

# Article

## ‘I don’t know what I am’: the end of Afrikaner nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa

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### Abstract

Afrikaner nationalism achieved notoriety for its power and dominance of the political life of the South African state for much of the latter half of the 20th century. Nearly two decades on from the first democratic elections, in South Africa in 1994, Afrikaner nationalism is a spent force and the question is how to explain its decline. In this article it is argued that one has to look beyond historical and political accounts that focus on the structural factors that enable nationalism and ethnicity. In narratives of the self, young Afrikaners give insights into the formation of identities and modes of existence and lifestyles, or processes of subjectivisation, that indicate the cultural reasons for political actions. Increasing wealth in a growing consumer society has led to the formation of individual identities no longer contained within an ethno-nationalist framework. With the legacy of having contributed to, and benefited from apartheid, young Afrikaners are seeing the possibilities that come with a new, emerging South African nation but also face the challenge of coming to terms with feelings of loss and exclusion. While the cracks of a racist enclosure are widening, the opening of the apartheid mind is still a work in progress.

### Introduction

For much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afrikaner nationalism was the driving force in South African politics. It held together the apartheid state. Nearly two decades since the advent of democracy, this once powerful ethnic nationalism is now a spent force, which raises the question as to how to explain its decline, if not outright disappearance (Grobelaar 1998, Schlemmer 1999, Sparks 2003, Du Toit 2008). Political, economic, and historical explanations of the end of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid focus on, inter alia, the social and economic unsustainability of apartheid racial separation, evolving power relations between the apartheid state and the

anti-apartheid movement, National Party (NP) political shifts, cold war politics, and the global boycott movement (Adam and Moodley 1993, O'Meara 1996, Welsh 2010). In this paper however, I analyse contributing factors to the de-mobilisation of the ethnic and nationalist movement of Afrikaner nationalism. This approach is based on the observation that the apartheid state was supported and carried by ethnically-mobilised Afrikaners.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, socio-economic advancement had undermined the Afrikaner ethnic class coalition that formed the bedrock of Afrikaner nationalism, so much so that by the late 1990s, the political representation of an Afrikaner ethno-nationalist movement had been reduced to a symbolic presence. Ethnic and nationalist identification among Afrikaners had diminished, and the crucial question is how to explain this decline.

In order to answer this question, I suggest that we need to analyse the *Zeitgeist* of late modernity<sup>2</sup> as it is reflected in narratives of the self, and how it shaped the formation of identities among Afrikaners. This paper then pays attention to the evolving social imaginary of society which is being shaped, on the one hand, by the processes of individualisation and de-traditionalisation within a neo-liberal, consumer society which emphasises making choices as individuals and, on the other hand, by the political and social project of Africanisation and transformation, driven by the governing African National Congress (ANC) and the African majority, to restore Africa and Africans to their rightful place within South Africa and redress the injustice and inequalities of the apartheid past.

### **After Afrikaner Nationalism**

My principal argument is that the emergence of values and practices associated with late modernity contributed significantly to the undoing of Afrikaner nationalism – this should not be understood as a claim that structural racism, racist violence, ethnic enclosure, which were based on the apartheid system and the ideology of white supremacy, had vanished with the decline of Afrikaner nationalism and the advent of a non-racial democracy. Rather, as I show below, the gradual attrition of the Afrikaner nationalist movement, its disappearance as an important political force is mirrored by the gradual undermining amongst Afrikaners of values and practices associated with ethnic nationalism and white supremacy. My analysis of narratives of the self of young Afrikaners indicates an important move away from an ethno-nationalist mind-set. However, reflecting on their lives in contemporary South Africa, young Afrikaners, in their own words, also

demonstrate that the past and the legacies of apartheid still loom large and are not easily discarded. From a macro-social perspective, it cannot be emphasised enough that the relatively quick and largely unanticipated decline of Afrikaner nationalist sentiment was a significant event in the history of the nation and nationalism.

With hindsight, André Du Toit observes that during the time of apartheid, many analysts, including himself, had overestimated the power of Afrikaner nationalism (Du Toit 2008:576). Nonetheless, in historical and political reflections on the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy, it is often neglected how the imagined threat and power of Afrikaner nationalism influenced the early 1990s negotiations and the political settlement that laid the foundations of a new political order. During the 20th century, perhaps only Québécois nationalism, the francophone separatist movement in Canada's second largest province, rose and fell with a similar trajectory and within an equally brief period of time (Down 1999).

