

The Shifting Fortunes of Expression

Erik Doxtader

In late 2008, South Africa and the United States of America did something quite curious. For different reasons but with remarkable symmetry, each country chose to elect and install the very sort of presidential timbre that the other had deposed: Thabo Mbeki's ousting left the stage for Jacob Zuma just as George W. Bush was handing over the White House keys to Barack Obama.

One country saw the end of an administration defined by a president with deep and opaque ties to the intelligence community and significant populist appeal as the other welcomed the same into the Union Building.

One country watched an already besieged president begin to bristle at almost all criticism and rely heavily on underlings to do the moving and shaking as the other heard an executive committed to transparency and evidently opposed to the sturm and drang of palace intrigue.

And, as one country went from a president who bungled the vital duties of executive oratory to one that understood the power of speech to inspire interest in a common future, the other took the reverse course.

In both countries, some on the political left celebrated, while the middle pondered and the right fumed. In America, as Barack Obama set to work, the latter gathered more steam for more tea parties and began to rant. In short order and rather incoherently, the new president was deemed an alien, a socialist, a communist, and a nazi.

A nazi? Shuddering and shrieking, the left denounced the incivility, demanded respect, and preached a largely empty concept of civic engagement. It did so while forgetting the fact that it had spent eight years condemning George W. Bush as stupid, an imperialist, and a fascist.

Words set precedents. As they open and foreclose the ways in which human beings relate, they define the very possibility and meaning of politics. Today, the U.S. remains pinned in a corner that has much to do with the way in which the screams of "you are a stupid fascist" made it altogether acceptable to scream "you are an un-American nazi."

In this light, we might then ask after Jonathan Shapiro's most recent provocation. What is happening in his somewhat poetically impoverished pronouncement that President Zuma is "as big a dick as we thought"? What does this claim do?

Political discourse is not a game. Subtly matters. The rules are fluid. Name-calling is risky – the bat cannot be unswung. Once the terms and tones have been set onto the field, it is very hard to move them off. When they happen, moments of apology are not ejections but a chance to play on after a few less than contrite minutes in the sin bin.

This is not to say that Jonathan Shapiro ought to apologize, except perhaps to Brett Murray for trivializing his work and perpetuating the suspect idea that the social cohesion conference was a reply to “The Spear” more than savvy tactical cover for the ANC’s policy conference.

There is great merit to Shapiro’s claim that dissident views can energize democratic life. Yet, it’s far from clear that his cartoon furthers either cause. Its gesture is hollow, precisely because its provocation does little to support debate over how to differentiate productive opposition from paralyzing attack. We know this is the question, what we are missing is space to begin the work of fashioning a reply, a space that the cartoon does not help open.

Far from shocking or defamatory, as some have argued, the cartoon is simply and quite literally a distraction. It is a short-sighted punch that pulls us into yet another round of “name and shame the hypocrite.” We know this game. And, in the name of enjoying a brief titillation, we tend to ignore that it is largely self-defeating, at least until such a point as we can concede the conditions under which we are willing to change our minds or admit that ours is not the whole and real truth. In the name of unity or dissent, politics rarely admits to such certainty.

That said, the ANC is all too happy to take the bait. Indeed, the “Hey there, your shoes are untied” game of distraction is a boon for insecure institutions seeking to conserve power at the expense of accountability - look over there, while we dither over here. Put a bit differently, the cartoon serves the very forces that it hopes to challenge, precisely because it allows the Congress to trot out its still under-theorized claims about dignity and respect, along with its tired rants as to how “journalistic creativity” does “disservice to the unity and cohesion of our country.”

On the one hand, the ANC’s reply ignores that the constitution does not offer a full and timeless definition of dignity and that, as your phallus may indeed trod on my capacity for expression, the question at hand is not about respecting dignity but opening a difficult debate over how to bridge deep divisions over what dignity means and how it is best recognized and cultivated.

On the other, with distinct echoes of the Bush administration, the ANC’s reply refuses to accept that the presidency of a democratic nation comes with a responsibility to take all mode and manner of criticism and weave it into a shared vision. This is very difficult work. One of its names is the art of leadership, an art that not only accepts but embraces the sacrifice incumbent on those who choose to wield executive power.

What binds all this together is a sense of frustration, of an artist tired of frivolous lawsuits and a president unable to make himself a break. And between both, the frustrations of an ongoing transition – whatever its name or stage – in which a government has had very little time to rule and citizens have little overt inclination to act in ways that do not serve their immediate interests.

The reversal of fortunes hinges on our words, on a capacity to speak that defines the human condition, on the power of languages that we do not ever fully control, on forms of expression that can bind and wound.

Ethical life, including strident dissent and decisions about how to allocate finite material resources, begins in the question of the word and the fragile strength that we can give to the discovery of its answer. This work is the very calling of citizenship.

-erik doxtader

14 July 2012