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ETHICAL LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA: THE LEGACY OF THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE SPEECHES

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The Nobel Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the world, has been consolidating its credibility for over a hundred years, since the first Nobel awards were given in 1901. From the very beginning, The Nobel Prize was conceived as an international award to pay tribute to outstanding achievement, anywhere in the world. The solid selection of worthy laureates and the sheer standard of excellence among the awarded people or organizations is another element that established the credibility and high respect commanded by such a Prize. Among the categories mentioned in Alfred Nobel's will, namely Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature and Peace, it is the last category that concerns my present contribution^[1]. The Nobel Peace Prize is to be awarded to "the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses"^[2]. While all the other Nobel categories are awarded by Swedish institutions, The Nobel Peace Prize is the only one to be awarded by a committee of five people chosen by the Norwegian Parliament. The motives for

1 In 1968, Sveriges Riksbank (Sweden's central bank) established the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, founder of the Nobel Prize.

2 Excerpt from the will of Alfred Nobel "The Nobel Peace Prize". Nobelprize.org. 31 Oct 2010 http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/

delegating the decision concerning the Nobel Peace Prize to Norway are not explained by Alfred Nobel, but it is interesting to note that contrary to all the other prizes that are more clearly associated to particular scientific or scholarly institutions, the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize is, indirectly, in the hands of a political institution, a fact that makes sense, since the balance that may allow for the desired “fraternity between nations” is, frequently, a political matter. To a certain extent, there may be a political factor in all the choices for the categories contemplated by the Nobel Foundation, not least the Nobel Prize for Literature as ideology and ethics are core elements for the creation of written art. Nevertheless, no other prize is so clearly intended to interfere in world politics as the Nobel Peace Prize. Just by becoming a Nobel Laureate, a person or organization working in a particular country will be noticed worldwide, which means visibility for that particular cause, and not the least, a visibility accompanied by a public declaration of international approval and support, as it is implied in being chosen to receive such a prestigious award.

Nobel Peace Prizes have rewarded work for peace among nations as well as work to settle peacefully intra-national problems. In this particular study, I will focus on the four South African Nobel Peace Prizes, because I think, there is an exemplary dimension to the racial struggle within South Africa as the epitome of a continental struggle for decolonization and internal adjustment. And if South Africa’s struggle against racism stands as an example to the whole of the African continent, its ethical lessons are equally relevant for current European politics, increasingly involved with immigration issues and racist feelings, as one can conclude from the surprising popularity attained by such characters as Jorg Haider (who won Austrian Parliamentary Elections in 2008, dying shortly after in a car crash), or Jean Marie Le Pen, head of a nationalist, xenophobic party, the National Front, five times candidate to the French presidential elections (conquering a significant number of votes in 2002) and the recent polemic in the European parliament concerning President Sarkozy’s plan to deport the Roma people. Thus, it is timely and relevant to recall South Africa’s internal struggle against apartheid and learn from its ethical legacy.

The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to South African Albert Luthuli in 1960, to Bishop Desmond Tutu in 1984, and to FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in 1993. I will discuss the four presentation speeches, by the Nobel Committee, where the reasons for giving the prize to such personalities are put

forward, and then I will go through the four Nobel Lectures reflecting on the message by each of the Laureates. I will follow a chronological order because these awards have to be contextualized with an eye on South African history and the evolving regional context.

Albert Lothuli – Nobel Peace Prize, 1960

In his Presentation Speech, Gunnar Jahn, Chair of the Nobel Committee, declared that Albert Lothuli was given the Nobel Peace Prize because he had always defended a peaceful solution for South Africa's internal problems^[3]. The whole speech is very much focused on the presentation of South Africa's struggle against racism as a specific national issue, and that view surprised me. In this same year, 1960, a significant number of African countries had just become independent^[4], and the choice for a peaceful solution to settle internal conflict in South Africa was particularly important for the whole of the African continent, setting the example for the outcome of a decolonization wave. Considering that independence had often been followed by civil war or by internal tension between different races or ethnic groups, the fact that opposition in South Africa, that is to say, the ANC – the African National Congress – was choosing the road of peaceful demonstrations in the struggle for freedom (just as Gandhi had done in South Africa at the turn of the century^[5] and later, in India, in the 1940s) was all the more inspiring and commendable. On the other hand, the similitude between Gandhi and Lothuli in terms of convictions and leadership must have been quite scaring for white South Africans eager to defend the hold of their community to national power. An opponent with a high moral profile and an international reputa-

