

Imagining the measure of 'enough': opening a debate from below

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By way of introduction

When I received the invitation to deliver this lecture, I replied that I would be honoured to do so. Thank you to the staff and the board of the Alan Paton Centre.

My few direct interactions with Alan Paton, the person, were shaped by my student years and the politics of the times:

first, through his fictional writing (I studied comparative literature, Afrikaans-Nederlands and English – and political science – at the UNDurban during the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s);

second, his personal politics (I first saw him in doughty action at a candle-light protest on the steps of the Howard College building in the 1960s. It must have been during the protest against the 1966 banning of NUSAS president, Ian Roberson, just before the visit of Robert Kennedy, whose speech in Durban I attended;ⁱ

then when his politics and mine took separate routes in the 1980s: mine into opposing the ethnic, and class politics of Mangosuthu Buthelezi and his supporters in Inkatha in the wider politics of the country; and his aligned with what Buthelezi represented, in South Africa and internationally, a gradualist, capitalist approach to social change.

As political theory, liberalism, is most productively approached through the 'ambiguous legacy' description, argued for by Steven Friedman in 2014, where the value lies in that 'care for our fellow citizens', so often absent from political policy.ⁱⁱ

But what has brought me into a very important alignment with Paton, even if not in our shared lifetimes, was the creation of the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives. The core is the material that he left behind – a life intensely-lived, fighting for his political convictions on several platforms.

And then the staff need recognition and appreciation – the key component to successful archiving: through their dedication, interest, and knowledge of what is there and of what should be there, and how to introduce researchers to it. May institutional support continue, and increase – there are far too many stories of failing archives and archiving at present.

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Today i want you to join me on a brief journey, one that has thrown me into yet another confrontation within this wonderful and disastrous country we live in, located in a world that humans are destroying at a phenomenal and, by most measures, unstoppable rate. The social processes that give rise to **climate change** are in the background, while my focus is on the immediate reality of **local and global inequality**.

I wish to speak as '**citizen**', in other words positioned as an **individual in a collectivity**; with the **responsibilities** to self and others

that is demanded of that location; the **privileges** and **obligations**. It implies self, the individual, amongst others, joined in multiple ways, despite the fixing of difference and the value given to individualism in the twenty-first century world. And, a necessary warning, that citizenship should never be narrowed to 'nationality', and 'patriotism'.

I decided deliberately not to speak today on the issues with which i am most familiar, that which i have researched and written on over the years. Instead I challenged myself in what I will raise today. The walking on this small journey which i undertook and on which i ask you to join me is described by Rebecca Solnit in her *A Field-Guide to Getting Lost*.

To discover you first have to get lost – leave the familiar; know not where you are, but not be incapacitated by that; see it as an opportunity for exploration, of the self and of the surroundings. Call on abilities, imaginations you did not think you had, partly because you 'normally' have no need for them. The everyday confirms common sense.

I do not have answers to the world in which i am lost – except that answers lie in facing the world in its complexity, striving towards understanding, establishing some form of moral compass, also enjoying that state of curiosity without doing harm. Do I hear Rick Turner's and Steve Biiko's voices in the background, speaking from my own younger days?

This is the approach I propose to you, my fellow citizens. It is only a starting point – a method that immediately presents us with the challenge of activism.

There are two inter-related terms i will use – neither carry much academic weight in university curricula, but are core in social lives lived in extreme inequality. I will illustrate them through two stories. They are ‘**genoeg/ enough**’, and ‘**austerity/ eenvoud, soberheid**’, both relate to getting lost, in ideas – towards empathetic understanding.

Here is the **first** introductory **story**: our pozzie is in Prince Albert in the karoo, immediately under the Swartberge – even through we live in Johannesburg at present. In many ways an idyllic location, with a district population of some 10,000 people. Manageable one would think.

Leaving the N1, the road of slaughter, we drive a further 45 kilometres towards the mountains. There were two hitch-hikers, late afternoon, about eighteen months ago. One sat in the front of the car – I was by myself. They named Mtatha as home – that is where their families still are. They had hiked from Beaufort West, some 120 kms further along the N1, from where I picked them up. They had gone there to work for a brief spell.

‘Are there no taxis?’, i asked. It is explained that it is off-route, so to take a taxi would cost much more than they earned. Why are they in Prince Albert? Because at least here there is a greater possibility of work than in Mthatha: seasonal on farms, usually to do with onions – through the various stages of production. He, my front-seat passenger, explains that he keeps a small survival amount of the earnings, and ‘banks’ the rest – which turns out to be at the post office – to send through to his wife and child in the Eastern Cape. Insecurity in Prince Albert, in the karoo, is preferable to insecurity in Mthatha – grades of insecurity, as life.

