

# Dualism and the social formation of South Africa

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## Abstract

The idea that South African society is characterized by dual socio-economic structures is once more gaining ascendancy. Its key advocates include the former President of the Republic of South Africa – Thabo Mbeki – and the majority of members of the ANC-dominated judiciary, legislative and executive assemblies. The dualist interpretation is presented as a ‘correct’ way of understanding reality in South Africa and problems that beset it. In general there is indeed an irresistible temptation to adopt dualist propositions as they appear to be self-evidently true. But a critical interrogation of dualist interpretations reveals that in *essence* there is more to reality than what meets the eye.

The article makes a number of arguments: Firstly, dualist interpretations of social reality are hardly novel. English literature has ample cases of thinking influenced by dualism. Secondly, a look at the application of the dualist approach to South Africa’s economy shows that the dual economy thesis informs the equally quixotic notion that South Africa is a country of two separate nations. Lastly, inconsistencies and weaknesses of dualist interpretations of the social formation in South Africa lead to a suggestion that the concept of the articulation of modes of production is an appropriate instrument to best analyze and understand the socio-economic processes in the country.

**Keywords:** Dualism; Economy; Society; Nation; Modes of Production.

## INTRODUCTION

*“South Africa is the richest country in Africa, and could be one of the richest countries in the world. But it is a land of extremes and remarkable contrasts. The whites enjoy what may well be the highest standard of living in the world, whilst Africans live in poverty and misery...”* (Mandela 1969: 44).

## DUALISM

Dualism is defined as “the division of something conceptually into two opposed or contrasted aspects” (SACOD 2002: 358). It involves the construction of the world, real or imaginary, in polar opposites. It is about a simple dialectic of good and bad, egoism and altruism, reality and appearance, truth and falsehood, male and female, centre and periphery, et cetera. According to Babu (1981) in Christianity, for instance, people are viewed as inherently sinful

and that only through salvation can they be saved from their sinfulness. Hence attributes such as “egoism, evil [and] vice are always present in man [kind] and the slightest encouragement or temptation by evil forces is enough to bring them into free play” (Babu 1981: 57). The application of dualist approaches to being and social reality is, however, not a new phenomenon. English literature, from as far back as the eighteenth century, has ample cases that demonstrate thinking influenced by dualism. The following examples are illustrative.

In the opening passage of *A tale of Two Cities* the author maintains:

*“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the*

*spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Hell, we were all going direct the other way*" (Dickens 1981: 1).

In his judgment on whether James Joyce's book, *Ulysses*, was obscene or the intent with which it was written was pornographic and should, it found so, be subject to seizure, forfeiture, confiscation and destruction in the United States of America, Judge John Woolsey described the book in such dual terms as: "brilliant and dull, intelligible and obscure by turns. In many places it seems ... to be disgusting, but although it contains ... many words usually considered dirty, I have not found anything that I consider to be dirty for dirt's sake" (Joyce 1934).

In Hesse's novel of 1919, *Demian*, the protagonist's world is presented as both the world of light and righteousness and, its opposite, a world of darkness and vice. With regard to the former world we are told: "it was a world of quiet brilliance, clarity and cleanliness; in it gentle and friendly conversation, washed hands, clean clothes and good manners were the order of the day" (Hesse 1989: 9). The world of darkness and vice, on the other hand, is spoken of in terms of "... ghost stories and scandalous rumours, a gay tide of monstrous, intriguing, frightful, mysterious things; [as a world that] included the slaughterhouse and the prison, drunken and scolding women, cows in labour, foundered horses, tales of housebreaking, murder and suicide" (Hesse 1989: 10). The presiding deity, *Abraxas* – whose presence evokes feelings both of ecstasy and horror – is portrayed as both male and female, god and devil, containing in himself the world of light and darkness, flashes of profound guilt in the tenderest innocence (Hesse 1989: 90, 104).

In George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston, in respite from the mandatory morning physical training, delves into the world of 'double-think' which characterizes his country Oceania:

*"To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the party was the guardian of democracy ..."* (Orwell 1949: 31-32).