During the heydays of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid, white Afrikaans speakers cohered around an ethno-nationalist identity. However, starting in the late 1970s, new identities surfaced among Afrikaners that were beyond the framework provided by nationalism and ethnicity. The unravelling of these identities was neither a linear nor straightforward process. Over time, however, Afrikaner identities developed that were no longer compatible with nationalist mobilisation. While making this argument, it is important to keep in mind that it should not be read as ignoring the importance of resistance and boycotts, power politics, or political, economic and social factors, but it should rather be understood as making the case for an unravelling from within, from the realm of ideas and sentiments, how people saw themselves within the world around them, and how this affected their thoughts, feelings, identifications, and actions. These new identities were in many ways, according to Hyslop (2000, 2005), a consequence of a capitalist, consumer society. The social transformation originating in an advanced industrial society went beyond the confines of an authoritarian state that was promoting traditional, conservative ethno-nationalist values and practices. Rather, the values and practices of a modern, globally-integrated consumer society of late modernity shaped or reshaped the formation of Afrikaner identities. In late modernity, a combination of structural changes and evolving sensitivities led to the break-up of identities and new identities emerged. Albert Grundlingh describes how middle-class status and a newlyfound wealth through the economic gains that became fully

apparent in the 1950s and 1960s, together with new consumer practices, began to change Afrikaner identities:

Consumer practices assumed a more prominent role in the formation of identity, while individualised materialism rendered group boundaries more brittle, placing greater emphasis on re-inventing the self in a new environment. (2008: 158)

While Grundlingh makes a meaningful argument by focusing on the effects of consumer culture on the formation of identities, he does not further explore how traditional ways of being ‘an Afrikaner’ were no longer maintained and began to change. However, I would like to suggest that in order to understand how Afrikaner identities had evolved and how Afrikaner nationalism had disappeared, we have to study how consumer culture and practices had altered how people saw themselves and the world around them. These changes, in turn, are analysed in narratives of the self of young Afrikaners.

The claim made here that Afrikaner ethno-nationalism had unravelled and that the ideology of the ethnic unity of a people and of white supremacy was undermined from within, is contested. Jonathan Jansen argues in his *Knowledge in the Blood* (2009) that the socialisation of young Afrikaners in our post-apartheid period is still taking place unaltered: through institutions such as the family, the church, school and university, young people are raised and socialised into an ethnic culture that transmits ‘bitter knowledge’ about the past which claims that apartheid separation and white superiority should continue (Jansen 2009:114). In his thorough and passionate description of how these institutions shape the mind and knowledge of young Afrikaners today, Jansen writes as if the ‘pseudo-traditional organisational complex’, constituted by educational and other institutions that accompany and individual’s life, and which was, according to Jon Hyslop (2000 and 2005), unravelling in the 1980s, was still intact.

While there exist today Afrikaner institutions, not unlike many other South African institutions no matter their racial and ethnic affiliation, that are still influenced by a legacy of apartheid thinking and practice, I suggest, based on my research presented here, that Jansen is mistaken in claiming that young people’s minds are primarily shaped by a traditional discourse that is without ambiguities (Jansen 2009:171). Rather, I argue that there is a multiplicity of discourses, often ambiguous, that are shaping young people’s lifeworlds and their views about themselves, the post-colonial present they live in, the apartheid past, and the racial other. It seems to me that we have

to move away from an analysis that fails to take into account ambiguity and contradiction; there is no single narrative and not one dominant story that can be taken as the 'right' one in describing what shapes Afrikaner identities – diversity, among Afrikaners, is rather the rule than the exception. While Jansen states that there is diversity among Afrikaners and that processes of change are complex and contradictory (Jansen 2009:250), an observation whose consequences he does not give sufficient attention to in his book, my analysis of the narratives of young Afrikaners reveals a multiplicity of discourses, often contradictory, at times even encountered within one individual. For a complete analysis then, it is necessary to include both: instances of the continuation of the exclusionary, racist thinking, as well as practices and efforts, striving to do away with apartheid thinking and practice. Jansen's thinking in contemporary South Africa is important and his role as a public intellectual deserves much praise, but we should allow for social science research that tries to incorporate contradictions and ambiguities in the lives and situations we encounter.

### **Evolving Afrikaner identities**

According to Aletta Norval (1996:4), apartheid discourse 'institutionalised a certain vision of the world, of social and political reality'. The urbanisation and industrialisation of the turn of the 20th century among Afrikaners led to the emergence of the new hegemonic discourse of apartheid. This hegemonic discourse was articulated through administrative and clerical Afrikaner elites that had to overcome differences and divisions. It offered the best explanation for the dislocations of this vast social transformation and made the formation of a new, nationalist identity possible. This identity rested on the social imaginary of apartheid that was widely accepted by white Afrikaans speakers. It created 'novel images for identification through which new subject positions were constructed' (Norval 1996:7). A crucial aspect of the success of a hegemonic discourse was the creation of outsiders, the Other, within the framework of new, political frontiers. However, under the impact of the reforms of the 1980s, apartheid discourse entered into an organic crisis and apartheid discourse could no longer explain social divisions in a way that made sense (Norval 1996:10).

