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Documenting Democratization:  
New Media Practices in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Freedom of expression has always been one of the hallmarks of democracy. South Africans only recently tasted this liberty. Until the creation and ratification of the new constitution in the mid-1990s, the South African government was empowered to curtail free speech as it saw fit. During the final years of apartheid, it often exercised this prerogative. Newspapers were frequently shut down, novels banned, and films censored. Yet the ruling regime did not wield power in a purely negative manner. It also attempted to impose its dogma through the creation of a system of radio and television broadcasting authorities that faithfully replicated the central credo of the ruling party. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) gave the regime a powerful tool for articulating apartheid ideology and for controlling access to representations from outside the borders of the apartheid state. During the transition to democracy after 1990, South Africa faced the pressing question of how to transform this strategic organ of racist ideology into a forum for the advancement of national unity and equality.

The abiding urgency of this task has been made clear by the recent controversy surrounding the Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the post-apartheid media.<sup>1</sup> By ordering thirty six editors of the country's main newspapers, radio, and television stations to testify, the Commission set off a firestorm of controversy concerning the ruling African National Congress (ANC) regime's attempts to muzzle criticism. Substantial debate has taken place concerning the autonomy of the Commission from a ruling party that appears increasingly skittish about charges of corruption coming from the press. Particularly noteworthy in this controversy is the dissension among the editors themselves. Breaking ranks with white editors who refused to appear before the Commission in response to a subpoena, five black editors

agreed to cooperate with the inquiry.<sup>2</sup> The Commission's pointed argument that little institutional change has taken place within the media, seventy six percent of whose top managers are white, appears to be gaining increasing traction as the hard realities of post-apartheid economic and social inequality hit home.

The task of democratizing South Africa's media is complicated by the broader changes that accompanied the demise of apartheid. Public service broadcasting is in retreat around the world. In an era of information capitalism, the clarion call to build the nation through the creation of public authorities has grown increasingly faint. Moreover, the rise of transnational technologies such as satellite broadcasting has undermined both the regulatory power and the ideological presumptions of many national broadcasters to a significant extent. After being denied access to the national broadcaster by the apartheid regime for decades, democratic forces are now confronted with a similar problem as a result of globalizing currents. Yet such trends are by no means inexorable. As Neil Lazarus has stressed, neo-liberal ideology that represents globalization as uncontrollable effectively obscures the specific social and economic policies that canalize the transnational flows of capital and culture.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the many galvanizing dramas during South Africa's transition period has been the struggle to establish a national public sphere using the media. From the organization of the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting in opposition to the National Party's plans to privatize the SABC to the contemporary struggles over racism in the media that I described above, democratizing the media has been a central issue in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The new nation's ability to foster popular access to the airwaves is, admittedly, limited in a variety of ways. In the years since the unbanning of resistance organizations such as the ANC, South African society has been transformed to an extent few could have predicted. The transition to democracy offers a beacon of hope in a world where almost all forms of collective belonging and belief seem to be suspect. Yet the sweeping changes of the last decade have also shifted the terms that animated the national liberation struggle. Despite the ANC's electoral victories, South Africa remains one of the most materially unequal societies on earth. The issue

of democratizing the media may seem relatively unimportant in a nation faced with spiralling crime, urban and rural immiseration, and a collapsing health care system. Yet, as Benedict Anderson has argued, forms such as the newspaper, and now film and television, are integral to a nation's consolidation of its identity as an imagined community.<sup>5</sup> If any of the country's material problems are to be addressed on a national level, the primary media sites where the imagined community is conjured up will have to become vehicles through which demands for change can be phrased. Recognition of the crises which vex the nation may not in and of itself be adequate, however, serving in many cases simply to divert attention away from the sources of such problems. To what extent, then, does popular culture reflect both the promises and the pitfalls of current initiatives to establish democracy in post-apartheid South Africa?<sup>6</sup> What kind of national subject was being constructed by indigenous television broadcasts during the transition period of the mid-1990s?

I intend to explore these questions through discussion of a specific television series that punctuated the transition to democracy in South Africa in a particularly dramatic manner. *Ordinary People* was the first independently produced current affairs program to be aired by the SABC. Broadcast for three seasons, from 1993-1996, the series was conceived as a concrete embodiment of the ANC's call for a multicultural, non-racial South Africa. Episodes of *Ordinary People* were aired during prime viewing time on SABC-TV1, which also commissioned the program, on Thursday evenings. This prime slot suggests that both the producers and the channel strove to garner the broadest possible national audience for the series. Obviously, many South Africans living in rural areas may not have had access to television, lacking either the material or linguistic resources necessary for such access. However, given the fact that *Ordinary People* was broadcast on the channel associated with the nation's new *lingua franca* - English -, it seems logical to assume that the series' producers imagined themselves as broadcasting to and, to a certain extent, constituting the nation. Production and transmission of the series would have been unthinkable without the signal institutional transformations that took place at the SABC in response to popular mobilizations for equitable access to the media.

Consequently, this milestone documentary program offers a particularly significant case study of the struggle to forge a new South African national identity during the transition to democracy.