Lastly, in Robbins' recent book, *After the Dance*, the poet of the crash<sup>1</sup> Mpumelelo intelligently and opaquely contends that:

*"Everything is so difficult and it is also easy. There is this tragedy, and then there is this love. There is always tragedy and love. And yet there are also enemies. And I think: why is it so easy to have enemies? I cannot find the answer..."* (Robbins 2004: 29).

The value of all these examples lies in their depiction of the dichotomy of being. There is, in all these examples, a crystal acknowledgement that life fluctuates between dualities. In all these domains the central idea is that there are two basic principles that work in polar opposition to each other. Phosa (2004: 2-3) concurs: "Quite truly, life fluctuates between dualities. We would not be celebrating democracy if we did not know the pain of apartheid. Our better understanding and enjoyment of democracy is because we know the pain of its opposite". This idea then, that two fundamentally opposed classes of things, qualities or principles characterize social existence, is found in discussions about the nature of the economy in South Africa. In other words, the dualist approach is at the heart of the model of South Africa's economy.

#### DUAL ECONOMY

In line with dualist approach the economic structure in South Africa combines features of a relatively advanced capitalist economy with many of the characteristics of third world underdevelopment. Put differently, in dualist approach South Africa's economy is defined by two parallel economies, namely the First Economy and the Second Economy. According to this view the second economy is adversative to the first economy. Mbeki (2004: 29) contends that the first economy, on the one hand, is modern, produces the bulk of the country's wealth and is integrated within the global economy. The second economy (also known as the marginalized economy), on the other hand, is characterized by under-development, contributes little to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), contains a big percentage of our population, incorporates the poorest of our rural and urban population, is structurally disconnected from both the first and global economy, and is incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the aeroplane which was carrying President Samora Moises Machel of the Republic of Mozambique and 34 of his compatriots and colleagues which crashed in Manzini, in unexpected circumstances, on 19 October 1986.

self-generated growth and development (Mbeki 2004: 29).

Proponents of the dual economy model maintain that South Africa, in its dual economic structures, reflects the global reality. In other words South Africa is a microcosm of the global system. All of the world's problems and contradictions, goes the argument, are found in South Africa. Mbeki (2003: 4) argues that "the global economy is characterized by its division into two worlds, the "first world", and the "third world", the North and the South, one rich and developed, and the other poor and underdeveloped". In the same vein, Venter (1997: 20) maintains: "the points of conflict between the first world and the third world in South Africa and the tensions between them are the same in principle as those on the global stage". In a famous lecture delivered in memory of the revolutionary A.M. Babu, Samir Amin exclaimed: "You [South Africa] have everything that exists anywhere and usually the worst of everything! You have strata with the level of consumption of developed capitalist countries, but not the average productivity of those countries. Elsewhere there is an industrial third world, hardworking people with high productivity but low wages, and a fourth world too – the poorest people of Africa in the erstwhile Bantustans" (Amin 1997: 9).

On the question of the relationship between the second economy and both the first and global economy the dualist approach invokes the notion of 'structural disconnection'. In accordance with this notion the relationship between the second economy and both the first and global economy is seen as characterize by a structural disjuncture. This means that there is no connection, whatsoever, between the second economy and both the first and global economy. Mbeki (2003) lists the different ways in which the structural disconnection between the second economy and both the first and global economy manifests itself. Mbeki (2003: 2-3) is of the view that:

1. Many of the people in the second economy have either no skills or very low skills levels;
2. This renders them both unemployable and incapable of starting small businesses that require one skill or another;
3. This situation – compounded by poverty – deprives these people access to services offered by modern financial sectors in the first economy;
4. This then leads to their further exploitation (Mbeki 2003: 2-3).

On this dual economic structure is therefore firmly rooted the dualist society (Turok 2003: 5).

#### DUALIST SOCIETY

The characterization of the economy in South Africa as divided into two separate economies informs the contention that South Africa is a country divided into two nations, one white and the other black. An elaboration of the dual society (or what is also called the two-nation thesis) is found in what has become known as the *Two-Nations Speech*.<sup>2</sup> Taking cue from the former State President Nelson Mandela's statement<sup>3</sup> quoted in the beginning of this paper, Thabo Mbeki (1999: 188) in the speech boldly asserts:

*"South Africa is a country divided into two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has access to a developed economic, physical, education, communication and other infrastructure".*

According to Mbeki (1999: 188) the 'other nation' is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This second nation, in stark contrast to the first nation,

*"...lives under conditions of a gross underdeveloped economic, physical, education, 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 the black nation only to the extent that it is incapable of realization..."* (Mbeki 1999: 188).