So I asked a question, voicing a concern that has shaped the most grounded way in which I can 'think inequality', in its everyday existence, hearing avoidance in the explanations we are (sometimes) required to express. It started when I heard Neville Alexander use these words many years ago – also the title of the final chapter of his post-humously published book: '**Enough is as good as a feast**'.

I asked the young man in my car, 'What would be "enough", in your life?'. 'Wat sou genoeg wees vir jou, in jou lewe?'.

What enormous meaning does that word carry – meanings, plural, actually. And that is only in English and Afrikaans. I have not explored that notion, and a word(s) for it, in other of South Africa's many languages.

He could, initially, not follow where I was heading – so I turned to myself and showed how I had much more than 'enough', with examples – transport (as that is where our conversation started); accommodation (he had told me where they lived in a backyard shack in Noord Einde in Prince Albert); a regular pension (and savings and accumulated wealth to fall back on); my own education and that of my children. I could not possibly 'justify' the detail in any terms that made logical sense, in that micro-comparative context, certainly not when sitting next to this young man. And then there is the wider context.

He understood, and answered 'Werk' – a job. And by that, it came out, simply regular employment so that there would be a salary – unspecified – at the *end of every month*, in order to use the post office to send money. In other words, security, and the dignity that goes with

that. No 'minimum wage' but some regularity to which to adapt, make do. A starting point as basic as one could require to get lost around.

The second term is related: '**austerity**', a word tainted, probably beyond effective use, by what happened in Greece, Portugal, and several other countries. Austerity enforced from above, to save banks and capitalism in general, from the self-inflicted, through greed, financial crisis now some ten years ago. Austerity enforced on those at bottom of the inequality hierarchy. But let me, through the attempt to clean it up, illustrate my general argument.

Justin Welby, arch-bishop of Canterbury, well summarised selective austerity **from above**:

“Austerity, “ he writes [in the *Guardian*]. “is not merely an economic term. It is a word that almost invariably conceals the crushing of the weak, the unlucky [for example, through such arbitrariness as time and place of birth], the ill and millions of others. Austerity [from above] is a theory for the rich, and a reality of suffering for the poor.”

What then is 'austerity from below', the austerity, consideration of which should concern us all? Here is the **second story**:

Prolific and world-renowned historian, Tony Judt, 'struck down at the age of sixty by an incurable degenerative disorder' (Lou Gehrig's Disease), gradually lost any movement; but his mind and memory continued vigorously for another two years. He employed it in the most rewarding way. He structured short essays as he lay awake at night, stories which he recited the next morning. They appeared in a series in

the *New York Review of Books*; subsequently published as a collection under the title *The Memory Chalet* – in the year of his death in 2010.ⁱⁱⁱ He was sixty-two. Friend Jacob Dlamini, gave me a copy when it appeared, as we had discussed the essays, especially the one headed ‘Austerity’.

If I can get you to read this essay, and Neville’s chapter, my talk here today will have been successful beyond belief.

In ‘Austerity’ Judt relates his children’s description to their friends of their father – as having grown up ‘in poverty’: because of his on-going fastidious attention in the family home to saving wrapping paper, left-over food, switching the lights off, mending rather than replacing. He responds, ‘Not at all, I correct them: **I grew up in austerity**’.

Judt was English and Jewish; born and was raised in England, after WW II. He writes:

After the war everything was in short supply. ... Clothes were rationed until 1949, cheap and simple ‘utility furniture’ until 1952, food until 1954. ... To a child rationing was part of the natural order. Indeed, long after the practice ceased, my mother convinced me that ‘sweets’ (...) were still restricted. ...

Rationing and subsidies meant that the bare necessities of life were accessible to all. Courtesy of the postwar Labour government, children were entitled to a range of healthful products: free milk ... concentrated orange juice and cod-liver oil

‘Bare necessities’. What a wonderful way to express it. ‘Bare necessities = Enough’?

There was a notion of ‘We’ that had some meaning, notes Judt – ‘It was this “togetherness” that made tolerable the characteristic shortages and grayness of postwar Britain.’

But he adds, there were signs of what was to come, lying under the surface: ‘Of course we weren’t *really* a family: if we were, the wrong members – as Orwell had once noted – were still in charge’. However, he adds, ‘... since the war the rich kept a ***prudently low profile***. There was little evidence in those years of conspicuous consumption. Everyone looked the same and dressed in the same materials: ...’. Revolution was in the air if ostentatious consumption by some was visible.