Afrikaners had developed subjectivities that were no longer centred on a modernist state-building project, but were more individualist and consumerist. Afrikaner nationalism became the victim of its own success: having acceded to economic well-being, the class alliance split and ethnic

identity became less relevant as new identities emerged. In his 1971 study, *Modernizing Racial Domination*, Heribert Adam explains the political, societal and socio-economic changes that eventually led to the emergence of new Afrikaner subjectivities. Adam argues that a majority of Afrikaners – those who had achieved middle-class comfort – turned into a pragmatic race oligarchy. White South Africans were no longer ardent believers in racial superiority. In the late 1960s, racial domination became a rational feature. Rather than based on an irrational ideology, racial discrimination was a crucial aspect of the system that resulted in a ‘tolerable domination over cheap labor and political dependents’ (Adam 1971:53). The defining feature of the system was coercion and it was to ensure the survival of the Afrikaner ethnic group and white civilisation. Adam argues that despite exhortations to live up to the ideal of separation by editors in Afrikaans newspapers, people insisted on having their servants close to them, living in white cities and not in distant homelands. These white cities developed into the living ground of black people, a consequence of the fact that consumer interest began to override ideological concerns for racial separation (Adam 1971:84-85). As race relations were de-ideologised and streamlined (Adam 1971:159), there was no longer a unifying emotional bond among Afrikaners, but rather a diluted ethnocentrism and nationalism (Adam 1971:178).

Likewise, the unity of the Afrikaner volk began to crumble. Politically, Afrikaner dominance had arrived at a dead end. Under the premiership of PW Botha (1978-1989) the NP tried different strategies to save a declining regime (O’Meara 1996: 251-78). Stepped-up repression alternated with reforms. But the political, social and economic crisis did not go away. Militarily, the liberation movements, led by the ANC, could be held in check. Popular resistance spread across the country and negated attempts to co-opt the black subjects. With increasing internal resistance from civil rights organisations, the various liberation movements inside and outside the country, popular resistance and revolt, and pressure from the international community, it dawned upon the ruling regime that more decisive action was necessary. Even the Afrikaner Broederbond, a quasi-secret elite fraternity, realised that Afrikaner dominance was in terminal decline and that a peaceful agreement with the ANC was necessary to ensure the continued existence of the Afrikaner nation in South Africa (Giliomee 2003:621). FW de Klerk succeeded PW Botha as Prime Minister in 1989 and less than a year later he unbanned the ANC and all other proscribed organizations.

In 1991, at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa), substantive constitutional negotiations were held for the first time. The negotiating process developed its own dynamic and despite various violent attempts to derail the process, led to a lasting agreement. In a whites-only referendum in 1992, a majority voted for the negotiations and the peace process; however, many would not have expected that the NP would retain so little power in a democratic South Africa (after a short-lived Government of National Unity, the NP left the ruling coalition in 1996). South Africa had embarked on a peace process that would lead to the first democratic elections in 1994. While their support for the negotiations was motivated by the increasing internal and international political pressure, one should not underestimate the role of new subjectivities, especially among Afrikaners. Adrian Guelke observes that ‘the primary agency for political change in South Africa was the realization among whites that they had to come to terms with a shift in power that was taking place in the country as a result of demographic and economic change’ (Guelke 1999:86). Complementing this realisation about power shifts was that the ethnic Afrikaner group at the core of white dominance was no longer coherent and united through ethnic nationalism. New identities had emerged, shaped through living in a consumer society in late modernity with the concomitant changes in values and meanings. Afrikaner identities had moved beyond ethnic nationalism.

For much of the twentieth century, the mobilisation of an Afrikaner ethnic identity to assert control over the state and to uplift Afrikaners through exclusionary apartheid policies was successful. By the 1970s, a large number of Afrikaners found themselves in a comfortable middle-class position.

According to Rebecca Davies, today, ‘an increasingly globalised Afrikaans speaking middle class and capital elites are linked to the globalised political economy’ (Davies 2008:72). This social transformation had significant political consequences. The once monolithic party, the NP, was under strong internal pressures, pitting die-hard apartheid advocates against reluctant reformers. In the early 1990s, a majority of whites and Afrikaners came to accept a democratic political system. For Christi Van der Westhuizen, Afrikaner ‘collectivist nationalism’ was subverted by the individualism brought along with ‘middle-class status’ (Van der Westhuizen 2007:286). The forces that were underlying these developments were based on structural changes in late modernity which affected how the individual related to society. Afrikaners ceased to look upon themselves as a coherent group with unifying goals, based on an invented (nationalist) tradition, but instead

developed an ‘individualist and consumerist identity’ (Hyslop 2000:37). By looking at the formation of identities, Hyslop is studying subjectivisation, or how subjectivity is produced. According to Jean-Francois Bayart, studying how the human subject is constituted involves an analysis of ‘the production of modes of existence or lifestyles’ (Bayart 2005:153). Bayart suggests turning to the study of politics and the social imaginary because in analysing the two, we take stock of processes of subjectivisation and simultaneously study the cultural reasons for political action.

