

# 2014 COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE

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## TRANSFORMATION AND THE INTELLECTUAL

The 2014 English Academy Commemorative Lecture

In honour of the late Colin Gardner

Delivered at UKZN, Pietermaritzburg, 30 August 2014

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Colin Gardner was pre-eminently an intellectual. His powerful contribution as an academic, a public figure, a churchman, a friend, and I dare say as a family person, rested on his disciplined insistence that making sense mattered in engagement with an often profoundly troubling world. There can have been few people more committed to the transformation of South Africa. He was deeply engaged, moving out of the comfort zones of white privilege, and felt he should have been more so. He was also richly engaging as a teacher and commentator, and more generally as a human being. The English Academy, of which he was a Vice-President, had the benefit of his incisive but generous contributions and his deep commitment for many years. This lecture honours Colin's memory. But it is not about him. It is rather an attempt at exploring a set of vital concerns which he shared: a set of concerns to which he gave particular kinds of substance from a base in this campus and building for more than 50 years. I hope that giving some attention to them today will be in the tradition of Colin's contribution to language, to public life, and to moving towards a dynamic and just society in South Africa.

When we become too comfortable with words, we let them hide reality from us. That applies very strongly to two words in my title: transformation and intellectual. Both represent concerns of vital importance. But both have been hijacked and debased in popular political discourse. In that discourse they have had very different trajectories. "Transformation" has the high moral ground but less and less conceptual bite, while the word "intellectual" often suffers from being used with an uneasy and knowing contempt. We "all know" that transformation is at the heart of our formal political priorities, whatever those may be in the many-tongued politics of 2014. And we "all know" that intellectuals live in an ivory tower and are not worth much when it comes to practical matters. The words and what they can stand for are far too important to leave matters there. We need to be able to use the word "transformation" in promoting profound and beneficial change, and "intellectual" in nurturing abilities which keep us focused on the most important challenges of our time and place.

With that in mind, let me venture tentative definitions of transformation and the intellectual:

- Transformation is the process of change leading to a more or less profound improvement. It involves form and substance, external features and internal disposition, material conditions and frame of understanding. In our circumstances, the outward and the inward are both important and need to go together.
- An intellectual is someone who makes sense: a person who is so engaged with the world in which he or she lives, that making sense of it is a vital, ongoing priority, as a basis for effective and wise action by him or herself or by others.

The pertinence of this theme was highlighted for me in an online Mail and Guardian article of 14 August. Phumla Nganga, Chairperson of the Council of the University of KwaZulu Natal, announced the appointment of an eminent scholar as the University's new Vice-Chancellor. The report quoted her as saying that Dr Albert van Jaarsveld, "brings with him a wealth of experience and new ideas on how to keep the university on an upward trajectory, building on its record of excellence through transformation." I was delighted at the news. Transformation as envisaged in this statement promotes or generates excellence and so raises the bar for South Africa. There are few things we need more. However, keeping a hold on that rich sense of transformation is a challenge. A great deal that passes for transformation in our current discourses would not be conducive to achieving excellence. In fact, some so-called "transformation" could take us in exactly the opposite direction. Transformation conducive to excellence is a theme we shall be returning to in connection with the role of the intellectual.

Gaining some sense of where we are as a nation in our quest to transform in ways that realise the values embodied in the Constitution is an important starting point. The Cape Times of 22 August 2014 offers a convenient snapshot to get us going. A concern with transformation is a recurrent feature in four reports, with some interesting differences in meaning.