### The Campaign for Independent Broadcasting

Despite the qualms that retarded the introduction of television until 1976 in South Africa, the apartheid regime quickly found the means to use the medium to further its separatist ideology.<sup>7</sup> However, while adopting the model of public broadcasting embodied in agencies such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, South Africa departed radically from other nations where broadcasting played a historic role as the primary public sphere of the nation during the postwar period. Seeking to allay the concerns of ideologues who argued against the potential for cultural fusion implicit in the model of a unitary public sphere, SABC-TV began broadcasting exclusively in Afrikaans and English, the two languages of the hegemonic white minority in South Africa. After four years, this policy was supplemented through the addition of two channels, TV2 and TV3, which broadcast in the major African languages. Programming for whites and blacks was thus rigidly segregated according to the spuriously multicultural, essentialist logic that characterized apartheid ideology following the introduction of the bantustans, or “native homelands,” in 1971. This arrangement banished fears that TV could act as an agent of cultural miscegenation.<sup>8</sup> The SABC’s instrumental use by the apartheid regime has given the question of equality of access to the public sphere a far higher profile than in other nations during our current era of globalization. Consequently, although the move away from state regulation is being felt in South Africa as it is in other nations, this move is not taking place in the typical ideological environment in which the public good and decentralization are disaggregated from one another and wholly subject to a market logic.

Despite the fact that the SABC is no longer the only broadcaster, its transformation during the years following 1990 suggests that noncommercial, democratic media systems remain a crucial resource in South Africa. Changes at the SABC were initially catalyzed by a group of anti-apartheid film and media organizations and unions which publicly claimed the right of

access to the national broadcaster.<sup>9</sup> Such claims were particularly important given the ruling National Party's move to privatize the SABC before losing power. The importance of these claims to democratic access was further underlined by the need to ensure the SABC's independence before the first democratic elections. A coalition of labor and progressive political groups coalesced in the early 1990s as the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting. This coalition managed to pressure the government into electing a new board for the SABC prior to the 1994 elections and helped establish an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to diminish state power over broadcasting. The Act which established the IBA emphasizes the responsibility of broadcasters to advance the right to representation of historically disadvantaged groups in the nation.<sup>10</sup> These goals have been cemented through the promulgation of broadcasting regulations stipulating linguistic equality for South Africa's eleven major languages and through content quotas which aim to increase the representation of local issues in programming. Despite the limitations imposed on such laudable objectives by lack of funding and worries over continued state intervention, the establishment of the IBA and its subsequent democratic initiatives clearly represent an important foundation for future extensions of equal access to the media in South Africa.

Concurrent with these institutional forms of democratization has been an emphasis on documenting the popular history suppressed during the apartheid era. Many of the approaches employed in programming such as *Ordinary People* were pioneered by anti-apartheid media activists during the 1980s. Radical collectives such as Video News Services (VNS) made documentary programming for local branches of the United Democratic Front, a broad anti-apartheid alliance of workers, community organizations, and youth groups founded in 1983. Following the unbanning of anti-apartheid organizations in 1990, VNS members and other anti-apartheid activists began to produce documentary material for the SABC. By stressing popular identity and power in their work, these documentarians moved beyond the white-dominated view of South African history disseminated by previous media.

Recuperating Popular History

*Ordinary People* is one of the landmark broadcasts to embody this strategy of recuperating popular history. Produced by Free Filmmakers, a collective composed of former members of one of the apartheid era's underground video groups, the series was conceived as a video journal of changes in South Africa during the transition to democracy. The first season of episodes was aired on SABC-TV's Channel 1 during the powder-keg year of 1993, shortly before the first democratic elections confirmed South Africa's transition from apartheid. Each episode of *Ordinary People* frames the radical changes and social disruptions of this period from multiple points of view. Cameras follow three of four 'ordinary' people as they experience some of the events that define the new nation. Through this populist strategy, the series sets out to chronicle a significant set of events from a series of different perspectives, producing a complex weave of voices that reflects the variety of contemporary South Africa. In addition, however, the disparities that are revealed as different individuals and groups of people experience identical events offer a powerful implicit comment on the social polarization that is apartheid's primary legacy. Indeed, by opening up the lives of South Africans to one another, *Ordinary People* bears witness to the dramatic inequalities that have to be overcome in the process of nation-building. Yet in doing so, the series allows the viewer to engage in the process of identification and understanding that structures other aspects of the nation's negotiated transition. Perhaps the most internationally well-known embodiment of this process of transformation has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yet *Ordinary People* suggests that the Commission is but one element in a much broader culture of confession and conciliation, as well as, on occasion, aggression and dissent, that characterized South Africa during these years.

*Ordinary People* includes episodes that focus on extremely public moments in the nation's history. They include a day in the life of President Nelson Mandela, which was, according to the group's promotional material, the most watched documentary in the history of South African television. In addition, the filmmakers also focus on the moments of spectacular antagonism that occurred during the transition. Perhaps the most well known episode along

these lines is the collective's account of an extreme right wing Afrikaner party's storming of the conference hall where multi-party negotiations were being carried out. Certainly, such accounts are an important document of their time. By recording the reactions of workers inside the conference hall as swastika-wearing Afrikaners smashed through the hall's glass doors, the filmmakers provided a galvanizing portrait of the menacing violence that pervaded everyday life in South Africa during the period. Given the reconfiguration of the nation's political terrain since the mid-1990s, however, these episodes may seem dated. While many of the underlying cultural and racial attitudes documented in these episodes persist, the specific political forms through which they are organized have changed markedly and, in some cases, completely disappeared from the scene.

