

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# YOUTH IN HISTORY, YOUTH MAKING HISTORY: CHALLENGING DOMINANT HISTORICAL NARRATIVES FOR ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

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### **An introductory on contemporary representations**

During the recent riots in London and other English cities, official society instinctively labelled the youth involved in this urban rebellion as anti-social gang members, immediately invoking a discourse of criminality to describe the character of the youth and to explain the causes of the riots. The media reinforced this approach by continuously publishing images of hooded youths looting and burning shops, even though they represented a minority of the protesters. Also resurrected was the local upper class English refrain that this sort of behaviour was to be expected from those they have historically labelled as *Yobs* and *CHAVs* (Council House and Violent). However, the most common description attached to the rebellious youth has been of a *feral underclass*, which has also developed into the default explanatory framework.<sup>1</sup>

Purveyors of this pejorative notion intended to portray poor and marginalised youth as essentially uncontrollable. After all feral refers to wild animals existing outside conventional society, either as a consequence of abandonment by or escaped from society. In that state, they do not conform to the norms and rules of conventional society. It is a discourse aimed at dehumanising the objects of critique and thus to set the stage for policy intervention designed to tame them. Moreover, these views are hardly novel. More than thirty years ago Glasgow noted how official society deemed black youth living in ghettos

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian* and London School of Economic, 'Reading the Riot: Investigating England's Summer of Discontent' (available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>), accessed on 27 September 2011.

in Britain as prone to failure and rendered them 'obsolete before they can begin to pursue a meaningful role in society.'<sup>2</sup>

Similar views have been echoed in other parts of the world affected by outbreaks of youth rebellions. Over the past few years, the USA, Spain, China, Iran, Greece, Mexico, Brazil and various parts of Africa have experienced various types of youth contentious politics. Sometimes these have been explicitly political, have erupted into violence but have also assumed other forms of protests, including occupations. The purpose of these prefatory comments is to serve as a reminder that the anxiety expressed in our own society about the problematic 'condition of youth' is in fact a global phenomenon. So too are the knee-jerk reactions that fail to disaggregate the causes of youth rebellions or to probe beyond societal prejudices. Such comparisons point to the importance of having a global perspective of the underlying structural factors impacting on youth politics in contemporary society.

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, several scholarly research projects were commissioned, including by the London School of Economics, in an effort better to comprehend the causes of the rebellion. The general conclusions of this body of research were summarised by Kate Pickett of the *Guardian* newspaper: 'While some dismiss the unrest and violent actions as the criminality of a 'feral underclass', beyond the control of parents and teachers, an understanding of the profound effects of inequality and poverty on family life and parenting can help us understand why our society has proven to be such fertile ground for the seeds of unrest.'<sup>3</sup>

Globally, a generation of young people are systematically being excluded from society, whether they are in the economic powerhouses of the world or in poor countries, educated or semi-literate. The deepening economic woes facing most parts of the world, characterised by recession, high unemployment, severe cuts in public services and rising costs of education, have effectively closed off opportunities for the advancement of growing sections the youth population. Of course, these problems disproportionately affect youth in developing countries and women in particular. Statistics reveal the majority of the world's population is under the age of thirty, but the global economy has experienced only marginal growth in employment levels. Educated or not, many young people find the prospects of long term or sustained employment highly improbable. For example, an estimated one million young people in Britain are unemployed with little prospect of

2 GD Glasgow, *The Black underclass. Poverty, unemployment and the entrapment of ghetto youth* (Vintage), 1980.

3 K Pickett, 'How to make children happy? Reduce social inequality', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2011.

improving their status. The situation in South Africa is infinitely worse: nearly three quarters of the country's unemployed population is younger than 34 years and the unemployment rate among people under 25 years old is twice the official national average, that is, approximately 50%.<sup>4</sup> Add to this, the crisis in education (high drop-out rates in secondary and tertiary institutions) and it is not difficult to see why so many young people feel alienated from society and believe their futures are devoid of promise. The question that arises is what kind of politics can possibly emanate from this situation.