In one article (SAPA 2014a), Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training, speaks of measures to "stop racism and discrimination in higher education institutions." The issue is a very important one for transformation. However, making a general allegation of racism and discrimination as a prominent feature of all higher education institutions and boldly announcing that the envisaged measures will "stop" it are probably the work of the same sub-editor whose minimal investment in meaning is signalled by the title: "Blade wants to slash racism in education." One has to read the news with care. Having said that, the minister is reported more directly as saying that the intention of the policy "was to ensure that educational institutions recognised and promoted integration, human rights, unity in diversity, and human

dignity” – essentially the informing values of the Constitution. Few would argue with what Dr Nzimande wishes to have recognised and promoted. But there is a demon lurking in the language. It is the word “ensure”. “Ensure” upholds the idealist fallacy that guidelines and regulations and measures actually bring about the envisaged changes. Put the rules and laws in place, it seems to say, and you have ensured that the problems will be no more. “Ensure,” then, is the language of instant transformations. In the early 20th century a “transformation” was a woman’s wig. One minute, there is modest Maisie with her mousy mop. The next minute there is a gorgeous brunette with glossy, flowing locks. This quick fix meaning is recorded as rare in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, but it is a viable metaphor for a way of speaking about transformation that has wide currency in South African political discourse across party lines. The consequence of the instant change this way of speaking offers is inevitably that fundamental change is off the agenda. The pattern is familiar all over the ex-colonial world: under guise of transformation, the colonial morphs readily into the neo-colonial. Yeats was deeply disillusioned when this happened in Ireland. He expressed the problem with painful intensity.

Hurrah for revolution, and more cannon shot.

The beggar upon horseback lashes the beggar on foot.

Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again

The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

“The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.” Quick fix, cosmetic change can merely obscure the fact that there has been no address to the fundamental problem. In a measure, the superficial can be “ensured”, but the features of healthy social interaction that are the marks of deep transformation cannot be imposed; they have to be developed. Laws and regulations cannot “ensure” anything. But they have a vital role. In his eloquent new book, *Justice: A personal account*, Edwin Cameron (2014:9) comments that: “Our Constitution ... gives us a framework for a society in which mutual support and generosity are the key. And it obliges government, on behalf of all of us, to create a society in which all of us can live with dignity.”

The second report in the Cape Times of 22 August (SAPA 2014b) covers a speech to the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry by the ANC Secretary-General, Gwede Mantashe. He challenges the private sector as not transforming fast enough. “We are dealing with a past we are all afraid of talking about,” he says. “Transformation should open opportunities for black South Africans to participate, or else there will be despair in the black community.” While we might wish to qualify his claim that “Where the state is involved there is progress”, there is no question about the urgency of the issue, not so much as a matter of race as a matter of poverty and felt exclusion. The same issue of the newspaper carries two reports which reveal the depth of the challenge. In the wake of the beheading of US journalist James Foley by the so-called Islamic State, The Muslim Council of Britain denounced the action as “abhorrent murder”, but it

did not stop there. Its advisor Iqbal Sacranie called for engaged attention to the sub-culture of “jihadi cool” which flourishes “within the margins of society” (Reuters 2014). The margins of society, out of public view but where people feel their exclusion from social and economic opportunity are a dangerous place. Closer to home, another report occupies a large part of the front page. It is devoted to an account by Babalo Ndenze (2014) of the ANC’s admonitory and even threatening response to the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) after the disruption of Parliament by its MPs. The EFF flourish within the margins of our constitutional democracy. Gwede Mantashe is right. Marginalisation breeds antinomian aggression. But inclusion in the sense that is likely to lead to the healing of our society and the building of our economy is no simple matter of business making black appointments and getting on with training the people appointed. In fact, the social semiotics of projecting a view that it is only the private sector that needs to act radically misconstrues social process. It actively prevents the desired change. The private sector are not the only agents in the transformation of business. Their ability to achieve the desired transformation depends very significantly on the consistency with which government and the ruling party project a credible image of the inclusive transformation which our Constitution frames. It also depends on government’s consistently fostering a sense of constructive agency among the people. This would counter the widespread notion, evident in the character of recent strikes and service delivery protests, that the private sector – and government – have simply to deliver without the people having any constructive role. The challenge is to enable such dependant clients to become responsible citizens and not to lock them into their historical disadvantage and the strategies of frustrated anger. A mindset change on the part of all concerned is necessary for this to happen.