There the provocative words are then: **enough is as good as a feast**, and **austerity from below**. Austerity enforced on those at the top, decided upon through debate initiated from below.

The BBC has a series, running at present, of position statements under the title ‘In My Humble Opinion’ (IMHO) – the participants take on topics such as: ‘dying is not as bad as you think’; ‘can you love an object’, and, closer to my concern, ‘high economic inequality damages the environment’.

In my humble opinion, I suggest, as a **central task in the present**, **that citizens join in ‘imagining “enough”**’. That citizens join in defining policies and practices towards meaningful ‘**austerity from below**’. It seems such an apparently simple matter, but it has vast implications, and consequences for our thinking and behaviour, for a challenging moral approach to the social world, and to the environment of which we are inseparably a part.

Can we be open enough, not only to our own thinking and its avoidances, but even more important to listen to those whose perspectives are not heard, and to give power to those perspectives. A 'Freedom Charter' of Enough?

In my humble opinion we have, for moral and survival reasons, vigorously to explore what that might mean – and not only *what* it means, but **for whom, when, and where**, and then the **how**. For whom has to be through 'opening a debate **from below**'. 'Work as enough' starts the ball rolling.

Austerity from above is the kind of 'austerity' that Ron Aronson would describe [in his recent book *We: reviving social hope*] as utilised in the service of 'Progress' with a capital 'P', measured by the growth of consumer capitalism – where success is success in telling us what we need, that without which life is not worth living.^{iv}

How does one reverse this word, turning a sword wielded by the powerful, into ploughshares? The intention of such a debate would be benefit to all. How does 'Progress', with a capital 'P', become 'progress', measured in terms of dignified lives of all people? Lives where children do not die in pit toilets, where everyone can expect to participate in fulfilling work, where tons of wasted food is not discarded every day while millions starve. And so on and on.

I am asking you to reflect on a **Charter of 'Enough'**, here in South Africa, some seventy years after that war that forced advanced capitalist Europe into Judt's austerity – for a few years at least. The Freedom Charter spoke in a way towards citizenship – for all. And that was what made it a slogan that had effect. But, as we have discovered, here too there was a strong under-current that would immediately undermine it

– the imagined family was not based on equality. Oh, the words remained: RDP, transformation, equality.

We remain the most **unequal** country in the world; or – at best – amongst a group of a few such societies.

Yes, not the **poorest** – listed as an ‘upper Middle-income country’ in the *M&G* a couple of weeks ago, in an article on, of all things, poverty alleviation. No, not the poorest by a long way off – but having gross poverty along with enormous, shameful wealth.

Conspicuous consumption is the rule for those who can, and the aspiration of those who cannot but are hoping to be on the path towards inclusion. For the majority, however, it is not even an impossible dream. It is not a path, but immobility – a location.

Göran Therborn, in a slim book by the title of *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, gives a definition of inequality as follows, bringing together a larger picture, and more complex approach to the issue:

Inequality is a violation of human dignity ... a denial of the possibility for everybody’s human capabilities to develop. ... Inequality, then, is not just about the size of wallets. It is a socio-cultural order, which (for most of us) reduces our capabilities to function as human beings, our health, our self-respect, our sense of self, as well as our resources to act and participate in the world.

This approach defines inequality by the size of wallets (resource inequality), the health of the organism (vital inequality), and the dignity of the person (existential inequality).

Exploring each of these areas always requires a relational approach: inequality implies a relationship between one end of the spectrum and the other, between the 1% and the 99%.

As Colin Bundy noted – poverty can be reduced while inequality increases – ‘... tackling inequality is more complicated and politically contentious than tackling poverty, as the former implies a “rearrangement” of the positions of the poor *and* the rich ... whereas the latter only involves the socio-economic conditions of the poor’.

Wealth and poverty, health and ill-health, dignity and indignity. What form does each take, what are the consequences, and what are the causes that result in both?

We have to struggle against what historian (at Free State University) Lindie Koorts called the learning that those who have undergone (and where ‘enough’ does not even enter as a term), to blunt yourself to a degree, otherwise you would not be able to function (at least not in the way *we* expect to function). She quotes Jacob Dlamini, now in the USA, on a visit to South Africa: “I often return home and I know that I have been home for too long when I no longer notice the beggars in the street ... there is something about the place that kills the soul”^v.