However, the series also includes portraits of more mundane, if no less grave, events in the lives of South Africans. These episodes, while perhaps less spectacular or sensational than those previously described, nonetheless more aptly embody the series' brief to elevate the everyday life of the average South African citizen to historic significance. I will be concentrating my discussion on two such episodes. The first of these is entitled "The The Tooth of the Times." As the voice-over introduction explains, this episode focuses on the impact of an Afrikaner's loss of his family farm. According to this introduction, the government's reversal of its policy of 'buying' white votes by subsidizing farmers has, in conjunction with years of drought, forced many farmers to default on their substantial loans. *Ordinary People* documents the impact of this situation not simply on the Afrikaner family who own the farm, but also on the black laborers who have lived for generations alongside the white landowners.

Shortly after providing us with this information, the film cuts to the series' introductory sequence, a medley of images that captures the essence of the program. In ravishing black and white photography, we are treated to a sweeping tour of contemporary South Africa. The camera zooms down rural roads and over urban highways, stressing the dynamic and varied character of the new nation. The camera's focus on black and white faces, on women and men, children and grandparents invokes the celebratory multiculturalism that has become a part of mainstream

discourse in the United States since the Civil Rights movement, a discourse that leaders in post-apartheid South Africa have appropriated to great effect. Yet we are also shown signs of the tensions that simmer in the country today. A young white man scuffles with a black man in a street. The swastika of the neo-Nazi Afrikaner People's Party is etched on a wall next to which a white woman stands passively. Squatting like an ominous metallic beetle, an armored troop carrier parks itself on a plain outside a township that is engulfed in acrid smoke. A couple of black men argue over a fence with a film crew, seemingly intent on rejecting the version of reality members of the media are constructing. If the series is intent on documenting the common experiences of South Africans, this introductory sequence also insistently draws our attention to the grim realities that trouble the utopian hopes of the transition.

The primary narrative threads from the body of "The Tooth of the Times" enlarge on this interweaving of identity and difference. Eddie Jacobs, the Afrikaner family patriarch, has left his farm while the implements, livestock, and land that have given him and his family a sense of meaning for five generations are auctioned off. His son watches, anger at the humiliation of having to buy back the tractor he grew up with clouding his face. Yet the scene set up by the filmmakers to follow this account of the auction jars the sense of identification we feel with the Jacobs family. The camera cuts to Fanie Letsimo, perched on his crutches in the middle of a desolate plain, within which are buried generations of his ancestors. His prayer to them suggests the absolute sense of loss he will experience when the Jacobs farm passes into new hands. Not only will his connection with the land he has worked on but never owned be ruptured, but he will also be deprived of the link with generations of his ancestors who are buried on the farm. While the Jacobs family confronts a tragic loss of vocation that might be seen as analogous in many ways, Fanie Letsimo and his family are faced not simply with emotional and spiritual loss but also with total destitution. Without the 'baas' upon whom he depends as a result of the enduringly feudal system of labor relations in rural South Africa, Fanie is helpless.

I have not yet touched on one of *Ordinary People's* most significant features: language. Both Fanie and the Jacobs family speak in their respective languages in the episode, with English



subtitles illuminating the meaning of their words. This strategy allows each to speak using the resonant linguistic forms employed by their diverse communities. Moreover, the Jacobs family often slips in and out of English, dramatizing the importance of Afrikaans as a badge of cultural identity as well as a form through which the deepest feelings of grief are articulated. The filmmakers' strategy is particularly significant in this regard. While using English, the *lingua franca* of the new nation, they also allow individuals to speak in their mother tongues. Given the history of linguistic, cultural and racial segregation that, as I argued previously, has characterized SABC-TV services, this constitutes a signal recognition of difference. *Ordinary People's* use of subtitling is a subtle but crucial part of a nationalist pedagogy, one that emphasizes forms of common experience that link South Africa's diverse cultures.

The central element in this strategy of interpellating national subjectivity comes through the different narrators employed by the episode. As I mentioned earlier, the series typically employs three or four narrators within each episode. So far, however, I have only discussed two such narrators: Fanie Letsimo and Eddie Jacobs. Although they experience a similar set of events, the binary arrangement of these two narrators would seem to reinscribe problematic racial oppositions. However, the third narrator, whom I have not yet mentioned, disrupts this binary, helping to create a sense of unity among the two primary narrators. The filmmakers choose the visiting auctioneer to be their third narrator. We see him arriving at the farm, telling the film crew in the car with him that the *boers* don't feel animosity towards him but rather see him as simply doing his job. However, as we find out in the bitter auction scenes which follow, both the Jacobs and the Letsimo family see themselves as the victims of the bank for whom the auctioneer works. A human community with long traditions of mutual conciliation is conjured up in contrast to the largely faceless and rapacious force of capital. Through the common feelings of despair articulated by Eddie - he returns to his farm after everything has been sold and says "now I'm under the mud" - and Fanie, a structure of collective feeling is created by the filmmakers. Linked in a grieving community, Eddie and Fanie offer a microcosm of national identity. Although viewers are certainly offered the materials with which to produce an

oppositional reading that focuses on the material disparities differentiating the subjects of this community, this episode of *Ordinary People* strongly evokes the project of nation-building by asking us to identify with the common sufferings of all the inhabitants of the Jacobs farm.<sup>11</sup>