Something of that mindset shift was called for by Police Minister Nkosinathi Nhleko in addressing Cosatu’s City Wide Crime Conference in Cape Town on 21 August 2014 (Coetzee 2014a).

Reflecting on the common view that it is the sole responsibility of the police to tackle crime, he argued that: “Crime cannot be defeated by the police alone – communities must get involved.” This called for profound social reflection: “There is something fundamentally wrong with ourselves as a society,” he said. “We need to go back to the basics and say what it is that we are doing.” It is interesting that it should be the Minister of Police who shifts to a different discourse, eschewing the attractions of speaking as if the changes we are committed to as a nation can be achieved simply by the exercise of power and will on the part of those in authority.

Which brings us to the main front page article in the newspaper we have been perusing. It is on Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s call for a more representative Springbok rugby team (Coetzee 2014b). Desmond Tutu is quoted as saying, “I lament the tortoise pace at which transformation at the highest level is being effected.” He called for rapid attention to building a Springbok team representative of the “full spectrum of the rainbow that defines us – not on the basis of quotas or

affirmative action or window-dressing, but on merit and for our long-term well-being as a nation.” Alone among the people we have been considering, Desmond Tutu entertains the tension between action now and the scope of a long-term vision. Similarly, he is alone in rejecting technical means of achieving indices of change and insisting that the challenge involves developing merit. And he is careful to respect the quality and dignity of the “paler” player who, in his opinion, has been “leapfrogged into the team” over the black man who was next in line. Tutu’s approach resonates with the Constitution in values and in approach. The goals are never in doubt, but there is a clear-eyed awareness that achieving them is an ongoing task. The Constitution is historically grounded. In the Preamble it first recognises the injustices of the past. Then it commits government and citizens to historical process in bringing healing, establishing an open society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights, securing the protection of the law for all, improving the quality of life of all citizens, freeing their potential, and achieving unity in diversity. The word “transformation” does not appear there, but is often taken as embodying this vision, as when Edwin Cameron (2014:175) speaks of the Constitutional Court’s embracing “the crucial project of transforming society.”

Transformation, in this sense, combines two of the meanings given in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary. For 600 and more years the word transformation has meant “The action of changing in form, shape or appearance.” And for more than 400 years it has sustained another, more profound meaning: “A complete change in character, nature, etc.” A good part of the transformation called for in South Africa is of the structural variety. The frame of labour relations has changed, employment structures have changed, school management structures have changed, the courts have changed, and so on. Few would deny that structural change was and is necessary to create space for developing new opportunities for citizens in keeping with a democratic order. However, that kind of transformation is far from enough. The focus of the second meaning is not on external appearance or shape but on substance, internal disposition or essential character. In short, the word intimates the possibility of radical change. This meaning comes from the late 16th century and is once again current. It arose in a time of major political and ideological change when the nature of political authority was being renegotiated, there was a significant expansion of literacy, neo-Platonic idealism was in the ascendant, and the implications of the Reformation in the western Christian church were being worked through in society. Where did this late 16th century meaning, which was to be of such great political significance, originate? Earlier political thought (though not necessarily practice) about change was largely adaptive and ameliorative. From the late 16th century on ideas of thoroughgoing change not only gained currency but carried the highest moral sanction. The tussles in political philosophy are felt in the tragedies of the period. Works like *King Lear* negotiate the sources of authority and the role of individuals, and mark the process of moving from absolute to constitutional monarchy.

The vocabulary of this profound shift lies substantially in the early translations of the Bible into English. Transformation as a process of internal renewal is part of the Pauline theology of salvation in these translations, and so part of the vocabulary of popular religion. Romans 12.2 in the King James version of 1609 reads:

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

In other words, the alternative to conformity is radical change from within that allows one to experience for oneself the meaning of life. In the same period, other ideas from classical antiquity, like those of that second century social constructivist Marcus Aurelius, gained currency. For Marcus Aurelius, The universe is transformation; our life is what our thoughts make it (Meditations 4.3). These are radical thoughts. The combination of Bible and classical authority was potent. Small wonder that it informed much of the revolutionary thinking of the day and created room for the idea of essential or fundamental or radical change in secular form. This kind of change involves a change of perspective and essential dynamic: a change not only of outward form but of informing vision and spirit.

