own Moses. In 1993, a week after the assassination of Chris Hani, Oliver Tambo died; it was after that, in 1994, that Nelson Mandela led us through the river."

Whether or not Mandela made it to the other side is still up for debate. At least, outside the ANC it is. Inside the party, a different universe of delusion exists. Look at it from a distance and the ANC has created an impenetrable bubble, inside of which 70% of news is good and its performance has been stellar on every conceivable front, regardless of the problems it has created. Thus, it has a good story to tell. Critical introspection, that is, the ability to question not just one's behaviour but firmly held beliefs, is not easy for any political party. They are fundamental beasts. But, for the ANC, the belief has become the lens through which everything is interrogated and, inevitably, it shows only progress.

As the idea of optimism has evolved over time, it has developed a number of adjuncts, "blind" optimism being one of the more common. But it is redundant if you believe this world is the best of all possible worlds. The idea is already absolutist.

It has been a painful process for the ANC, watching its bubble shrink over time. There was an extended period when it engulfed much of South Africa within it.

James Myburgh has written of the Panglossian South African mood during Thabo Mbeki's tenure, a period in which the former President was able to feed, vampire-like off the seemingly limitless good will he had inherited. He says:



“Whatever the ANC of Mbeki did was for the best. We lived in the best of all possible countries, with the best of all possible leaders, surrounded by the best of all possible advisors, pursuing the best of all possible policies, with the best of all possible constitutions, overseen by the best of all possible courts.”

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But that is no longer the case. The current Zeitgeist would have it we live in the worst of countries, with the worst leaders, surrounded by the worst advisors, pursuing the worst policies. Only the constitution and, to a lesser degree, the courts, have been exempt. The Constitution can still be said to resonate with some small amount of optimism; although the assault on it, as a compact that betrayed rather than liberated, is starting to find an increasingly enthusiastic audience.

Among certain left-leaning liberals, so quick to hitch their moral bandwagon to the ANC of Mbeki, so quick to detach it when the road became more treacherous, this shrinking has produced a cohort of modern day apologetics. The ANC has problems, they argue, “challenges”, but its soul remains pure and our goal is to aid and to understand, to help it back onto the right path so that we may once again hitch our wagons to it. They wander the streets, these apologists, their emotional baggage in tow, directionless. Many of the old party faithful, from Trevor Manuel to the late Kader Asmal, seem to suffer a similar crisis of conscience. *What contradictions here my soul confound.*

For those brave few, led by the Democratic Party (DP), who bucked the trend in the 1990s and warned that this was not the best of all possible worlds, the price was a high one: to be labelled eternal pessimists, disinterested in hope, forever animated by despair. But their wisdom is now almost universally accepted. When the DP first identified, explained and illustrated the ANC’s policy of cadre deployment, in a document titled ‘All Power to the Party’, it was derided as McCarthyist. Today

that policy is a stock standard component of so much criticism aimed at the ruling party and its administration of the State.

Ironically, the Democratic Alliance (DA) has become the torchbearer for contemporary optimism. It describes a utopian South Africa in the year 2029, when ten years of DA governance will have transformed the country into a prosperous, effective modern democracy. To date it has provided no substantial policy framework in support of that vision. No doubt it will come, but it is remarkable the extent to which it is able to ride this rhetorical wave, given the depth and breadth of our collective despair. Perhaps it is because, inherent to it, is a prophecy of doom: *don't embrace our vision and the end is nigh*.

Desperately the ANC has tried to, once again, extend its bubble. It is locked into a way of attrition with the media, at whose feet it lays the blame for the majority of its bad public reputation. It seems to have made some progress too. The Independent Group now practices a kind of news-by-social work, as does the SABC. Endless stories of personal experiences, of personal truths and individual narratives designed to serve as metaphors for those sentiments no hard evidence can be found to illustrate. Yet, such is the extent of the decay, even it cannot hold back the tidal wave of negativity from its front pages. You have to search long and hard to find that 70% these days.