### The Transition and Land Reform

“The Tooth of the Times” demonstrates the complex bonds that link blacks and whites and thereby gives the viewer an important opportunity to perceive the complex, wounded humanity of both groups in South Africa. Yet the episode also suggests that the political transformation which galvanized the world’s attention following 1990 is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meaningful democratization. Without genuine agrarian reforms that benefit the rural African population, South Africa’s fledgling democracy will be built on shaky foundations. The ANC’s legitimacy as the hegemonic party of national liberation during the apartheid era rested to a significant extent on its promises to redistribute the ill-gotten gains of colonialism and apartheid, both through the return of land to African farmers and through broader forms of economic and social levelling. Restitution of at least a portion of the lands of which Africans have been dispossessed during the four hundred year long European domination of South Africa was an important element in the process of multi-party negotiations that produced the new constitution during the mid-1990s. These negotiations achieved many dramatic successes: South Africa’s new constitution has some of the most progressive human rights clauses of any nation in the world. The issue of land reform and restitution has, however, proven an intractable problem. Currently, a small portion of the nation’s white minority owns 86% of South Africa’s land.

One of the chief catalysts behind the formation of the ANC early in the twentieth century was the upcoming passage of the Natives Land Act of 1913 by the newly formed South African legislature. The Land Act constituted a precedent for much of the legal framework established during the era of formal apartheid after 1948. In response to the growing wealth of African farmers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Act introduced the division

of land in the nation between firmly mapped out areas of white and black settlement. The minority white population was given control of over 92% of South Africa's territory; Africans were limited to reserves covering less than 8% of the nation's land. The Act also contained provisions intended to limit the numbers of Africans settled on white farms, where they had been carrying out highly competitive agricultural production. The long-term effect of the Act was to reduce African agriculture to purely subsistence conditions, ensuring that sharecropping and other rent operations would be transformed into labor tenancy, which would in turn become (unfree) wage labor as part of a cycle of increasingly capitalised white agriculture.<sup>12</sup> This move placated the white owners of large farms, who had been meeting increasingly stiff competition from African family farms. In addition, the Act also helped push African labor into the gaping maws of the gold and diamond industries. The "reserves," which eventually mutated into the nominally independent bantustans after the creation of formal apartheid, became overpopulated, economically and environmentally devastated holding pens for the black industrial reserve army needed by South Africa's mining industries. By allowing these industries to shift the cost of reproduction to Africans themselves and by permitting industry owners to pay exorbitantly low wages to migrant laborers who were seen as 'supplementing' income earned through farming by working in the mines, rural segregation became an integral element in the massive accumulation of profits that gave South Africa's white population one of the highest living standards in the world throughout most of the past century.

In the course of the twentieth century, the newly organized South African state built a virtually impregnable position by consolidating a two-nations hegemony.<sup>13</sup> The state, in other words, garnered support from the white working class and from industrial and agricultural capital by passing on the benefits of the extreme exploitation of the black majority to the white minority. Hein Marais calls the situation instituted by apartheid, in which high standards of living for whites were fostered through super-exploitation of blacks, "racial Fordism."<sup>14</sup> While the impact of this strategy may be most visible in the creation of a middle class Afrikaner bureaucracy during the apartheid years, it is also evident in terms of the agricultural policies pursued by the

regime. In addition to the racial legislation described above, substantial subsidies were allocated to white farmers, keeping families like the Jacobs afloat. Moreover, the post-apartheid state continues to support white farmers by sanctifying private property, which translates into routine police intervention on the side of landowners in disputes over land claims. Afrikaner farmers essentially operate as a rentier class, extracting rent in the form of labor from African tenant farmers, whose land had been seized during early colonial period.<sup>15</sup> The establishment of the bantustans coincided with yet another attack on the labor tenure system. The illegality of labor tenure proved highly convenient to white farmers, who, as a result of the mechanization of agricultural production that characterized the ‘green revolution’ of the 1960s, had less and less call for the large numbers of Africans whose labor they once exploited. Indeed, migrant farm labor is a far more effective solution in this case, since it means that the white farmer does not have to pay the costs associated with the reproduction of his labor force. The ‘homelands’ were thus also a convenient solution for changes prompted by the increasing industrialization of large-scale South African farming.