The currency of that meaning has not been constant. I was surprised to find that “Transformation” does not appear in any of my five dictionaries of quotations or in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. So our use of the word in political discourse is a strongly South African phenomenon. This is partly because of the negotiated change led by Nelson Mandela. There was no classic revolution, but there had to be a radical shift. A relatively new vocabulary was needed to mark both the evident external change which was a political necessity, and, more importantly, the change of people’s mindsets to enable them to live and grow together as a nation while the national profile shifted. Like “reconciliation”, “transformation” filtered from the Christian church into political discourse in South Africa. It did so in much the same way as it had done in England in the 16th and 17th centuries. The crucial source is the same. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12 2). While the means of that transformation is no longer generally what Paul envisaged, the key concept of mindset shift in ongoing, creative tension with a process of structural change took root. A whole new way of looking at the world was necessary to make sense of South Africa post-1994, and to give substance to the structural or external changes that would be introduced.

Making sense is the role of the intellectual, schooled or unschooled. Walter Bgoya, the veteran Tanzanian publisher, has recently appealed for more intellectuals in public life in Africa and an intellectual approach to meeting the hugely complex demands of post-colonial transformation and development. He will be expanding on this in an address to the UK African Studies Association in Brighton in ten days time. At the heart of his concern is that people managing the

life of nations and institutions should have an ongoing and informed curiosity about the nature of the people and the culture and the economic life they are trusted to govern or manage. Bgoya's challenge is clear. Africa needs intellectuals to reconceptualise in ways that fit their social environment and to act – and enable others to act – effectively in terms of the new understandings.

I earlier defined an intellectual as a person who is so engaged with the world in which he or she lives, that making sense of it is a vital and ongoing priority as a basis for effective and wise action. In a more embattled context, Edward Said (2005:158) is more focused: "The intellectual's is a voice in opposition to and critical of great power, which is consistently in need of a restraining and clarifying conscience and a comparative perspective." It is time to look at some intellectuals in action on matters related to the post-colonial condition.

In his essay on "Indian traditions and the Western imagination", Amartya Sen (2005) draws on Edward Said's Orientalism. "The orient," says Said, "is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West." Sen outlines the three main Western approaches to India in the colonial period, which, whether malignant or benign, contemptuous or appreciative, all emphasised difference from the West. With the huge challenges to indigenous self-worth in a colonial situation, difference became definitive FOR Indians, to the neglect or forgetting of a rich record of achievement in science and politics and play which would have placed India in the same conversation as the West. Today, the heritage of colonial underdevelopment accentuates the difference in insidious ways, producing "Indian particularism" (Sen 2005:140).

[The "backwardness of India in mass education" means that] Acceptance of the achievements of Indian spirituality tends to look less 'alienated' from the masses than the achievements that demand more exacting formal education. (Sen 2005: 157)

This has a certain political appeal. However, while pointing to these achievements may be a necessary boost to self-image in the process of post-colonial healing, it can lead to failure to address the profound heritage of disadvantage. It is the role of the intellectual to point this out. The fact remains [says Sen]... that illiteracy is a deprivation. The issue of inter-class justice cannot be a matter only of recognising the real role of subalterns in history (for example in anti-colonial national movements), important though that is. It is also a matter of remedying the immense inequalities in educational and other opportunities that severely limit ... the actual lives of the subalterns. (Sen 2005:157)