### Historical challenges to the 'lost generation' thesis

I would like to suggest that in addition to having a global perspective, it is equally crucial to have an historical perspective of the role of youth. Our contemporary conjuncture is certainly not the first (nor will it be the last) animated by debates about the 'hopeless' condition of the youth (globally and locally). It is worthwhile recalling in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as we experienced the demise of apartheid, the condition of black youth was put in the spotlight as one of the intractable problems requiring urgent resolution as the country contemplated its future. At the time, several scholars critically confronted the 'lost generation' discourse that seemed to overwhelm public opinions about state of black youth.<sup>5</sup> Mokwena explained how apartheid created conditions of structural poverty, marginalisation and subjugation. Bantu Education, he argued, 'undermined the stability of black youth' and was 'the site of much trauma, strife, violence and politicisation for black pupils.'<sup>6</sup> In the 'Foreword' to the same volume, Sheila Sisulu dismissed the notion of a lost generation. 'The term lost generation', she insisted, 'is negative, defeatist and fundamentally wrong. The youth are not lost nor misplaced: they are present in increasing numbers and being marginalised from society.'<sup>7</sup> Despite these critical interventions public perceptions and debate continued to be dominated by a sharp division.

Seekings graphically captured the hegemonic binary that had imprinted itself in the public domain with the title of his book: *Heroes or Villains*.<sup>8</sup> He

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4 Centre for Development and Enterprise, 'Jobs for young people. Is a wage subsidy a good idea?' CDE Roundtable, No. 17, August 2011.

5 See for example the chapters by S Mokwena, M Ramphela and R Riordan, David Everatt & Elinor Sisulu (eds), *Black Youth in Crisis, Facing The Future* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg), 1992.

6 S Mokwena, 'Living on the wrong side of the law: Marginalisation, youth and violence', David Everatt & Elinor Sisulu (eds), *Black Youth in Crisis*, p. 32

7 S Sisulu, *Black Youth in Crisis*, 'Foreword'.

8 J Seekings, *Heroes or Villains? Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg), 1993.

perceptively detected “two stereotypical views” in South Africans’ vocabulary about youth. On the one hand, there was what might best be described as the *apocalyptic* view in which youth are reduced to essentially hostile, violent and destructive beings. On the other hand, there was the perception of youth as agents of liberation or to invoke local struggle idioms; they were *comrades* and *young lions*. Whereas the former characterisation was intensely antagonistic to youth, especially young black men, the latter lionised youth for their unselfish contribution and sacrifices in the struggle for liberation and democracy.

Monique Marks’ study of youth politics in Diepkloof (Soweto) in the 1980s and early 1990s contributed significantly to this debate. She explained the perceived degeneration among youth as a consequence of the lack of moral authority. Employing the theory of anomie, Marks argued that this decline could only be reversed with the “formation of youth organizations led by mature and respected leadership”. In her view, the rapid transformation of the political landscape in the early 1990s engendered a crisis among youth, as the role of youth organisations, which in the late 1980s has assumed the role of militant battalions of the revolution, had become less clear in an era of negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

These critical interventions sought to grapple with the category of youth as an intrinsically political phenomenon, in which the terms comrades and youth had become conflated. In this framework, the iconic image of youth in South Africa was the armed young black man kitted in military fatigue. But by the late 1980s, this heroic image of youth was severely dented. The surge in youth-based violence (arguably characterised by the phenomenon of comtsotsis, the reign of terror by *jackrollers* and a general increase in gangsterism), plus the purported disdain for education were regarded as among the principal contributors to the perceived demise of youth activism. Although the aforementioned authors inserted an important and critical analyses into what tended to be a shrill debate, their interventions were somewhat circumscribed by the immediacy of the dilemma. We can learn from the perceptive arguments mounted by these scholars but also add further historical depth as we confront a rather similar set of questions as they did twenty years ago.

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<sup>9</sup> M Marks, *Young warriors: Youth politics, identity and violence in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg), 2001.