3 “If the nonwhite people of South Africa ever lift themselves from their humiliation without resorting to violence and terror, then it will be above all because of the work of Luthuli (1961: 22, 23) in “Presentation Speech by Gunnar Jahn”, *Strenghts & Convictions, the Life and Times of the South African Nobel Peace Prize Laureates*, (ed.) Gavin Jantjes, Nobel Peace Center and Iziko Museum of Cape Town, Catalogue to the Exhibition “Strenghts & Convictions”, 2009, p:16-23.

4 In the year 1960 the following African countries became independent: Camaroons, Togo, Senegal, Madagascar, Somália, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory coast, Chad, Congo, Gabon, Mali, Nigeria and Mauritania.

5 Ghandi was in India from 1893-1914 – political activity to defend the rights of the Indian community. Founded the Natal Indian Congress (May, 1894), and launched the first peaceful resistance campaigns.

tion must have been that last thing they wished for. And how did Luthuli gain such a high profile?

Albert Lothuli was a teacher for seventeen years, as faculty member of Adams College, in Natal⁶. He was a Christian, and Christianity had deeply influenced his worldview. He also came from a lineage of Zulu chiefs. This combination of circumstances means Lothuli gained visibility and respect in his community through three dimensions of social intervention: as a highly regarded teacher, as local chief (since 1953) and as an active member of the local church. In the Nobel Presentation Speech, Gunnar Jahn said Lothuli worked all his life to promote justice “in the individual, in the nation and among the nations” (2009: 16, Nobel Presentation Speech, 1961). These words are important because the line of argument defended by Lothuli, and in fact by all the Nobel Laureates to be addressed in this essay, is that no political regime can afford to sacrifice the dignity of the people under its responsibility, in order to perpetuate itself. And it was by calling on individuals to feel entitled to dignity and self-respect that Albert Lothuli captivated people into political commitment.

Lothuli emerged as a political leader in the post-war years, when he became a member of the African National Congress (founded since 1912) in 1944. At this particular moment in time, World War II had weakened most European regimes and the Soviet Union was quick to see the opportunity to expand communism worldwide through the support of independence struggles. In South Africa, during the 1940s, white pressure increased as the white community was aware of the changing international climate due to the rise of independent African nations. Yet again, white South Africans saw themselves entitled to a different, legitimate claim, since they were a centuries old white community, saw themselves as Africans, and did not see their regime as “colonial”, in the sense of foreign, metropolitan occupation. However, even if white South Africans were indeed Africans, that identity did not justify a racist, *apartheid* regime. In his presentation speech, Gunnar Jahn provided some numbers for 1960:

“The present-day population of South Africa is some 14,7 million, of whom only some 3.3 million are white. Of the remainder, 9,6 million are Africans, some 0,4 million Asian (mainly Indians) and 1.4 million of mixed race.

6 Again, it was in Natal that Gandhi organized the Natal Indian Congress, in 1894, the very same region where Lothuli studied and worked. I believe, Gandhi must have been an inspiration for Lothuli.

(...) The figures testify to the fact that people of all races have helped to build this community. The whites could never have done it alone. (...) But what is the position of the nonwhite population? In this community, non-whites are denied all right to participate in the government of the state. They are discriminated against legally, economically and socially.”

(Gunnar Jahn, Presentation Speech for Nobel Peace Prize 1961, 2009: 17)

The year Luthuli became the President of the African National Congress, 1960, the Congress was banned in South Africa and went underground. In that same year, Luthuli was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, a real embarrassment for the oppressive white community.

In Luthuli's own words, the Peace Prize he received had a “threefold significance” (2009: 24, Albert Luthuli Nobel Lecture, 1961):

“(...) It is a tribute to my humble contribution to efforts by democrats on both sides of the color line to find a peaceful solution to the race problem. This contribution is not in any way unique. I did not initiate the struggle to extend the area of human freedom in South Africa; other African patriots – devoted men – did so before me.”