Despite the central role which land dispossession has played in South African colonialism and apartheid and its own origins as a movement of protest against the Land Act, the ANC has paid scant attention to land issues since its founding.<sup>16</sup> Rural issues have been displaced in the organization’s thought by the task of mobilizing the urban black working class. It might be argued that the ANC has so steadfastly refused to focus on rural issues in order to deny the apartheid regime any legitimation for its bantustan policy, which was predicated on representations of Africans as inherently rural people. However, given the constitutive relation between land dispossession and labor migration discussed above, this lack of attention to rural issues represents a key theoretical and strategic elision. The organization’s failure to capitalize upon and augment rural uprisings during the period before its banning in 1960 has, for example, been seen as a crucial missed opportunity to expand the ANC’s support base beyond an urban base. This elision seems particularly grave given that some of the central pillars of apartheid, the “efflux and influx controls” embodied in the notorious pass laws, were based on nakedly

economic considerations related to the regulated distribution of black labor between agricultural, mining, and urban sectors. Approximately three and a half million Africans were affected by the accelerated rate of forced removals between 1960 and 1983 that accompanied the increasingly capital intensive character of South African agriculture and industry during this period.<sup>17</sup>

The ANC's historical inattention to agrarian issues has also raised key dilemmas during the transition period. While in exile, the ANC concentrated on mobilizing its urban constituency for a frontal assault on the state. However, significant forms of grassroots organization took place outside the ambit of ANC power. The United Democratic Front, formed in 1983 in opposition to the regime's attempts to create a tri-cameral parliament that would include representation for "coloureds" and South Asians, was instrumental in creating a structure of civics located in urban and rural areas.<sup>18</sup> After its unbanning, however, the ANC attempted to absorb these local initiatives and to refocus them on building regional and national structures.<sup>19</sup> Local activists and protesters found that the local issues that had helped mobilize a popular constituency for the UDF were now being given short shrift. Despite establishing a National Land Commission and affiliated Regional Land Commissions on short order following the organization's unbanning, the ANC failed to connect these organizations to grassroots groups adequately.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the rhetoric of 'nation-building' often actively militated against local organizations' attempts to foster social and economic justice.

One of the key initiatives taken by the ANC during its first term of office was to endorse the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) developed by a COSATU-affiliated group shortly prior to the 1994 elections. The RDP's ambitious plans included a targeted redistribution of 30% of South Africa's land to poor, black, rural households during the party's first five-year term. However, according to a report by the National Land Committee (NLC) published in 1998, less than one percent of the country's total farmlands area had been reallocated by the government thus far.<sup>21</sup> The NLC report found fault, among other things, with the government's market-based policy of redistribution. Faced with the fear of capital flight should it follow through on any of the hopes raised by the socialist language of the Freedom Charter of 1955, the

ANC foregrounded the sacrosanct status of private property during constitutional negotiations. As Levin and Weiner argue, the prominent place accorded to private property rights in the new constitution was ample evidence of the ANC's decision to subordinate the interests of the nation's rural dispossessed to other considerations.<sup>22</sup> Rather than expropriating land from the politically powerful white farming sector or turning over vacant state lands to the dispossessed, the architects of land reform proposed to subsidize the petitions of black farmers for land, allowing them to buy such land back from willing white farmers. Not entirely surprisingly, this strategy not only failed to convince many white farmers to sell their land, but also helped to drive the price of land up, making it impossible for individual rural households to gain access to land with their relatively meager government grants. In order to buy land, people were forced to band together into communities whose lack of common interests sometimes produced very uneven results following successful purchase of land. In addition, money was allocated exclusively to male heads of households, revealing a disturbing gender inequity in the ANC's thinking about rural communities. The fundamental unworkability of this market-based approach, however, results from the enormous historical imbalances in terms of access to rural land resources produced by colonialism and apartheid, not to mention the income inequalities that persist in post-apartheid South Africa. The two other initiatives taken by the Department of Land Affairs during this period, the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994 and the Land Reform (Labor Tenants) Act of 1995, had similarly insignificant impact on rural poverty and homelessness. As the editors of a volume produced during the initial debates over the government's plans put it, "the countervailing tendency to push people off the land... is likely to override state supported efforts to buy into the land market."<sup>23</sup>

The ANC has been given the unenviable task of forging a historical class compromise.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, during the period of transition, the party valiantly embraced the language of nation-building. Yet, as Hein Marais has argued, this rhetoric obscures the fundamental class character of the nation.<sup>25</sup> While it has made genuine and impressive changes in the political character of the nation, it has been far less effective in challenging the economic inequalities produced by

apartheid. The transition should be seen, then, less as a total rupture - as the term 'post-apartheid' suggests, than as a reconfiguration of existing class-, race- and gender-based inequalities.<sup>26</sup> In other words, although the ANC employs a rhetoric that implies the fostering of consensus and has made genuine and original efforts to make such consensus possible, the economic policies that the party administers often militate against the livelihood and rights of its major constituency. The party is caught between two tendencies, between the alliances forged in the name of 'nation building' and the aspirations and demands of its own support base. Without substantial economic changes that entitle the economically disenfranchised African majority, the project of national unity implies the legitimation of social inequalities. Denied such substantial reforms, the ANC's mass constituency is likely to challenge the party's commitment to 'national reconciliation,' seeing that this rhetoric increasingly serves the class interests of dominant sectors of both industrial and agricultural capital in the country.<sup>27</sup>