## **Lessons from history**

The idea of a distinct category known as ‘youth’ is a rather contemporary phenomenon. According to John Gillis in his seminal work entitled *Youth And History*, ‘pre-industrial Europe made no distinction between childhood and other pre-adult phases of life’.<sup>10</sup> Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been intense debates about the definition of youth especially in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and politics. These have often centred on what age range constitutes ‘youth’ or whether, in fact, the very notion has any analytical value. This is important to keep in mind considering the multiplicity of cultural, social and political approaches to the issue. There is simply no single definition of youth. Seekings argued that ‘youth’ do not constitute a conceptually coherent collective. As an aside, it is worth noting that our definition of youth as someone who is 35 years old and younger is one of the most generous around! One may argue that modern notions about youth in South African began to take root from the end of World War Two.

The formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944 marked an important turning point in South Africa’s political history<sup>11</sup> for a number of reasons. First, it heralded the organisational and ideological coalescence of a generation of young political activists whose contribution shaped the country’s political landscape for the next six decades. Second, led by intellectuals such as Lembede and Mda, this cohort of young men (who were members of the urban educated elite, with distinctive social and political aspirations) evinced a commitment to the cause of national emancipation. Third, they articulated a coherent ideological programme of African Nationalism, which contained not only a critique of white minority rule but also espoused a vision of a future society. Fourth, they aligned themselves to the global anti-colonial movement and thus consciously transcended the limited horizon of national politics. Fifth, the founding of the Youth League arguably signalled the entry of youth into the formal politics, which had hitherto been dominated by the older generation. Members of the Youth League may be regarded as the Young Turks of the liberation movement, who challenged the old guard with new ideas and organisation culminating in the ousting of older leaders at the ANC’s conference in 1949.

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10 JR Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and change in European Age Relations, 177 - Present* (Academic Press, New York), 1974.

11 T Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg), 1983, pp. 20-22.

By mounting a challenge against the hegemonic position of a conservative older generation, the Youth Leaguers had much in common with movements across the world in which old order and prevailing norms were beset by crisis. Moreover, it was a phenomenon that also manifested itself outside the formal political arena.

The growth of *tsotsism* in the 1950s reflected a growing mood of anti-authoritarian and anti-social behaviour among urban black youth, who tended to be unemployed and quite disparaging of the discipline and toil associated with manual labour. Rather than being subjected to the norms of official society, these youth constituted themselves in gangs and sought alternative lifestyles constructed around music, petty crime, fast cars and women. They also espoused a strong sense of masculinity.<sup>12</sup>

Their epicurean disposition and general desire for 'good times' were hardly exceptional. Across the tracks, white society was experiencing a similar rebellion of young people. This was the era of the ducktails (*eendsterte*) and Sheilas. Local newspapers were filled with self-righteous hysteria about anti-social, undisciplined youth. Their alleged crimes included listening and jiving to rock 'n roll, and being predisposed to violence, drinking, fast cars and sex.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, the state responded to the perceived anti-social behaviour among both groups in very similar ways. School, work and the family were regarded as the cornerstone of official strategies to bring the youth under control. The introduction of Bantu Education and the development of massive public housing projects should be viewed in this light. In these ways it was imagined generational order could be restored. And, of course, young white men were also subject to conscription.

These measures largely succeeded in stemming the tide of youth rebelliousness of the 1950s, but did not entirely extinguish it. Among white youths, new subcultures emerged over time despite National Party social engineering. These took the form of Flower-Power in the 1960s, the Mods and Punks in the late 1970s, the New Romantics in the 1980s and Goths and Ravers in the 1990s.

The 1960s are widely regarded as the period of 'high apartheid', characterised by unprecedented economic growth (and the concomitant expansion of white privilege), the implementation of rigid and doctrinaire segregation policies,

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12 C Glaser, *Bo-tsotsi: The youth gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976* (Portsmouth, Heinemann), 2000.

13 K Mooney, 'Die eendstert euwel' and societal responses to white youth subcultural identities on the Witwatersrand, 1930-1964', PhD Thesis, 2006.

political repression and very tight control by the state over many facets of the population's life (again this was experienced disproportionately by Africans). One may therefore refer to this as a period of authoritarian hegemony.