(...)

“On the other hand, the award is a democratic declaration of solidarity with those who fight to widen the area of liberty in my part of the world. As such, it is the sort of gesture which gives me and millions who think as I do, tremendous encouragement.

(...)

From yet another angle, it is welcome recognition of the role played by the African people during the last fifty years to establish, peacefully, a society in which merit and not race would fix the position of the individual in the life of the nation.

(...)

This award could not be for me alone, nor just South Africa, but for Africa as a whole.”

(2009: 24, Albert Luthuli Nobel Lecture, 1961)

As you can read in the quotes above, the connection between the internal struggle against racism in South Africa and the decolonization process in the rest of the continent is quite clear in Albert Luthuli's lecture. If these struggles across the African continent are connected, the Nordic declaration of solidarity towards South African's internal struggle against apartheid can

be extended to moral support in the fight against racism and colonialism throughout the African continent.

In total contrast with the repressive attitude of the white community, Luthuli always spoke of sharing power, of enlarging access to citizenship, and never of revenge, or of measures against the white community. Luthuli's political vision is collected in his book *Let my People Go* (1962), a set of lectures and writings that certainly had an impact in the political formation of other African activists.

During his Nobel lecture, Luthuli's appealed for further support from the Christian church, "to help the struggle to end racism in South Africa" (2009: 30 Nobel Lecture 1961), and in fact, it would be by a man of the church that would follow on Luthuli's footsteps as another charismatic South African leader and Nobel Peace Laureate.

Desmond Tutu – Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984

The first noticeable difference between the Nobel Peace Ceremony of 1961 and the 1984 one is that both the Presentation Speech and the 1984 Nobel Lecture (by Desmond Tutu) reveal a very different attitude. Twenty-three years later, the world was more aware of and more horrified at the shocking repressive measures enforced in South Africa, and you can feel a certain international consensus in the expression of rage against the white community. That is why the 1983 Nobel Peace Ceremony is more focused on internal events in South Africa and the tone is quite different from the more contained, utopian and reformist appeal of the 1960s. In his presentation speech, Egil Aarvik said:

"It is the Committee's wish that this year's award should be seen as a renewed recognition of the courage and heroic patience shown by black South Africans in their use of peaceful means to oppose the apartheid system.

(...) Sometime ago television enabled us to see this year's laureate in a suburb of Johannesburg. A massacre of the black population had just taken place – the camera showed ruined houses, mutilated human beings and crushed toys. Innocent people had been murdered. Women and children mortally wounded. But, after the police vehicles had driven away their prisoners, Desmond Tutu stood and spoke to a frightened and bitter congregation: 'Do not hate', he said, 'let us choose the peaceful way to freedom.

It is with admiration and humility we today present the Nobel Peace Prize to this man.”

(2009: 43-44, Presentation Speech by Egil Aarvik)

As if to complement the denunciation tone we can read in the above Presentation Speech, Desmond Tutu did not refrain from presenting a horrifying account of life under apartheid:

“One day the police chased some pupils who had been boycotting classes, but they disappeared between the township houses. The police drove down the old lady’s street. She was sitting at the back of the house in her kitchen, whilst her charges were playing in front of the house in the yard. Her daughter rushed into the house, calling out to her to come quickly. The old lady dashed out of the kitchen into the living room. Her grandson had fallen just outside the door, dead. He had been shot in the back by the police. He was 6 years old.”

(2009: 48, Desmond Tutu Nobel Lecture, 1984)

(...)

“In pursuance of apartheid’s ideological racist dream, over 3.000.000 of God’s children have been uprooted from their homes, which have been demolished, whilst they have then been dumped in the Batustan homeland resettlement camps. I say dumped advisedly: only things or rubbish is dumped, not human beings. Apartheid has, however, ensured that God’s children, just because they are black, should be treated as if they were things, and not as of infinite value as being created in the image of God. These dumping grounds are far from where work and food can be procured easily. Children starve, suffer from the often irreversible consequences of malnutrition – this happens to them not accidentally, but by deliberate government policy.”