### **A new social imaginary**

As a majority of Afrikaners acquired middle-class positions through apartheid discrimination, a new social imaginary which was based on the culture and values associated with consumption arose and influenced the identities of young Afrikaners in important ways. It generated among them a crisis of legitimacy of their traditions and institutions as they had developed under apartheid. Charles Taylor puts it succinctly by stating that the social imaginary is ‘the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit’ (Taylor 2004:6). Such imagination is an integral part of society since it enables people to live together through the creation of common meanings. It is only through these common meanings that we can make sense of the practices of society. Taylor suggests that the imaginary includes the expectations people have of society which are normally met, and ‘the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (Taylor 2004:23). These normative notions or social imaginary significations are created by the social imaginary. They describe the ‘common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy’ (Taylor 2004:23).

Given its fundamental role in society, the social imaginary is society’s creative ability (Gezerlis 2001:4). With this creative indeterminacy, the social imaginary cannot be managed – the social imaginary remains autonomous and can never be a totality (Bayart 2005:160). The social imaginary has no clear limits, but it is the ‘unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation’ and therefore eschews capture in an explicit doctrine (Taylor 2004:25). Rather, different figures of the imaginary emerge that are ‘necessarily fragmentary and polysemous: none of them absorbs the function of imagination’ (Bayart 2005:228). Each sector of society is endowed with social imaginary significations that move at their own pace; hence, the resulting ambivalence and contingency of its significations (Bayart 2005:229).

Nevertheless, through their radical ambivalence, imaginary social meanings hold together, and thus hold together society (Bayart 2005:233).

The social-imaginary significations have to be distinguished from ideas and ideologies that are manifest, for instance in social theory. Included, however, are ordinary people's images, stories, legends that are shared by most people of society (Taylor 2004:23). Through this common understanding, collective practices that make up social life are possible (Taylor 2004:24). Practices, such as the organisation of 'the production of [society's] material life' (Castoriadis 1987:145) and symbolic, background understandings, are in a mutual relationship that give us an understanding of our location in time and space. Taylor argues that meaning is created through the experience of our whole world, past and present; and yet, what these background understandings signify is not easily circumscribed, precisely because they are so all-encompassing (Taylor 2004:28). This background also involves a sense of moral order, based on images and through which we understand life and history and ultimately allows us to make sense of our actions (Taylor 2004:28). Particularly in times of vast transitions, such as the movement away from apartheid to democracy, our social imaginary is transformed as a new moral order emerges.

Finally, what stands out about the above description of the social imaginary is that it is not easily captured and described. But what I would like to suggest is that the end of apartheid, and the demonstrated bankruptcy of the values and practices on which it was based, called for a new moral order which pursued two overarching imperatives. First, the end of a whites-only South Africa, or its retraction into ethnic enclaves, such as Orania and the private realm of individual homes, perhaps neighbourhoods, led to a difficult search how South Africa could become more African and make-up for years of discrimination against black Africans. Second, the development of a consumer society in late modernity led to a turn towards individualisation, and began to unravel traditional identities. It is in the narratives of the self of young Afrikaners, below, that these values and their associated practices are made visible and their complexity rendered comprehensible. In what follows, I analyse some of the narratives of the self of young Afrikaners in order to demonstrate how these processes can be described and analysed. By looking at narratives of the self of young Afrikaners, we gain better insights into their individual lifeworlds, how they make choices and how they ultimately desert Afrikaner nationalism.

## **Young Afrikaners' narrative of the self: shifting and resisting identities**

The interviews that led to the narratives of young Afrikaners presented in this paper were conducted between 2003 and 2005 for my PhD thesis research (Blaser 2007). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 young Afrikaners, age 19 to 33, who were residing, with the exception of three, in the greater Johannesburg area at the time of the interview. Another three informants residing in the Western Cape were sent questionnaires by email and they gave written responses. The duration of each oral interview was between 45 and 90 minutes. The majority of those interviewed lived in urban areas and were students and professionals.