The 1992 Report of the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Race Relations Survey of 1993/94 and the September 2000 and 2002 Labour Force Surveys, in some quarters, collectively give credence to the dual economy

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<sup>2</sup> The speech was delivered by Thabo Mbeki – then Deputy President – at the opening of the debate in the National Assembly on Reconciliation and Nation Building in Cape Town, 29 May 1998.

<sup>3</sup> The statement was made from the dock in the Pretoria Supreme Court on the 20 April 1964 at the opening of the defense case in what became 'the Rivonia Treason Trial'.

thesis and the two-nation thesis. The 1992 Report of the Development Bank of Southern Africa attests to the existence of the 'worst poverty' in rural areas of South Africa. According to the Report a greater number of the unemployed and unemployable people<sup>4</sup> than the able-bodied employable people populate the rural areas (Duncan 1995: 148). The *Race Relations Survey of 1993/94*, on the other hand, shows that in 1993 95 000 African households and 22 600 Coloured households lived below the poverty line of R1 200 per family per month. This is directly opposed to only 8 300 White households who were living below the poverty line during the same period (Duncan 1995: 147).

The *September 2000 and September 2002 Labor Force Surveys* show that unemployment rose by 9 percent for African women which was more than any other group. Amongst African men it rose by 6 percent between the same period, thus increasing the number of unemployed by 757 122 amongst African women and by 528 474 among African men (Watkinson and Orr 1995: 23). This discomfoting reality of South Africa can indeed be seen as a hindrance and negatively impacting on the country's efforts to ensure the existence of the material base necessary for nation reconstruction and development. It is on the basis of this reality that dualist interpretations of social structures and relations in South Africa appear to be self-evidently true.

To summarize then, the dual economy model is based upon two assumptions. The first is the idea that South Africa's economy is characterized by two diametrically opposed economies and the country, by two diametrically opposed nations. The second assumption is that no connection, whatsoever, exists between the 'modern' developed economy and the 'traditional' underdeveloped economy. In Mbeki's (2003: 1) formulation the relationship between the second economy and both the first and global economy is characterized by a structural disconnection. A thorough examination of dualist interpretations of processes of economic and social development in South Africa demonstrates, however, that they are characterized by distortions, limitations and historical inaccuracies. It is to these aspects that the paper now turns.

### **DISTORTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND INACCURACIES**

The conceptualization of South Africa as a country divided into two diametrically opposed nations is a distorted recollection of the South

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<sup>4</sup> Unemployable people are children, the handicapped and elderly people.

African Communist Party's theory of South Africa as a colonialism of a special type<sup>5</sup>. According to this approach South Africa was a colonial situation because all the essential features of colonial domination in the imperial epoch were maintained and even intensified (SACP 1989: 18). The country's colonial status was, however, of a 'special type' because the colonial ruling class shared the same locality or living space with the oppressed colonial majority (SACP 1989: 18). South Africa then was in a curious dichotomy of being at one and the same time a colony and an independent state. The theory posited the white nation in South Africa as the colonial power and the politically oppressed black majority as the colonized. This reality then led white South Africans, on the one hand, to enjoy political power, privileges on the basis of race and a lion's share of the wealth of the country. The black majority, on the other hand, was subjected to national oppression, exploitation and a complete denial of basic human rights (SACP 1989: 18).

The South African Communist Party's solution, supposedly shared with the other two members of the alliance (the ANC and the union federation, Cosatu) and the broader range of democratic forces, called for an immediate perspective (National Democratic Revolution) and a long term perspective (Socialism). The main content of the national democratic revolution was, in line with this theory, the liberation of the African people in particular and the black people in general and, ultimately, the transition to socialism (SACP 2000: 17-23). In the two-nation thesis Mbeki takes for granted the homogeneity of his categories and does not even analyze the class relationships of the society or the class structure of either of his categories.