The syndrome Sen describes has its local analogues, which I shall not pursue here. However, the intellectual's role in picking up the implications of a received vocabulary and set of hidden constraints in similar vein to Sen is demonstrated repeatedly in Leonhard Praeg's stimulating (and difficult) new book, A report on ubuntu, published earlier this year by UKZN Press. He

examines with a sharp sense of historical process what is happening to the ways in which different groups of citizens in a transforming South Africa see the world. In an implicit challenge to the sentimental, morally-laden use of the idea of “transformation”, often a means of avoiding the real issues, he describes:

the two most salient characteristics of colonialism ... as transformative, in the dual sense of rearranging local territories into the self-image of the colonial territory ... and transforming fluid ethnic identities into rigid, inflexible tribal identities. (Praeg 2014:38)

Transformation, in other words, can work the wrong way. As Sen made plain, colonialism not only has material consequences, it also affects the ways in which the people involved are able to see themselves and the world. Pre-modern communities take their identity for granted. Modernity is marked by the loss of that assurance. In Praeg’s words, “Modernity is that moment when belonging becomes, first and foremost, a problem for thought.” This has fundamental implications for his main investigation: “only when we no longer live ubuntu, does Ubuntu become a problem for thought” (Praeg 2014:34). The shift is marked by the change from lower case to upper case. Any formal use of the term in law, policy or other public discourse is upper case, Ubuntu, and as such requires that content be given it. Its meaning cannot be taken for granted.

This has substantial political implications. In post-colonial South Africa Praeg sees the divide , as not between pre-modern and modern but as between modern and modernising. He distinguishes between these two different ways of seeing the world: “a (post)modernised imaginaire of those for whom belonging has been for some time, first and foremost, a problem for thought; [and] ... the modernising imaginaire of those for whom belonging is in the process of becoming a problem for thought” as they move away from the traditional political economy of obligation. For the modernised imaginaire, the institutions of modernity like the Constitution are “the last possible response to belonging as unresolvable problem for thought”. It is unthinkable that they should not be respected. However,

For the modernising imaginaire, these ... institutions have no such self-evident or internal legitimacy [because belonging has not yet become] a problem that can only be resolved by accepting as irreversible the inversion, to a significant extent, of the historical priority of praxis over thought, common good over individual freedom, belonging over being and so on. For this ... imaginaire there still exist sufficient residual elements of a praxis of belonging, rooted in custom, tradition and religion, to conceal the fundamental contradiction [between individual freedom and the common good which is] at the heart of the human condition. (Praeg 2014:226f)

For this imaginaire the institutions of democracy may simply seem to be “solutions to non-existent problems” because the same effect can be organised “through the networks of belonging that mark the continuation of the now perverted, because relativised, political economy of obligation” (Praeg 2014:227). And one might add that this perverted, relativised political economy

of obligation creates the space for personal enrichment at the expense of the communal. That complex situation, once understood, has considerable practical implications for transformation. Praeg focuses on the implications for jurisprudence. Having established as typical of modernity the fundamental division between the areas in which individualism or altruism are primary in judicial decision making, he is able to point to these two areas as being radically asymmetrical in the post-colony, with individualism being the overwhelming basis for decisions. This leads him to ask what role the concept of Ubuntu can play in restoring symmetry (Praeg 2014:242). However, that formulation may be deceptive. The purpose is not simply to achieve or restore balance. It is rather to let justice be seen to be done and to draw those on the margins into the constitutional democratic order in the process.

Praeg problematises the matter as affecting the perceived legitimacy of the Constitution by taking account both of the unresolved issues of historic injustice and of the unavoidability of moving in the direction of the modern. These matters present themselves as dilemmas which have to be negotiated. And for this purpose he sees Ubuntu humanism as affording a valuable mode of critique.