(2009: 50 Desmond Tutu Nobel Lecture, 1984)

With these words, Desmond Tutu brings the world both the random killing of innocent people and the organized genocide, balancing the intimate and the national dimension of horror in his exhaustive, diversified and eloquent denunciation of the South African apartheid regime. There is a tremendous dimension of courage in doing this, for someone who is not a refugee, and who would return to South Africa in a few days. Maybe it is worth to point out that Albert Luthuli, the previous Nobel Peace laureate, died near his hometown under mysterious circumstances hit by train. How mysterious these circumstances are, I leave you to wonder.

From Luthuli you learned restrain, high ethical standards, and the choice for peaceful resistance. With Tutu, the courage of open denunciation, and with both, the refusal to be indifferent. But a time would have to come when resistance is replaced by concrete political decisions. The next two Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to South Africans were given to a black man and a white man, who decided to sit down, talk about their differences, and end apartheid together.

Frederik Willem de Klerk and Nelson Mandela – awarded The Nobel Peace Prize in 1993

The presentation Speech by Francis Sejersted reinforced the commitment of the Nobel Foundation to support the fight for human rights, recognizing the value of a selection criterion that is slightly different from the more militaristic formulation in Alfred Nobel's will. In the 20th century, it is commonly acknowledged that the construction of long lasting peace takes more than reducing armies and promoting peace among nations. As Francis Sejersted says "If anything close to a stable peace is to be achieved, respect for each other's character, integrity and dignity is an absolute requirement (2009: 62, Presentation Speech by Francis Sejersted, 1993). In his presentation speech he also recalled the two previous Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to South African activists Albert Luthuli and Desmond Tutu, linking the Nobel Committee's long and repeated support for the struggle against Apartheid to the happy outcome celebrated by these last two prizes.

On receiving this award, Frederik Willem de Klerk asked if the procession of Nobel Peace Laureates since 1901 reflected a general movement by mankind toward peace. A pertinent question if one wants to judge the effective ethical intervention that moved Alfred Nobel to promote such a prize. I would answer with the value of role models such as the ones revisited in this essay. They certainly made a difference to make the world a better place. And how would these outstanding characters define peace in their own words?

According to Frederik Willem de Klerk:

“There can thus be no real peace without constant effort, planning and hard work.

Peace, therefore, is not an absence of conflict or a condition of stagnation.

Peace is a frame of mind.

It is a frame of mind in which countries, communities, parties and individuals seek to resolve their differences through agreements, through negotiation and compromise, instead of threats, compulsion and violence.”

(2009: 68 – 71, FW de Klerk Nobel Lecture)

On his turn, Nelson Mandela phrased with amazing clarity what is at stake in the choice for peace:

“We speak here of the challenge of the dichotomies of war and peace, violence and non-violence, racism and human dignity, oppression and repression and liberty and human rights, poverty and freedom from want.”

(2009: 77, Nelson Mandela Nobel Lecture)

“This must be a world of democracy and respect for human rights, a world freed from poverty, hunger, deprivation and ignorance (...)”

(2009: 79, Nelson Mandela Nobel Lecture)

Indeed, the choices and the task before us are simultaneously this simple and immense. And urgent. To take heart, I would like to recall the exhibition that motivated the above reflections on the South African Nobel Laureates. It took place in 2009, at Iziko South African National Gallery, in Cape Town, South Africa, under the title “Strenghts & Convictions”. The value of exhibitions such as this one has got multiple dimensions and plenty of positive outcomes. Among these I would first underline the dignified ability of such an exhibition to put out the word about what happened, how much it hurt, and how a few exceptional people were able to make a difference. Secondly, let us recognize the gift of art to bless a violent history with a positive, hopeful note. As example, I picked one of the pieces from the “Strenghts & Convictions” exhibition to show you. It is a series of photographs by George Hallet from the “Dance for All” project. “Hallet invited the young dancers to present themselves to the world in a single-shot portrait” (2009: 209). In this set of photographs, young dancers face the camera with attitude, blending refined elegance and self-confidence. Their sense of purpose and their pride encourage one to believe that this new generation, with access to opportunities, materializes, to some extent, the regeneration of South Africa’s wounds. Their country certainly has to live up to the quality of these youths... And a watchful world has to help in any way it can.

References

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