

PRESERVING MEMORY:

The Past As A Means Of Understanding The Present

A fundamental objective of a site of memory is to preserve the past – its events, meanings and importance – in order for people to better understand and comprehend the present.

By Nicholas Wolpe



The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history [...] Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was

– Milan Kundera

There is one certainty in life: we will repeat the past. This has become apparent in South Africa today as we have fallen victim to the idea that our past, our history, bears no relationship to our understanding and comprehension of the present. Yet, as George Santayana said, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. This quote refers to the language of 'not knowing' and 'not remembering.' The underlying contention is that the past provides a framework upon which we structure and fashion solutions to address the challenges of our prevailing conditions and circumstances. In particular, sites of memory have a significant and meaningful role to play. A fundamental objective of a site of memory is to preserve the past – its events, meanings and importance – in order for people to better understand and comprehend the present.

Yet, if the past shapes our present and provides the basis for our comprehension and understanding of it, then what are the implications and consequences if there is a break in this dialectical linkage, in the historical dialectic, narrative and chain? As Karl Marx argued in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (2005 [1852]),

[M]en (sic) make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

South Africa today is experiencing the consequences of such a breakage in the historical dialectic. Though our social conditions are a consequence of our past, the past in many instances has been relegated to the periphery and, as such, we find ourselves in a state of flux and contestation between prevailing ideologies, values and aspirations, which in many instances are at odds with the values, aspirations, goals, meaning, spirit and aims of our liberation struggle. Moses Kotane, a stalwart of the liberation struggle, remarked that,

we must learn history to know and understand the story of man's (sic) development through the ages – the various forms of social

organisation and the causes of the rise and fall of those forms of human relationships. (in Motlanthe, 2014)

Yet the current social discourse has underscored South Africa's deviation from the aspirations, intent and goals of our liberation struggle objectives, as defined by our Freedom Charter. As such, we need to reflect on and remember the significant and seminal historical events that help explain where we as a country have come from and where would like to head.

Currently, the growing traction in the line of thought and thinking that the past no longer matters to our understanding and comprehension of the present is alarming and has, in the process, allowed a revisionist argument to seep into our discourse. Such an argument has been crafted in a vacuum with little or no appreciation or understanding of our past. We have witnessed an alarming trend in our political discourse that the inclusive political negotiations at CODESA and Mandela were a sellout to 'white monopoly capital'. The narrative here is that the ANC accepted a settlement that enabled the white minority to maintain and perpetuate white minority control and rule in some form. For instance, in a paper titled 'The Freedom Charter: the contested South African land issue', Mazibuko argues that rather than promoting and enshrining majority rights and claims, the Freedom Charter reduced them to the periphery while cementing white control. He argues that the drafting of the Freedom Charter was a master stroke by white intellectuals to subjugate the wishes and desires of the black majority.

As our link to the past grows ever more tenuous,

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we are faced with the prospect and reality that the events of the past will start to hold less meaning, to the point where the past will fail to resonate with future generations. We run the risk of future generations being shaped within a historical vacuum, as is currently happening. Indeed, today we are facing the stark reality that our youth and the twenty-to-thirty-somethings – the born frees – have a very limited or no personal recollection of, or limited memory of and little emotional attachment to, the struggle. Their outlook, focus and narrative has and is being forged and shaped by a new set of material conditions, desires and expectations, which in most cases have little or no connection to the past.

The passage of time can blur and distort our recollection of the past, of places, events and names. It is easy to forget where we have come from and what we as a people have been through. With each generation, the gap gets wider and the importance of our past has the potential to fade further from our historical, consciousness landscape and narrative. That is why testimonies, sites of memory, museums and other places that aim to convey, preserve and protect the past are essential to the address the challenges we face today. Sites of memory – historical sites – stand as testimonies to and reminders of the passage of time. They ensure that events and actions that shaped our world today are not forgotten. They are our tie to the past, our connection to the present and our bridge to the future. A site of memory can thus be used to re-inculcate the very essence of collective memory, as it articulates both individual and collective historical memory. It provides a platform for open expression of the events, activities and purposes of the past.

Once such site of memory is Liliesleaf, which has become a focal point and articulation of the ideals, principles and values that defined our struggle.