That it is so is evidenced by the intellectually focused and daring work of the Constitutional Court. “Ubuntu” as a term was used once in the Interim Constitution of 1993 when it spoke of a “need for understanding, but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation” (quoted Praeg 2014:177). The word does not appear in the final Constitution of 1996, but is mentioned in a number of judgements. In his judgement in the Port Elizabeth Municipality case, Judge Albie Sachs noted:

The Constitution ... confirm[s] that we are not islands unto ourselves. The spirit of ubuntu, part of the deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population, suffuses the whole constitutional order. It combines individual rights with a communication philosophy[, a] unifying motif of the Bill of Rights which is nothing if not a structured, institutionalised and operational declaration in our evolving new society of the need for human interdependence, respect and concern .... (Sachs 2009: 106)

In the process, cultural praxis, which is in some senses exemplary, is mutated into a jurisprudential principle which requires a new approach. The case involved informal settlers, land owners and the municipality. Judge Sachs clarified the values of the Constitution as necessarily informing legitimate action by all parties, and gave them the opportunity to find a resolution that honoured the spirit and frame of the Constitution. In the same spirit, Judge Edwin Cameron explains that:

often, when the court orders a government agency ... to take action, it includes in its order a requirement that [the agency] and those subject to its power engage in meaningful dialogue with each other so as to try to find a solution. (Cameron 2014: 188)

Without surrendering its ultimate authority or constitutional responsibility, the court provisionally relinquishes the role of resolver of issues and engages those before it as citizens with a joint responsibility for justice. Law is thus not seen as a set of abstract principles, but as necessarily making sense in concrete terms and real situations if it is to be of transformative benefit. Law relates to life. Significantly, then, Albie Sachs's book is *The strange alchemy of life and law*; and Edwin Cameron's, *Justice: A personal account*.

Early on in this lecture, I promised to return to the theme of "excellence through transformation" in the academic sphere. I do so now, because this is a matter of vital importance to all our universities and to our country.

1. We need transformation in the encompassing sense I have described if we are to face the challenges of our country with confidence and efficacy. Mindsets have to change, and they do so through engagement, not in compliance and conformity. Of course, in real life situations it is hard to escape contradictions. Government's demand for transformation and its insistence on managerial approaches is one of these. That insistence is part of a wider trend. As we speak, there are major protests in the UK over the suspension of an unconforming professor at the University of Warwick. In our situation, the issue is critical. Transformation and the spirit of conformity are mutually exclusive. For real transformation we need to build and sustain a collegium of academics and students with a common desire to address the challenges of our time and place reasonably and with integrity.

2. Excellence is a term with several ramifications in this context.

- There is no question but that if universities draw more fully on the South African talent pool they will ultimately be in a better position to generate new and incisive academic discourses, provide more nuanced responses to intellectual challenges, and develop new questions. This innovativeness is a mark of excellence.
- There is also no question but that it is important to aim at excellence in research in a global environment. This is not necessarily inconsistent with the first point, but does require an ability to entertain both local and global perspectives.
- Thirdly, excellence at the highest levels is unsustainable without excellence in the undergraduate programme. Excellent pedagogy is always the product of ongoing experiment, and in our case it must necessarily take account of those whose school background has not given them the start that they need. But it must not get stuck there. A deficiency model tends to confirm inadequacy. But a model based on intellectual challenge has the potential to make sense to all involved and build a community of intellectual leaders.

3. Excellence through transformation can be achieved only as an intellectual project, in which an inclusive community is built of people so engaged with the world in which they live, that making sense of it is a vital, ongoing priority as a basis for effective and wise action.

Finally, transformation has to be imaginable in all its complexity. In this regard, imaginative work in image, form or words has to have a major role in enabling us to reach beyond our prejudices and gain a freshness of vision. We need art.

With that in mind, I shall conclude by reading a moving 8-line poem by Colin Gardner. It evokes a number of features of our challenge as a nation and of the quiet courage and determination of our people.

A glimpse of rural life  
Out of the corrugated iron hovel,  
out of the domestic confusion,  
the old clothes, the ad hoc arrangements,  
the shouting voices and the clucking fowls,  
the two children emerge  
each morning,  
at quarter past seven,  
in their neat school uniforms.

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