

Opening Remarks by Siseko Kumalo, Associate

Eschewing a Paralysing Interregnum and Inaugurating the Revival of Thought

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the official public launch of The Polisee Space.

In her seminal address on ‘Revolution and Freedom’ of 1966, Hannah Arendt reminds us of Vergil’s genius when Vergil writes of the “*magnus ordo saeculorum*” (I am translating here – the great cycle of periods that is born anew) in his Fourth Eclogue. The genius in this conception lies in the facticity of human nativity – understood as natality – which portends the ability to re-imagine the world, setting on course the path to a just arrangement of the polity.

Put simply, the fact of birth – which denotes our ability to start on the path toward freedom, that we are beginnings through birth – means that we can set new beginnings, for we are beginners. Now I will not recycle Arendt’s lecture, but am predicating my opening remarks today on her corpus of thought, a corpus that focused its attentions quite significantly on this capacity of human natality.

In her seminal essay -focusing on the Crisis in Education- a short treatise she penned in 1954, she once again draws our attention to the importance of human natality. The liberating capacity of nativity (i.e. natality), as it is unlocked in the pedagogical process of education for those who are new to the world, is only realised by – and through – the assumption of joint responsibility for the world that we have created, as those who are tasked with educating the new generation. It is only in assuming this joint responsibility, which denotes an ability to confront our part in the injustices that define our worlds, that we are able to capacitate the new generation with the tools to see injustice, name it and act towards its undoing.

The notion of natality then, both in the liberating capacity it had in the time of Vergil, that is in the 1st century BC, as well as in the 20th century through the thought of Hannah Arendt, is important for us here tonight owing to the paralysing interregnum that we find ourselves stuck in. This is to say that there is a stark challenge highlighted by the inability to give birth to the new, an inability that was inaugurated by the failure of the current generation of leaders to assume joint responsibility for the world.

I do not wish to use this opportunity to chastise the generations that have come before us, but I do, however, wish to draw our collective attentions to what I have diagnosed as the dearth of imagination – which resultantly leads to the death of theory.

I came to this socio-political diagnosis, having systematically engaged the work of Zoe Wicomb (in that review that appeared with *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*), in which I found the ineptitude of cross-disciplinary collaboration to be the underlying challenge behind our inability to systematically respond to social questions (from any vantage point, neither political theory nor philosophical reasoning).

In this brief sketch, I have already given away my own proclivity to philosophical inquiry, however, do not wish to distract myself with such musings. If I were to interrupt

myself for a moment, I would like to sketch (ever so briefly) the implication of the death of theory. Existing under an anti-intellectual climate that has been fanned and ebbed on by the political order that prevailed in our very recent history and one that continues to linger in the current political moment, this anti-intellectualism is what arrests our capacity to holistically and imaginatively respond to the questions of a stagnant economy, unparalleled social inequality that increases feelings of insecurity even for those who can afford private security companies that patrol their neighbourhoods and guard their stark luxury in the face of depraved poverty.

This inability for thinking with the social conditions – an inability that also is doubled by the lack of a transitional capacity in the dearth of a set of new thinkers (who will begin anew, the task of thinking creatively and critically about the social context in which we find ourselves) is what gave rise to the Polisee Space. Thus, our borrowing from the European tradition, a borrowing that diagnoses the current crisis as an interregnum that requires innovative thinking and fresh ideas both at the level of intellectual curiosity and applied methodologies in addressing socio-political ills. As a collective of young people, who are in this case an embodiment of this “magnus ordo saeculorum” of which Vergil wrote about, which in itself was denotative of “founding Rome anew” and not “founding a new Rome”, we too are interested in an ability to present to the South and Southern African political economy – new ideas that are sorely wanting as a result of the dearth of imagination and the subsequent death of theory.

Put differently, the Polisee Space facilitates a capacity of thinking critically about (and anew) old questions. This is to say that this intellectual collective, by way of beginning anew, charting a new path in the space of ideas in the country and the regional community, aims at the ability to respond urgently to what we foresee to be a set of social conditions – that if unaddressed – will result in revolution.

In closing, as Hannah Arendt once said, revolution as “liberation now [means] provision with life’s necessities, the abolition of what then was [and continues to be] called “unhappiness”, the creation of “bonheur”, happiness – and this word, it was duly noted, was a new word in Europe” then, however, begs the necessity for its realisation in Southern Africa today. Simply put, in order to abate a situation of social upheaval – an upheaval that will inherently be violent in line with the characteristics of democratic violence, we must be revolutionary in our ideas.

I thank you!