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But it is the voting public at large that is most interesting. The ANC got 62% in the last election. That, by anyone's standard is a healthy majority. Are the masses, particularly the ANC's core, rural constituency, optimistic about the future and the ANC? There doesn't appear to be much evidence for it. Service delivery protests continue to escalate, the alliance is cracking and fracturing, water, electricity and roads infrastructure crises hamper the quality of life, unemployment remains disturbingly high and corruption is particularly acute, especially at local government level, where politicians are now almost synonymous with the disease.

No, with the death of South African optimism, something else remains in its wake, a kind of prevalent fatalism. At the crux moment in the movie of the same title, Jack Nicholson asks, "is this as good as it gets?" For many the answer would seem to yes. That does not mean there isn't resentment and anger; that too is on the rise. But it pales in comparison to the emotional apathy of the acquiescent majority. The Economic Freedom Fighters, ostensibly the flag bearers for this new rage could manage just 6% in 2014. For the rest, it was business as usual.

The great divine and benevolent force for good might well have been revealed to be as ineffective as it is self-serving, but it did do one thing in its favour: in systematically denuding South Africa of hope, it revealed much about the national character. Victimhood is for many a way of life. Difficulty is not something to be overcome, but to be endured; any small freedom won is a relative miracle against which every hardship can be favourably measured and endured.

Quite what Voltaire would make of all this is an interesting question.

Many are coming to the conclusion that the ANC is not the benevolent force for good they once thought it was. That, despite freedom and a Constitution,

fate continues to deal death and despair. Certainly we have had our fair share of Lisbon earthquakes on its watch. With this, optimism has, for the most part, been vanquished from contemporary public discourse. It is now found primarily in the dreams and aspirations of the opposition, the insular world of ANC communication or the misguided apologetics of those that yearn for an ANC that does not exist; some would say, that never did.

Certainly that will be the defining test for the students, who were relatively slow to focus their attention on those who actually hold the purse strings, but they got there in the end and that is deeply significant. Time will tell.

In its wake it has revealed a far more fundamental and disturbing aberration: Fatalism. Not just the acceptance that some divine force can be excused its transgressions, but an inability to identify them as transgressions in the first place. Not that there is no effect without cause, only that there is no cause. There is only effect.

For all the self-harm South Africa's myopic optimism during the age of Mbeki inflicted, the illusion that there was an ultimate ideal was kept alive. A reason, a cause, to look up. But few people's heads are raised these days. They are cast down, at the ground, where they can see their own feet firmly planted.

"A hundred times I wanted to kill myself, but always I loved life more. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of our worst instincts; is anything more stupid than choosing to carry a burden that really one wants to cast on the ground? To hold existence in horror, and yet to cling to it? To fondle the serpent which devours us till it has eaten out our heart? —In the countries through which I have been forced to wander, in the taverns where I have had to work, I have seen a vast number of people who hated their existence; but I never saw more than a dozen who deliberately put an end to their own misery".

So says an old woman in *Candide*, as she sets out her misery and contemplates suicide.

Perhaps the student protests that have engulfed the country are a sign of things to come, an indication that this malaise is generational. It is too early to tell. The test of it all will be the next set of elections. Certainly that will be the defining test for the students, who were relatively slow to focus their attention on those who actually hold the purse strings, but they got there in the end and that is deeply significant. Time will tell. The protests are as much a rejection of victimhood as they are an embracing of agency. For anyone looking for South African optimism to rise, these are the kinds of ashes they should be looking in for any sign of a Phoenix.

We endure so much in South Africa. For all the pretence at optimism, it is our real, defining characteristic, the ability to endure. Whether it is a virtue or a vice can be argued both ways. One thing it certainly isn't, is a reason to hope for a better tomorrow or to vote for one. Not the best of all possible worlds but a world without possibility.