These questions are not simply significant in South Africa's rural areas. Pushed off the land by a vicious combination of forces, South Africa's immiserated rural population winds up as slum dwellers in both rural towns as well as in increasingly violent and dysfunctional urban conglomerations such as Gauteng. The inequalities that deprive African communities of basic services, job prospects, and educational opportunities have been coming home to roost in the cities where the majority of the white population lives since the National Party's abandonment of the pass laws in the mid-1980s. In 1986, the National Party's White Paper on Urbanization sketched out a new policy of what it called "orderly urbanization." Abandoning its earlier role as direct provider of housing for urban blacks, the state sought to reap the benefits of the accelerated urbanization of the period without absorbing any of the costs.<sup>28</sup> The outcome was the spread of squatter camps, accommodating an estimated seven million people or one quarter of the nation's black population shortly prior to the 1994 election. The rate of urbanization that helped to topple the apartheid regime shows no signs of slowing: in the new millennium, the nation's major urban conglomeration will be approaching the size of New York and São Paulo. This urban area will, moreover, display some of the world's starkest contrasts between rich and

poor. Under these conditions, urban crime may, as Hein Marais suggests, be a substitute for the civil war which South Africa's peaceful transition so famously averted.<sup>29</sup>

### Mobilizing National Subjects

In its second season, *Ordinary People* returned to the issue of land rights with an episode entitled "Land Affairs." This time, it took a less consensual approach than the one evident in "The Tooth of the Times." The producers decided to cover a land dispute taking place near the town of Weenan in northern Natal/KwaZulu province. The severe drought of the early 1990s that forced Eddie Jacobs into bankruptcy also led to a wave of evictions of farm labor families, creating a rural crisis that the ANC-led Government of National Unity attempted to address with the legislative innovations described above.<sup>30</sup> How successful, this episode of *Ordinary People* asks, are these reforms proving on the ground? To assess government policy, "Land Affairs" focuses on a potential land invasion by a group of labor tenants, who, the narrator explains, have been evicted from the white-owned farms where they have lived for generations. The three protagonists of the episode are Philip Buys, a white farmer whose property is likely to be seized by the "squatters," Mr. Mzalazi, a black labor tenant who was evicted from one of the farms now owned by Buys, and Derek Hanekom, the new ANC Minister of Land Affairs, who drives in specifically to act as a mediator between the aggrieved parties. The shift in tone and subject matter that characterizes this new episode of *Ordinary People* demonstrates the increasing tensions that threaten to rend the ANC's rhetoric of nation-building apart.

We are introduced first to the white farmer, Philip Buys. Although the narrator begins the episode by stating that Buys is a descendent of the voortrekkers who first colonized the area, Buys is quick to explain that he inherited none of the land he currently owns. According to Buys, he scraped together savings while working in a post office in order to buy some land. His success over the years has made him the owner of several large, industrially-farmed properties in the area. Buys's insistence on the hard work that has brought him to his current prosperous position is a significant move on his part. Faced with imminent land invasions, Buys sets



himself up as someone who has been given nothing for free. His hold on the land, Buys argues, has been earned, unlike that of the labor tenants whose infringement of property rights the government seems set to defend. Not much reading between the lines is necessary to understand that Buys is impugning the provisions for social justice embedded in government legislation such as the Land Reform Act.

Although Eddie Jacobs expresses subtle forms of racism in “The The Tooth of the Times”, speaking about servants who have been working for the family for years more as if they are household objects than sentient human beings, nonetheless at least there is some mutual recognition of shared suffering in the earlier episode. In “Land Affairs,” by contrast, the white farmer evinces a paternalism so thoroughgoing that it displaces all possibility of the recognition of black subjectivity. Buys argues that he provides his laborers with everything that they want. When asked whether he is like a father figure to the Africans who are piling into his truck for a day of work in the fields, Buys answers affirmatively with no trace of irony. He also offers a variety of pathologizing explanations for the current plight of former tenant laborers, saying that the protestors have been manipulated by outside agitators, that they’ve simply reproduced too much on their reservations and now want more land as a result, and that they lack the self-discipline necessary for the wage labor which replaced the tenure labor system after 1969. There is not one moment in this film when Buys recognizes the sufferings of displaced black farmers and the legitimacy of their claims to compensation. One of the final images we have of Philip Buys comes as he gives us a tour of the graveyard where his ancestors are buried. Quick at the outset of his narrative to disavow the idea that he inherited the land he now farms, Buys now stakes his claim for the antiquity of his relation to the land through this tour of the graveyard’s time-worn tombstones.