It was within narratives of the self that I was looking for explanations for the decline of a national and ethnic mindset among young Afrikaners. The thrust of the interviews was to find out more about the lives of young Afrikaners and how they related to their ethnicity, to having an Afrikaner identity. It soon became apparent that many Afrikaners had embarked on the process of re-negotiating their ethnic identities. In a clear break with the past and stemming from social transformations beginning in the late 1970s, most young people I spoke to understood that there were different ways of being an Afrikaner or Afrikaans which seems to have influenced how they looked upon their relationship to people of different race groups and ethnicities; many stated that Afrikaners are more open to difference and diversity. The view that ethnic identity is unstable, that individuals may have different identities that share equal importance in their lives is based on a *Zeitgeist* according to which exerting choice is part of the contemporary social imaginary in a democratic, consumer society. While modern individuals may feel a sense of thrownness and uprootedness, such identity-related dislocations may also offer the opportunity to overcome established authoritarian structures which relied, among others, on a dominant Afrikaner (masculine) identity. However, we need to remember that choice of identity and lifestyle does not apply to all equally – differences of class and geographical location, just to name two, shape possibilities of choice. But perhaps less visible and nonetheless fundamental to modern society is that choice is something all want to possess.

With a violent history of apartheid racism and ethnic nationalism, the analysis of the Afrikaners as a social group lends itself easily to an emphasis on extremes. During apartheid, sympathetic views of the 'white man's burden' were apologetic for the regime. In contrast, left-leaning analysis

condemned Afrikaners as Nazis. Today, a focus on Afrikanerdom and racism in the making of contemporary society often neglects processes of social change, how people try to make sense of their lives and integrate change into their daily lives (Blaser 2008). This is not to claim that race and racism no longer matter. On the contrary. Only a better understanding of the making of race and racism allows for meaningful anti-racist policy and practice. Anti-racism work can gain from insights into white identity, ethnic and national formation that try to be alert to openings, contradictions and evolutions in the formation of identities. In our analysis of identities, we should not neglect how a new social imaginary takes roots and evolves as identities do. I therefore suggest that we analyse these narratives of young Afrikaners not as unique with respect to their normative content, and according to which they are often evaluated on a scale of their progressiveness, as is often done in discourse analysis on whiteness (Steyn 2001). While such a classification allows for some insights into how people perceive the world and express their attitudes, it neglects the complexity of white and Afrikaner identities; in other words, I would argue, the essential of our analysis lies not in the classification or identifying aspects of an immutable and dominant whiteness, but rather in gaining insights into the multiplicity, contradictions, and ambiguity of individual narratives while not losing sight of the relevance of structures of oppression.

Afrikaner identities are shifting towards a position that allows them to be both more African, however vaguely defined, while at the same time resisting such a process. For many, to become more African is an irreversible development. Even if they are sceptical of or averse to Africanisation, becoming more African seems the only option for a liveable future. To facilitate this process, some argue that African and western culture may merge. But what does it mean to be more African? I want to suggest that in popular parlance among Afrikaners, to be African as a white person implies to have an appreciation for black people. This transformation is often expressed in the observation that some Afrikaners have become liberal which means that they no longer harbour a racist rejection of black people – the liberals are those who have changed.

Patricia and Ronel are two 23 year old students who have grown up and are living in Pretoria. They are religious and see themselves first and foremost as Afrikaners. Patricia feels that Afrikaner culture has

changed year by year, you get those that change and those that don't change. I don't have a problem with those that change, it's a way of being Afrikaans.

In the course of our interview, it became apparent that she identified more with those who have not changed. But she is far from condemnatory of those who have. She understands that there are now many ways of being Afrikaner and Afrikaans. To be conservative and averse to change, hanging on to white supremacy, is no longer a viable way of being. Ronel qualifies her own, self-declared traditional Afrikaner identity by saying

Our views have definitely changed. We are more liberal, although our conservative values, for example faith, are still important to us. We are more open to change.

The existence and even prestigious reputation of liberal Afrikaners, those who have changed, testifies to the sea-change under way in Afrikaner society. During apartheid, liberal Afrikaners were deemed traitors who had failed to support their own people and had sided with the enemy. Now, they are mainstream, no more nor less Afrikaner than those who do not change. Diversity among Afrikaners is recognised. At the same time, and in contrast to those who make an active effort to change, there are also young Afrikaners who describe their own Afrikaner identity as fundamentally opposed to anything African. It is an attitude that was at times combined with racism and a belief in white superiority.

Afrikaner ethnicity is unstable and multiple. Young people choose how Afrikaans or Afrikaner they wish to be. In this sense then, identity is a choice. This is a sign of the times, of democratic, capitalist consumer societies in late modernity in which choice and individual lifestyles shape identities in significant ways. For conservative Afrikaners who strongly identified with the racially and ethnically marked institutions of the apartheid order, the void of being without definite identity markers is difficult. But perhaps more difficult is accepting new norms of social conduct. The liberal Afrikaner, the one who gets along with black people and appreciates their presence, is a difficult figure to emulate. In some instances, such complicity is still seen as a betrayal to the national project of survival of the Afrikaner nation. After all, was not the fear of ‘miscegenation’ a crucial factor in the perceived need to separate races, first through segregation and then through apartheid, and hence to guarantee the survival of Afrikaners and white South Africa? The ‘kaffer boetie’ (nigger lover) is a figure from popular culture that testifies to the lure of transgressing social taboo. That this figure is now part of the dominant social imaginary highlights the transformation of values among Afrikaners. The liberals, those who show little identification with the dominant markers of Afrikanerdom, just like the conservatives, are trying to