That hegemony began to be dislodged by, among other developments, the emergence of Black Consciousness in the late 1960s, whose impact became pronounced from the early 1970s. It was a movement whose importance may be equated with the impact of the Congress Youth League a quarter of a century earlier. Adherents of Black Consciousness proudly asserted their blackness and attracted support from educated young blacks, initially university students but later also secondary school students. Steve Biko and his comrades were quintessential organic intellectuals and critical thinkers who espoused an ideology of their own making. They were, to quote Nina Simone's anthem from that era, 'young, gifted and black'.

This movement gave hope to a generation of black youth that they could change society by liberating themselves. Emancipation for them was all-encompassing: economic, social, political and cultural. They were audacious and had a vision of freedom.

The rise of Black Consciousness and the uprising of 1976 also heralded a critical shift in the generational balance of forces. Challenges to generational authority have deep historical roots in South Africa, which is why it is so widespread and obstinate a phenomenon. Apartheid disempowered youth, who then sought to re-empower itself, generally at the expense of, and often in contempt of, the older generation. Youth gangs reflect this structure of values, but so too did black consciousness (which disparaged parents for their acquiescence in apartheid). From this perspective, it may be argued the psychological emancipation of the mid 1970s was not just directed against white domination but also parental authority.

Black Consciousness also established an important template of youth activism, premised on commitment and self-sacrifice, which influenced the politics of the post-1976 youth generation. In the late 1970s many youth activists committed themselves to what was then imagined as a long haul in the struggle for freedom. They joined trade unions, launched civic organisations, established cultural organisations and engaged in serious political education. The role of youth in reconfiguring struggle politics during this period is often forgotten. Then they were actively in search of new and radical ideas, and experimented with various forms of political organisations. It was a period of political fluidity energised by the critical and imaginative approaches of youth

activists, who were also not short on bravery and commitment.

The launch of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979 continued in this vein. Its main slogan, *Each One, Teach One*, was indicative of the political approach of that generation of youth activists. Their campaigns in schools in the early 1980s, which focused on rooting out authoritarianism and creating democratic learning spaces (end to corporal punishment and sexual harassment, for democratically elected SRCs, etc.), suggested a genuine commitment to educational transformation. A high point of this movement was the regional general strike in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereniging (PWV) area in November 1984 when students and workers joined hands in what was then the biggest and most significant strike. Politically, a generational equilibrium had been created.

However, this fell apart in the subsequent period under the weight of severe state repression and internal problems. The banning of COSAS and detention of many of the student leaders who had been instrumental in building the movement of the early 1980s created a vacuum of leadership. A combination of factors – inexperienced youth leaders, the closure of schools, the militarisation of the struggle in the townships (driven by the ISUs occupation of townships), state support for vigilante movements and a surge in gangsterism – led to the demise of the youth movement that had developed since the early 1970s. This was sadly reflected in the emergence of *comtsosis*.

If there is a salient theme in this overview then I would propose it is this: successive generations of South African youth have responded to deep crises with ingenuity, audacity of vision, critical thought and selfless commitment, without which we would not be where we are today. It goes without saying there were numerous problems, excesses and even reactionary politics. Nonetheless, as researchers and educators we have some responsibility to recover this history. Not to produce hagiographic and heroic accounts to assuage those who are in power, but to recover the multiple and differentiated experiences of young people.

### **A new generation of research**

Contemporary youth are confronted with two broad criticisms: those involved in politics are often viewed in a negative light. The heat generated around Julius Malema is emblematic of this. Other youth have attracted persistent criticisms about being too apolitical. They are accused of lacking

social responsibility and for being too individualistic. Sharp distinctions are drawn between the supposedly highly politicised youth of the past and the current generation of youth, thereby reinforcing a limited conception of South African youth. The narrow prism through which youth have been perceived has resulted in distorted understanding of youth identity and culture.