The theory of CST did not employ the terms – 'black nation' and 'white nation' – nebulously as is the case in the two-nation thesis. An integral part of CST was an identification of capitalism as the dominant mode of production in South Africa and monopoly capital as the dominant faction or fraction of capital. It also showed that the development of productive forces led to the emergence of the two dominant classes in the country, namely the white bourgeoisie with monopoly over the means of production and the super-exploited black working class. The dualist interpretation of social structures in the country, on the other hand, is silent on these issues. The

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<sup>5</sup> The theory of Colonialism of a Special Type formed the basis for an alliance between the African National Congress, South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Union.

core feature of the dual society thesis, as opposed to CST, clearly is the assumption that the relevant categories are merely 'white nation' on the one hand and the 'black nation' on the other hand. This paradigm assumes, as a result, a racial form where the 'first' world refers to whites and the 'third' world refers to blacks.

#### BLACK NATION AND WHITE NATION

Perhaps more controversial in the two-nation thesis is the implicit notion that black people in general constitute a nation separate from that of whites. In our view, Slovo (1988: 146) was right in his assertion that "despite the existence of cultural and racial diversity, South Africa is not a multi-national country. It is a nation in the making; a process which is increasingly being advanced in struggle and one which can only be finally completed after the racist tyranny is defeated". Equally problematic also is the suggestion that South Africa became a new nation with the first democratic elections in April 1994 (see Govender 1995:131). South Africa is far from being a nation today than it was prior the said historic national democratic elections. The confusion about black people constituting a nation distinct from a white nation stems from a lack of clarity about what a nation is. Scruton (1982: 312-313) defines a nation as "a group of people sharing a common language (or dialects of a common language), inhabiting a fixed territory, with common customs and traditions, which may have become sufficiently conscious to take on the aspect of law, and who recognize common interests and a common need for a single sovereign". The definition emphasizes the *commonality* of language, customs and tradition, interests, occupation of a fixed territory, et cetera.

Unfortunately this scenario is no where to be found in South Africa. Firstly, there is no common language shared either by black or white people in general in the country. To maintain that English is used across race, class, ethnic and gender lines and should thus be seen as a common language (*lingua franca*) would not only be ignorant of the history of South Africa. But it would also imply that struggles which led to the recognition by the Constitution of South Africa as official eleven languages in use in the country were unnecessary. Secondly, a commonality of customs and traditions does not exist either within the black community or white community on the one hand or between blacks in general and whites on the other hand. With respect to relations between Black and White people, it is not uncommon to hear white people assert a distinct and superior culture to that of black people in general. It is even more fallacious to claim a commonality of interests in social formations in which capitalist social relations are

dominant. It is now common knowledge that in such formations the interests of those who have monopoly of ownership and control over the means of production are fundamentally different from the interest of those who neither own nor control the means of production.

Black and white people do not constitute separate nations and, contrary to popular sentiments about the rainbow nation supposedly created post-1994, South Africa is not a nation. We cannot pretend that South Africans share a common patriotism, let alone a common vision of the future.

#### ARTICULATION OF MODES OF PRODUCTION

The second assumption in Mbeki analysis about the economic structures in South Africa is also not without problems. Some things in life, real or fictitious, come joined together. An example of this phenomenon is the Siamese-Twin cats that Alice met in Gilbert Adair's *Needle's Eye World* (see Botha 1995). Ping and Pang, the story goes, were attached to opposite ends of the same tail. One could not have Ping without Pang, and the other way round. The two cats physically entailed each other. They were not only linked to each other anatomically but behaved in a Siamese-like manner. They laughed and cried together and, as Alice discovered to her astonishment, they even spoke in tandem (Botha 1995). This is analogous to the relationship between the second and first economy in South Africa.

The social formation in South Africa has historically been characterized by an *articulation* of modes of production – the pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production. This situation, unfortunately, has not changed. There continues to be a link between the first and second economy. It is this conception of articulation of modes of production, as opposed to that of structural disconnection between modes of production, which best analyzes the processes of economic development in South Africa (Davies 2004: 31). Historical evidence shows that the articulation of the capitalist mode of production and pre-capitalist modes occurred through the economic mechanism of reproduction (Wolpe 1974). The migrant labour system is instructive in this regard.