come to terms with socio-political and personal circumstances that are transforming. In this quest, the liberals cope better. They have less of a sense of loss and are more ready to adhere to that which is emerging. Yet both face the same challenge of finding ways to belong to a fundamentally changing society. Some see themselves as more liberal than others. There is a perceived necessity to distinguish oneself, as a liberal Afrikaner, as someone who is not a racist from those who are perceived as being racist.<sup>3</sup> Those who do not change remain racist and are left behind. To distance oneself from racism is also to choose how to define your Afrikaner identity. In order to do so, some want to choose how much of an Afrikaner they are. Performing the self becomes a choice – being Afrikaner is no longer just given by birth and an accepted way of life into which one is socialised.

Jennifer was raised in a middle-class home in Cape Town, with parents who did not adhere to the dominant ideology of Afrikanerdom. She is now studying in Johannesburg and working as a journalist. She differentiates herself from those who are racist, including friends and family. She says, ‘...some of the friends which grew up in my area, they are my age and I can’t believe how racist they often are’, and ‘some of my aunts and uncles, they were real Afrikaner, racist kind’. Important in her account is also that she relates being a ‘real Afrikaner’ to being a racist. Afrikaner is a tainted identity. For Jennifer it was easier to make a break with the apartheid order, its meanings and symbols, and to demarcate herself from racist Afrikaners because she has never seen herself ‘as an Afrikaner’. Her family background was very critical of the apartheid order. Her dad is ‘completely anti-Calvin and anti-establishment’.

For Jennifer, young Afrikaners are more open today. The transformation of South African society has contributed to such a need for change. Talking about young Afrikaners, she argues that they are more open

because in the work place, you have to deal with the real, new South Africa. You can’t get away from that. Whether they like it or not, they have to see it every day.

What do Afrikaners now have to deal with, in this real, new South Africa? It seems to me that Jennifer refers to the collapse of the dream of a whites-only society on the African continent. Now, Afrikaners live in a society in which all are equal, sharing the same social space without legalized racial separation and hierarchy. For Jennifer, the new openness of young Afrikaners is not only derived from within, but it is also a necessary response to new social and power relations.

Liberal Afrikaners, more than conservatives, are more capable of relating to an emerging and transforming society. While talking to Jennifer, I realise that her progressive mind-set allows her to remain positive in dealing with the challenges of living in South Africa. Jennifer affirms her commitment to the country by saying ‘I like this country’. And she is doing so even though she acknowledges that life here might be difficult but she is glad to take up the challenge. After all, she says, ‘there is something to work with, there are things to change. That is what I like’. A positive attitude to the challenge society poses is supplemented by an appreciation of diversity. Coming from Cape Town, Jennifer enjoys the greater cultural and racial diversity of life in Johannesburg; ‘it’s the real South Africa’, she says. Because much of the historical legacy associated with being an Afrikaner is tainted by apartheid racism, she wants to reserve the right to choose what she thinks is useful and discard what she abhors: ‘I choose what elements I can associate with.’

By contrast, Kurt’s narrative is dominated by a feeling of loss. For this 22-year old engineering student from Pretoria, the loss of privilege, of the good life, of power and the decline in proper Christian values which no longer seem to dominate the public sphere, has put him in a sombre mood. This becomes clear in the course of our conversation. From his reflections about the past I gather that he and his family used to have a strong understanding of place in the world: there was strong Afrikaner culture with church, educational institutions, and politics aligned and interlocked in which they felt very much at home, but now, in a changing society and with the certainties of the past gone, he feels lost. As we sit down in a coffee shop in the mall, he attempts to have a conversation in the Sotho language with the waitron. The opinion of others, especially black people, seem important for Kurt. He regrets, even feels guilty for, the injustice of apartheid. When asked if he considers himself an African, he suggests that if the definition of African is something that has ‘African traditions and stuff like that and then I am definitely not an African’. This reflection, whether his identity can fit in with the current, dominant ‘Africanising’ project within South African society, leads him to realise that if he is not African, ‘then I don’t know *what I am* and I think that is the problem with a lot of us ... now that I am put on the spot, I don’t know what I am’. With the collapse of apartheid, a political transition, the advent of democracy and an African nativism in the ascendance, the traditional Afrikaner identity of the previous generation, as a ‘thick’ ethnic identity, fails to be transmitted.<sup>4</sup> Afrikaner identity seems to have lost its moorings, lacks purpose, and is bereft of meaning. While Kurt feels

alienated from an African identity that is growing more dominant in society, he is equally ill at ease with traditional Afrikaner identity.