Interspersed throughout Buys’s narrative is the story of the displaced tenant laborer Mr. Mzalazi. Mzalazi lives in a “reserve,” an arid stretch of unfarmable land to which he was transported after his eviction from one of the farms Buys now owns. As he prepares for his trip to the meeting between fellow displaced farmers and the Minister of Land Affairs, Mzalazi

explains that he and his family were driven from the land where they and their ancestors had lived by the white 'baas' at gunpoint. Their possessions were flung to the wind. Mzalazi's narrative cuts across Buys's explanations of the motivations of land invaders. These portions of the episode thus provide a subaltern history that disrupts the pathologizing explanations offered by Buys for the plight of former tenant laborers. Walking around the area on Buys's farm where he once lived, Mzalazi extends his hand over the landscape, where not a trace of his people's presence remains. The juxtaposition of this scene with that of Buys's graveyard tour, which follows immediately afterwards, underlines the way in which power disparities write themselves into the landscape. Buys's heritage is visible in the enduring lineaments of tombstones, while Mzalazi's has been thoroughly erased, its history evident only in the cadences of his voice as he walks across the featureless land.

If "The Tooth of the Times" sought to articulate a new national subjectivity capable of identifying with and reconciling both extremes of South Africa's racialized class structure, "Land Affairs" relentlessly exposes the incommensurability of contemporary social identities in a manner that places national unity under question. These disparities are, of course, embedded in the long history of racial division in South Africa described in the previous section. Not only do the historical narratives of Mzalazi and Buys diverge totally, but the two never actually meet in the flesh. Instead, we witness their separate encounters with the ANC-led negotiation team that is attempting to adjudicate the white farmers' and black laborers' claims to land. In these sections of the episode, the rhetoric of reconciliation and nation-building that animates the ANC on a national level rings hollow. Derek Hanekom, the Minister of Land Affairs, is powerless to do more than simply patch over the rancorous animosities and inequalities that manifest themselves at a local level. This episode consequently reveals the increasing differences between the ANC's role as leader of a historic class compromise and its position as leader of extra-parliamentary, civil social protest - a dual role that the organization pledged to retain during a congress in the mid-1990s. "Land Affairs" pushes the ANC to recognize the demands of its popular base, if not, ultimately, to live up to those demands.

The chief actor in these segments of the episode is Derek Hanekom. Hanekom shows great sympathy for Mzalazi and his friends. Indeed, we first encounter him dressing nervously for his meeting with the laborers' organization, worrying amiably about which tie would be most suitable for a rural constituency. Perhaps too much should not be made of this relatively human moment. Yet by emphasizing Hanekom's concern with self-presentation, these portions of the film dramatize the significance of the ANC's rhetorical commitment to rural affairs. It is unlikely that the color of Hanekom's tie will make much difference to the dispossessed farmers he is going to meet. But his concern with such issues underlines the gulf that separates him from his constituency. Hanekom extends this sense of a gulf when he talks about the need for a person in his position not just to have a thorough knowledge of farming, but also to have empathy with those who have lost their land. While this perspective certainly contrasts favorably with Buys's paternalism, it does not suggest a very pragmatic commitment to concrete forms of redistribution.

Instead of offering specific forms of redress, Hanekom offers the laborers sympathetic sentiments that veil his role as an ANC spokesman engaged in coopting forms of militant local organization. During his meeting with the evicted, Hanekom again talks about his empathy, describing the years he spent in prison as a result of his opposition to apartheid. Despite such sentiments, however, it becomes clear in the course of the meeting that Hanekom has not come to offer the dispossessed what they want: a firm date for their return to the farmland from which they have been evicted. Indeed, Hanekom offers precious little at the meeting other than a recommendation that the group think through a series of specific measures rather than attempting to reoccupy lands in a piecemeal and individualized basis. The producers cut backwards and forwards between this meeting and some of Buys's most unsympathetic comments, suggesting that the government policy of market-led redistribution of land based on a philosophy of "willing buyer, willing seller" is unlikely to return the evicted black farmers to their homes. Indeed, during the meeting with white farmers that comes at the end of "Land Affairs," Hanekom's most challenging proposal is simply that no further evictions should be engaged in, since these steps

are fanning the discontent of the already evicted. The optimistic statement with which Hanekom closes the episode, suggesting that a community has at least been constituted through these two meetings to address the difficult issue of eviction, is undercut by Buys's final words. In a menacing undertone, Buys says that the white farmers of the area have been doing their best to fit in with the changes that have followed apartheid's collapse, but that their nerves have grown frayed and are likely to break at any moment.

Buys's belligerent comment constitutes a challenge to the ANC's language of nation-building, just as does the struggle for social justice engaged in by Mzalazi. "Land Affairs" allows us to witness the unfolding conflict between South Africa's historically dispossessed and those who have benefitted from this dispossession and who continue to own the means of production after the demise of apartheid. As Hein Marais has argued, the language of African nationalism that is embedded within the ANC allowed a miraculously bloodless transition. It has, however, proven an inadequate vehicle to articulate and resolve the racialized class contradictions in contemporary South Africa. Hanekom's empathetic language in "Land Affairs" suggests that the ANC continues to recognize the claims of its dispossessed constituency, but has been unable to generate meaningful forms of entitlement for much of this constituency as a result of the limitations imposed by the negotiated character of the transition. Although the peaceful end of apartheid and the scrapping of its heinous legal infrastructure remain inspiring milestones, the transition prolongs rather than resolves the central contradictions of South African society. Mzalazi's wish for peace and justice at the conclusion of "Land Affairs" is likely to grow more rather than less fragile under such circumstances.