Youth culture shaped anti-apartheid struggles in the 1980s and early 1990s. Conversely anti-apartheid struggles shaped youth culture. Youth engagement in politics has understandably been the main focus of social scientific youth studies to date. Yet no adequate understanding of youth culture can be gained without placing it in its broader inter-generational and social context. A good deal of evidence points to the growing autonomy of youth cultures from older generations in the 1980s. In many places youth increasingly autonomously re-empowered themselves by drawing on a range of cultural and social resources.

While it is true an unprecedented number of youth were involved in political struggles, this involvement was very uneven. Significant sections of youth were either only intermittently or not involved at all in politics. The emphasis on politics in analysing the youth of the 1980s, has meant that women, who were not as involved in political activism as their male counterparts, only make episodic appearances in the accounts of the period. Although young women were intimately involved in political struggles, they generally did not (or were not allowed to) play leading roles. Clearly the position and role of young black women needs much more interrogation, without which our understanding of youth will remain woefully inadequate.

Over the past few years a cohort of young intellectuals has embarked on critical enquiries into the phenomenon of youth. Many of them do not carry the political burdens of previous scholars and are thus introducing fresh perspectives. Their intellectual horizons are certainly not limited by the framework of the lost generation thesis.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, a new generation of fiction writers are making their mark with innovative reflections on the myriad issues facing young people in contemporary South Africa.<sup>15</sup> Critically, young women, especially black women, are playing a leading role in this exciting explosion of new literature. So while the media is obsessed with Malema there are many substantial and critical contributions being made that are in danger of being overlooked.

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<sup>14</sup> I am thinking of current research undertaken by, among others, T Moloi, M Moilola and M Ndlozi.

<sup>15</sup> For example, K Matlwa, Z Meeran, JB Ngwenya, K Moele.

## Conclusion

An important question before us is whether the current generation of youth can possibly emulate their historical predecessors by engendering a new, imaginative politics. I would say that if one were to look at the marvellous role played by Egyptian youth in the democratic revolution there earlier in the year, the march organised by teenagers in the London's borough of Hackney in the aftermath of the riots or even the student's occupation in Wisconsin then it is possible to discern the numerous possibilities of alternative futures led by a new generation of young people.

I have in this brief introduction deliberately erred on the side of the sanguine in my appraisal of the history of youth and their current condition. The aim has been to provide a small corrective to the overwhelming negativity surrounding youth. But I do not wish to obfuscate the myriad difficulties or deep-rooted problems. There is nothing automatic about youth being visionary, progressive and the standard-bearers of a brighter future. But neither can they be dismissed as the pall-bearers of a grim future.

As educators we should be brave enough not to baulk at the audacity and contention of the youth. Previous generations of educators were instrumental in nurturing and supporting young critical thinkers.

It might be regarded as remiss of me not to say one or two things about Malema in a presentation on youth politics in South Africa. So here is my two-pence worth. Malema has been hugely misrepresented in the media as an ill-informed, uneducated radical activist. While it may warm the hearts of the chattering classes, this is an erroneous analysis. Malema is very far from being radical even if he attempts to equate himself with the traditions of the Youth League of the 1940s. No, Malema is in fact a very conservative populist politician who does not represent the interest of the marginalised youth. Instead, he is the most outspoken representative of a fraction of aspirant capitalists desperately jostling for a place at the trough of accumulation. But, it is important to recognise, that he has become a lightning rod for the deep dissatisfaction among South African youth who feel alienated and marginalised. His demand for 'economic liberation', by which he really means access for the section of the elite who feel left out of the tender deals, is falling on fertile ground because so many young people continue to experience economic enslavement. What the Malema phenomenon signals, is a serious crisis of imagination for which we are all responsible, and which previous generations of youth had in abundance.

If you will permit me a double cliché to end: we should embrace the élan of youth and, if I may also be permitted to misquote Mao Zedong, ‘let a thousand flower bloom and a hundred schools of thoughts contend’. Therein lays the possibility of nurturing a new generation of young critical thinkers, of audacious and visionary young women and men. Our future depends on it.