Such alienation from Afrikaner mainstream society is not new, as the *Voëlvry* (outlawed or free as a bird) generation of young musical rebels against the established political and social order of the 1980s has shown. What is perhaps different today is that besides an emerging African identity, with which to identify is problematic for many Afrikaners, no other dominant identity is readily available. The generation of the *Voëlvry* movement could still identify with a common white society, perhaps liberal and alternative, but nonetheless safely within a common, white and western paradigm. Kurt does not think that he has these options. For him, a more thorough engagement with what it means to live in an African society is needed, even though it is fraught with difficulties. He nonetheless hesitantly suggests that there is perhaps a possibility of merging two apparently contradictory identities. He explains that African and western culture could merge with the result that ‘a new sort of African, westernised culture’ would develop. While he wants to give this process time, he says:

we feel it’s all happening too fast. Ten years, and things have changed like this. I mean, name changes and job changes, everything. Why not give it a little time? I know the past is bad, but just slow down.

Kurt feels overwhelmed by the rapid changes of the current epoch. The feeling that everything around you is changing fast leads to a feeling of neglect and loss. ‘They don’t think about us anymore’, says Kurt, but it is not clear to whom ‘they’ refer – the government or perhaps black people, on whom the construction of a common South African identity and a common future relies? In the absence of state support, many who relied on and identified with the South African state feel that the state has left them on their own. Kurt feels that ‘we just have then to accept everything’. He regrets that society is now led by people who use traditional healers and who celebrate important events, such as marriage and birth, with the slaughter of animals. Hence, in his view, he lives in a society in which Christian values are no longer recognised.

Despite the negativity that he attaches to living in a society that is promoting, through the state, an African identity and in which traditional Afrikaner identities have come under pressure, the possibility remains that Afrikaners may find a way to relate to the emerging society. So much is conceded by Kurt who says, ‘we know that it is necessary to change’. This observation shows an understanding that individuals will have to change

in order to become part of a newly emerging society. The lack of a definite identity and a sense of forlornness testify to the difficulty of the process. At the same time, I find it significant that this young Afrikaner who grew up in a conservative household, perceives racial and ethnic identities not as essentialised as apartheid doctrine had taught him and that they can and indeed are changing.

This discussion of Kurt's narrative shows well how Afrikaner ethnicity is bound up with whiteness, race and culture as exclusionary practices, and racism. This association is the burden of Afrikaans culture and language in South Africa, but it is also being negotiated with an emerging imaginary that is moving away from these markers of identity. What also transpired from an analysis of narratives of the self of young Afrikaners but which I could not deal with here for reasons of space, is that how to relate to Africa and black Africans in South Africa is a serious concern for many young Afrikaners. How to live in this present is fraught with difficulties. As Van der Waal and Robins suggest in their reading of the social and cultural trajectory of the pop song 'De la Rey' in the South African public sphere, it is laden with contradictory meanings that reflect 'profoundly unsettled identity politics' in a changing environment; in the final analysis, however, they observe that the path chosen to connect the past with the present, as suggested by the lyrics, re-inscribes racial boundaries (Van der Waal and Robins 2011:778).

Paul Gilroy writes that in our epoch of multiculturalism and non-racialism, culture-talk is replacing race-talk (Gilroy 1994). Culture, including language, is used as a proxy for race, and the defence and maintenance of one's language and culture as exclusionary practices is justified as multiculturalism. George is a twenty-two years old chartered accountant from Pretoria, working in Sandton City, a luxurious office and shopping mall complex. He is from a middle-class family that values religion and Afrikaner culture highly. He says that the folkloric *volkspele* and *Voortrekkerdans* in which he used to participate are no longer practised. Concluding from this observation, he states that 'the whole tradition has changed, it's more modern, but still, you have your language'. Language becomes then the most definite marker of ethnic identity, especially under circumstances in which cultural traditions have changed significantly and culturally-based markers of differentiation have been reduced. Ethnicity as difference has shifted and is now largely focused on language. Language as a marker of ethnic identity occupies such a dominant position now because culture has changed greatly and cultural differences between white speakers of different

languages, especially English and Afrikaans, have diminished. Under apartheid, a common white supremacy and middle-class consumerism reduced ethnic awareness. Language becomes one way to distinguish oneself from others. And it is in the name of recognised cultural differences, including language, that apartheid-era like discriminatory practices are justified. However, as many other multicultural societies can attest to, the distinction between discrimination and practising cultural identities is not always clear-cut. The crucial question is whether someone like George is falling back on language, and to a lesser extent culture, to defend white privileges against the end of apartheid and white supremacy?