### Conclusion: Television as the Angel of History

*Ordinary People* provides dramatic evidence of the possibilities opened by the SABC's transformation during the years since 1990. The series offers a bold corrective to apartheid-era depictions of South African society. More broadly, the series demonstrates that although South African social movements are confronting a difficult struggle to create meaningful forms of

community in the face of enduring inequalities, the recent history of resistance against apartheid has introduced notions of popular power and equality of access into public discourse with an unmatched force. These possibilities will only be realized, however, through continuing initiatives to open the new global conduits of media production and distribution to democratic forces.

While demonstrating the impact of popular struggles for democratic access to the popular media, *Ordinary People* broaches the question of property rights and of racial ideology without attempting to offer any solutions to these increasingly significant issues. The series thereby demonstrates the ever-increasing strains on the cultures of collectivity developed during the struggle for majority rule. To what extent will increasing forms of mass mobilization in the countryside be seen as a threat to the ANC's politics of reconciliation, to capitalist confidence, and to the government's pledge to deliver order and stability? How will the discourse of nation-building shift under the strains produced by the historical class compromise forged by the ANC? The ANC's quick retreat from a policy of growth through redistribution to an orthodox neo-liberal strategy of fiscal discipline has raised issues of cardinal significance for the future of the nation. Such policies ramify not simply in the tripartite alliance, with the SACP and COSATU struggling to define a viable oppositional stance to the ANC, but also in the lives of ordinary South Africans. The radical social movements that generated *Ordinary People's* focus on popular history have long contested state power. The success of such movements in democratizing the media during the transition suggests that popular movements retain a decisive role in rearticulating South Africa's economic and political forces along more egalitarian lines.



Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Chris McGreal, "South African Media Accused of Racism," Daily Mail and Guardian. 23 November 1999 <[http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/99nov2/23nov-media\\_racism.html](http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/99nov2/23nov-media_racism.html)>.

<sup>2</sup>Rachel Swarns, "A Battle in South Africa Over Racism and Press Freedom," New York Times 8 Mar. 2000: A3+.

<sup>3</sup>Lazarus, "Charting Globalization," Race and Class 40, 2/3 (1998/99): 92.

<sup>4</sup>This point has been clearly recognized by South African scholars involved in media theory and policy formulation from the outset. For representative early responses to the dilemmas raised in this context, see R.E. Tomaselli, "Public Service Broadcasting in the Age of Information Capitalism," Communicare v.8, n.2 (1989), pp. 27-37 and P.E. Louw, "Media, Media Education and the Development of South Africa," Screen v.32, n.4 (1991), pp. 32-42.

<sup>5</sup>Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1991), 44.

<sup>6</sup>The centrality of this question within contemporary South Africa is underlined within a recent volume of the nation's principal journal of cultural studies that is devoted to the subject. See Critical Arts v.11, n.1-2 (1997).

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the National Party's quite remarkable resistance to the introduction of television, see Rob Nixon, Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 43-76.

<sup>8</sup>Nixon, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of some of the early programming produced by such collectives, see Jacqueline Maingard, "Television Broadcasting in a Democratic South Africa," Screen 38,3 (1997).

<sup>10</sup>Maingard, p. 262.

<sup>11</sup>As Barry Dornfeld has recently argued, "producers projections about their audiences greatly affect the selection, encoding, and structuring of the media forms these institutions distribute. The multiplicity of audiences' interpretive positions, the various things people do in consuming these texts through dominant, contested, or oppositional readings and the various imagined identities that grow out of these acts are constrained from the start by the way producers prefigure those acts of consumption." See Barry Dornfeld, Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), pp. 13-14.

<sup>12</sup>Henry Bernstein, "South Africa's Agrarian Question: Extreme or Exceptional?," The Agrarian Question in South Africa, ed. Henry Bernstein (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 5.

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<sup>13</sup>Hein Marais, South Africa, Limits to Change: The Political Econ of Transition (New York: Zed Books, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>Marais, 21.

<sup>15</sup>Marais, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup>Richard Levin and Daniel Weiner, "The Politics of Land Reform in South Africa After Apartheid: Perspectives, Problems, Prospects," Bernstein, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup>Bernstein, 12.

<sup>18</sup>Levin and Weiner, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup>Levin and Weiner, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup>Levin and Weiner, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup>Ann Eveleth, "Land Reform Targets Are Far, Far Away," Daily Mail and Guardian 05 June 1998 <<http://www.sn.apc.org/wmail/issues/980605/NEWS41.html>>.

<sup>22</sup>p. 108.

<sup>23</sup>Teresa Marcus, Kathy Eales, and Adele Wildschut, Land Demand in the New South Africa (Land and Agriculture Policy Centre, University of Natal: Indicator Press, 1996), p. 190.

<sup>24</sup>Marais, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup>Marais, p. 245.

<sup>26</sup>Marais, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup>Levin and Weiner, 116.

<sup>28</sup>David Smith, ed. The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup>p. 110.

<sup>30</sup>Bernstein, p. 17.