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It is associated with a series of events that had significant historical consequences. Yet, while for a long time the name Rivonia was associated with those events, today, Rivonia is not longer associated with Liliesleaf, the raid on Liliesleaf and the Rivonia Trial. Today, amongst born frees and other segments of the population, it merely is associated with Rivonia Road and no longer forms part of a defining moment in our historical narrative. Once these associations, links and connections are broken, the historical meaning surrounding places, events and names will eventually be forgotten.

Indeed, it is not only places but also names of places that have fallen victim to this loss of historical, identity meaning and translation. It is evident we believe that by simply naming buildings, places and streets after stalwarts of our liberation struggle, we are somehow perpetuating their memory and what their memory represents. An example is OR Tambo airport, named after one of the greatest leaders of the liberation movement. However, when a group of aspiring student journalists were asked ‘who was OR Tambo?’ the response was ‘the airport’. This demonstrates the extent to which a gulf has emerged between our past and present, due to the break in the historical dialectic.

The notion of the past speaking to and defining the present links to one of the most popular models of memory, which sees memory as a present act of consciousness that is reconstructive of the past. Unfortunately, today memory is treated as peripheral to our understanding of prevailing conditions, circumstances, events and actions. This stands in stark contrast to the writings of some of the great social thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries, like Georg Hegel, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, who argued that the notion of self-consciousness was defined and constructed by the historical framework that defined the conditions in which the actors found themselves. In particular, at the core of Hegel's social and political thought were the concepts of freedom, reason, self-consciousness and recognition, which, according to him, had their root understanding and comprehension in their social and historical embodiment.

Given the current discourse on memory and the role memory plays, there is a need to define and articulate how we can address this apparent dialectical discord. How do we inculcate and instill

the importance of memory and ultimately history into the DNA of our social fabric? The importance of doing so has been recognised by former Minister of Arts and Culture, Shipokosa Mashatile, who asserted,

at all times we must reaffirm our liberation heritage as an integral part of our country's collective memory and cultural history. Equally it is important that we continue to celebrate and draw lessons from the lives of those who shaped our country's history and contributed to the freedom and democracy that we enjoy today.

A platform of historical inclusivity, understanding and appreciation therefore needs to be harnessed and fostered, particularly for a nation like South Africa, with its history of strife, contestation and deep divisions. For South Africa to forge ahead, to progress, it is essential that we rebuild and reestablish unity, cohesion and togetherness. Unfortunately, we are struggling to define ourselves, to shape and establish a sense of identity, purpose and direction. We are a country without focus and direction, for we have allowed our past to be pushed to the periphery.

As David Crabtree (1993) remarks, 'our ignorance of the past is not the result of a lack of information, but of indifference. We do not believe that history matters'. He goes on to suggest that 'modern society...has turned its back on the past. We live in a time of rapid change...we prefer to define ourselves in terms of where we are going' and not where we have come from.

Pierre Nora, who has written extensively on the notion of memorialisation, states that, 'over the last quarter of century, every country, social, ethnic or family group, has undergone a profound change in the relationship it traditionally enjoyed with the past' (1989) and it is for these reasons that there has been an:

upsurge in Memory, demands for signs of a past that had been confiscated or suppressed; growing interest in 'roots' and genealogical research; all kinds of commemorative events and new museums; renewed sensitivity to the holding and opening of archives for public consultation; and growing attachment to what...is called heritage.

Thus, according to him, our concern should be with trying to regain an understanding and sense

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of who we are and what binds us together as a nation. Memorialisation represents a cognitive understanding of how the past shapes, binds and ultimately informs the present. It is this that defines our collective shared experiences, which in turn forms the foundation for defining our collective consciousness and sense of unity.

Thus the importance of sites of memory like Liliesleaf is that they 'allow history a kind of reawakening. These sites bring history to life' (Nora, 1989). Liliesleaf preserves the memories of our past and, in so doing, preserves these memories in the minds and consciousness of all. Such historical sites have a role and responsibility to keep the meaning of the struggle alive, to ensure that society appreciates, understands and applauds the sacrifices made to bring about the new dawn.

In other words, it is essential to know to whom and to what we owe our present. It is for this very reason that historical sites like Liliesleaf are essential. *A key feature of a site of memory is to ensure that the events and acts undertaken are not lost but are used as a frame of reference, a foundation upon which to ensure the achievement of the historical mission of building a unified, cohesive society, bound together by a common objective and mission.* ■

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