While it is not evident that George looks upon culture to maintain privilege and to discriminate, this interpretation is rather apt of the narrative of Adam who is a successful businessman living close to the wealthy neighbourhood of Houghton in Johannesburg. He travels frequently to Europe which allows him to combine work and pleasure: he is deeply appreciative of European culture and likes to be there on holidays. Adam begins our discussion by telling me that he is definitely not a typical Afrikaner but then he attributes his good prospect in the South African job market to his (Afrikaner) qualities, such as being in the possession of a 'Calvinist work ethic'. What he meant though by stating that he was not a typical Afrikaner was that he saw himself as an urban, sophisticated, upwardly-mobile Afrikaner who has little relation to the stereotypical Afrikaner, wearing short pants, and participating in *volkspele* (traditional dancing). His ethnic belonging is not expressed in traditional folkloric ways. Rather, he is fluent in English and in our conversation he indicates that being white is an important aspect of his identity. He is talking in an offensively, racist discourse. His almost obsessive awareness of race which he uses to explain any political and social fact of South Africa demonstrates clearly that race trumps ethnicity as a dominant marker of difference in his mind. For Adam, the contemporary negotiations of identities are to a lesser extent based on how to deal with Afrikaner traditions and Afrikaner ethnicity but rather based on race and the presumed superiority of white people. He may feel he has left Afrikaner traditions behind, but his worldliness only masks his racism and a feeling of white superiority.

## **Conclusion**

In narratives of the self, young Afrikaners reveal that they espouse values and practices associated with the formation of identities in late modernity. In doing so, some have moved beyond the ethnic and nationalist mobilisation which supported Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state. The process of deserting Afrikaner nationalism began in the late 1960s, as a majority of Afrikaners, through racially-based advantage, settled into a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. This development brought about new ways of living in society and shaped identities in significant ways. Individualisation, the end of traditional identities, and the extension of values based on consumption now come to the surface when young Afrikaners reflect upon themselves and the society they live in. Adhering to the nationalism of old is no longer useful, and white supremacy, so closely associated with it, is morally repugnant. Underlying this moral perspective are processes of identity formation for which narrow ethno-nationalist mobilisation no longer has social and political currency.

Narratives of the self of young Afrikaners express contradictions and ambivalences beyond the common recognition that there is no longer, if there ever was, a monolithic, dominant Afrikaner identity. Rather, social and political diversity among Afrikaners is recognized. To choose as an individual how to live and be Afrikaans is appreciated; also in order to adapt and to fit in with an Africanising society and to move away from being associated with an overtly racist past. This focus on the new, the emerging is, however, for some accompanied by feelings of loss and exclusion which perhaps attests to an inability or unwillingness to evolve with the times and take a clear stance against racism. The cracks in ethnic and racist enclosure are widening, but the questions remains how durable they are and in which directions they are moving.

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## **Notes**

1. The term Afrikaner, like all classifications given to race and ethnic groups by the apartheid state, are over-determined through complex meanings and contestations that endure in the present. During apartheid, the term 'Afrikaner' was used by the ruling class as an essentialised identity which helped to separate and oppress people. For the purpose of the research that supports the findings of this article,

I define 'Afrikaner' as a white resident of South Africa who speaks Afrikaans. For a discussion of the problem of defining 'Afrikaner', see also Rebecca Davies' deconstruction of the term (Davies 2009:8).

2. The concept 'late modernity' can be used interchangeably with the concept 'post-modernity' – the former is preferred here for it indicates less of a definite break with an earlier temporality but allows for a perspective that includes simultaneity, reversals and duplicities. Perhaps the most important aspect of the new temporality that has been ushered in after 1945 is that the relationship between self and other has changed, as it is particularly apparent in cultural manifestations. The trajectory of the nation, a collective identity that was created during modernity, is a most prominent example how fundamental change in a new epoch is shaping senses of individual and collective belonging (see Gellner 1984, Giddens 1991).
3. The existence of liberals (*verligte* or the enlightened) and conservatives (*verkrampte* or the ultra-conservative) goes back to the 1960s in Afrikaner intellectual and political history. The former advocated the transformation of Afrikaner nationalist ideology to suit political objectives. This also implied compromise and pragmatism, even experimental thinking. In contrast, the *verkramptes* were against all that was new. It is a narrow attitude that adheres to tradition strictly. In race relations, it advocated the strict enforcement of apartheid as a reflection of a clearly defined racial hierarchy (O'Meara 1996:155)
4. Definitions of national and ethnic identity can be distinguished according to how firmly they are embraced by their subjects. When we say an Afrikaner has a 'thick' ethnicity we want to say that she or he identifies strongly with such an identity in all aspects of his or her life. When we talk of a 'thin' ethnicity, we mean that her or her Afrikaner identity is just one aspect of her identity, among many other markers that are at least as strong and visible.

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