A migrant left his place of origin ('traditional' sector) to sell his labour power to those who owned the means of production (in the 'modern' sector) for a wage for a certain period of time. When the contract expired, the migrant worker then returned home to his family. The migrant worker was paid wages that were below the cost of his reproduction. This was because the

extended family in the reserves performed social security functions necessary for the reproduction of the migrant worker. By caring for the unproductive (that is the young, the old, the sick and the migrant worker during periods when he returned home) the African family in the reserves relieved the 'modern' capitalist sector from the responsibility to provide resources on these necessary functions (Legassick 1974, 1977; Saul and Gelp 1981; Wolpe 1974). Structures in the pre-capitalist modes of production thus performed functions necessary for the reproduction of a specific form of labour force (migrant labour force) for the capitalist mode of production. The existence and indeed the maintenance of these modes of production were fundamental, especially in the early period of capitalist development, for the provision of workers (mainly African) employed in capitalist production with "supplementary subsistence and were thus a crucial condition of reproduction of the migrant working class" (Wolpe 1974: 303).

From this it can be seen that the pre-capitalist modes of production actually incurred costs involved in the reproduction of conditions of existence of the capitalist mode of production. An integral part of these processes was unfortunately the under-development of pre-capitalist modes of production by the more developed capitalist mode of production. Such evidence demonstrates then that modernity of one sector (first economy) was actually a function of the backwardness of the other sector (third economy). In other words there was an indissoluble unity that existed between the reproduction of backwardness of the third economy at one extreme and the apparent progress of the first economy at the other extreme. The maintenance of underdevelopment was therefore an inherent condition of the process of the capitalist accumulation in South Africa. The establishment of Sebokeng<sup>6</sup> in 1965 (Hansard 1986) is another example demonstrative of the inter-dependent nature of the relationship between the 'second' and 'first' economy in South Africa.

This township was established to serve the socio-economic and political needs of the magisterial districts of Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Sasolburg and Meyerton. The irony of this is that Sebokeng was established during a period in which racial capitalist state policy focused on the development of homelands, considered to be 'true homes' to Africans who were seen as

'temporary sojourners' of the white republic. The labour-force in Sebokeng was therefore developed to meet the labour demands of the various branches of production in Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Sasolburg and Meyerton. The Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa (ISCOR) in Vanderbijlpark in particular had been experiencing a process of expansion since 1943. The initial stage of the process of expansion came with the erection of the plate mill in 1943. The second phase, coinciding with a wave of expansion of Vanderbijlpark<sup>7</sup>, came with the building of the new steel works. The last phase in the expansion of the industry in the 1960s came with ISCOR's R450-million programme designed to double the steel output of the steelworks (21 Years of Progress 1964: 23-24).

This process of expansion could only be accomplished – and the un-satiated demand for more labour power occasioned by the process satisfied – by the exploitation of the labour power of the working class from the areas of African settlement in the Vaal Triangle. As it can be seen, even the second industrialization continued to ensure an inter-dependent relationship between the second and first economy in South Africa. Unfortunately the de-racialization of the economy after the national democratic elections in April 1999 has not changed the inter-dependent nature of the relationship between the second and first economy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The arguments presented in this paper are neither original nor fundamental. They are also not intended to jeer at the government's attempts to address poverty and the fate of the economically under-privileged majority of the people in South Africa. The purpose is merely to show that dualism – which underlies the dual economy thesis and the two-nation thesis – is hardly novel and unique in South Africa and that the application of the dual economy model in South Africa, because of its numerous weaknesses, is an inappropriate and ineffectual mechanism to better understand social formation characterized by more than one mode of production. The notion of the articulation of modes of production best explains the development of economic processes in such social formations. In the context of the articulation of modes of production clearly the modernity of the first economy is actually a function of the backwardness of the second

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<sup>6</sup> Sebokeng, together with Boipatong, Bophelong, Sharpville, Zamdela and Deneysville, is the main area of African settlement in the Vaal Triangle.

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<sup>7</sup> Vanderbijlpark was also known as the Steel City. This is a careful reminder that Vanderbijlpark owes its existence and origins to ISCOR.

economy. In other words there is an indissoluble unity that exists between the reproduction of backwardness of the second economy at one extreme and the apparent progress of the first economy at the other extreme. The maintenance

of underdevelopment is therefore an inherent condition of the process of the capitalist accumulation path in South Africa.

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