Unless we learn the lesson of ‘blunting’, ‘afstomping’, we cannot ignore the fact that the effects of the three areas of inequality identified by Therborn affect the poor and the rich dramatically differently; we cannot ignore that climate change is already affecting millions of the poor in dramatically different ways from the rich – a stretch of coastal houses of the rich getting washed away in exceptional floods in the USA

gets far more attention than islands already becoming uninhabitable and countries such as Bangladesh facing unheard of disasters.

Inequality, if not seen as a causal relationship, ends up with objectifying poverty – as a condition for the undeserving – the ‘won’t work’, as those who receive our charity. It is that condition which we may have to address (often through guilt), without also focusing on the gross consumption by those whose ‘enough’ is an always open goal; in multiple ways informed by what is essential to our worth, the always unfulfilled ‘enough’.

What to do

There are **multiple obstacles to tackling inequality, and environmental change** – they both relate to the responsibilities of an inclusive citizenship. I will simply mention two: **first**, modern capitalism that is driven by production for individualised consumption, and not for human need as characterised early stages (as Ron Aronson argues well); and, **second**, our embedded ways of thinking, shaped by those in power and our ‘sensible’ denial of links between our ‘lifestyles’, socialized by being raised within specific ‘lifestyles’, ‘standards of living’. It should be clear that my, our, ‘we’ is located far from those we describe as ‘the poor’.

Inequality and climate change have become unexamined ways of living: **inequality** is there and sets **desirable goals** for those with power (to join the top levels), while those at the bottom live with protest against poverty and its **immediate** consequences, are occupied with survival. **Climate change** is not an event and is hidden, both from those who have money, and from those who cannot easily picture a global

catastrophe experienced across time and unevenly across space, from within on-going fundamental problems.

How does a new '**we**' get created, to use the notion employed by Ron Aronson in his book *We: reviving social hope*. The *we* that was created through such as the abomination of apartheid; that was created against slavery; that drove aspects of the 'Arab spring'; the Vietnam war. To do that will require much energy and multiple fronts – religious bodies, trade unions, educational institutions.

Kenan Malik's concluding reflections on creating our own, a human, moral order – necessitated by the failure of such as religions to provide guidance, standards, that could speak to all, and not just members or sympathisers are relevant.^{vi} At the end of his description of the search for such a compass, through the ages, brings together the '*I*' and the '*we*' in Viktor Frankl's 1946 book, *The Abolition of Man*. Malik writes:

Frankl's book is a hymn not to a transcendental deity but to the human spirit. Humans, he suggests, find themselves only through creating meaning in the world. But meaning is not something to be discovered. It is something that humans, and only humans, create.

And

It is only through others that we find our individuality, and it is only through others that we come to appreciate the meaning of values and the value of meaning.

Our responsibility, therefore, to this amazing planet, miniscule blue dot, is to reject the meanings that the powerful create for us, to explore how

'givenness' (the word Aronson uses) is, and is allowed to be, created and maintained by those who benefit from keepings things as they are.

It is essential that those who have most to gain, because they are already those who have least to lose, need to enter the picture, to become the essence of the formulation of another way. As I said in the title, it has to start with a 'debate from below'; requiring a new morality also for the comfortable middle; and then an enforced response from above.

And there what exists will not be morality or ethics. There it is Progress, turnover, and profit. As Aronson noted, the new capitalism has little to do with human need, driving production, but with consumption driving production. Harvesting the information web, as we discovered recently, is but the thin edge of a wedge of making consumption our very way of being human. Despite being top ranking inequality country, South Africa ranked sixth in terms of the number of shopping malls in the world in 2016. The obstacles are probably insurmountable – but ...

Where is an honour code of enough, to borrow a term from Kwame Anthony Appiah?

Malik ends his book: '... many ... recoil at the very thought of humans as moral map makers. – 'The human condition is, however that of possessing no moral safety net. ... It can be a highly disconcerting prospect. Or it can be a highly exhilarating one. The choice is ours'.

Neville Alexander's conclusion:

I have kept this discussion deliberately simple and direct. It would have been easier for me to have formulated yet another analysis of the 'global crisis of the capitalist system', but there are more than enough of these, I think. ... It has been more difficult and

challenging for me to return to the source, to reflect on first principles that motivate us in our struggle for a humane world order, one where every child and every adult has more than an outside chance of fulfilling his or her human potential. Today we have to formulate these principles in a new language, one that will find readier access among the youth, to whom we say so beautifully but so ineffectually, the future belongs. I have probably not succeeded in finding these words, but I hope that my attempt to do so will inspire others to take up the challenge.^{vii}

Thank you.

ⁱ June 7, 1966: University of Natal, Durban (<http://www.rfksafilm.org/html/speeches/uninatal.php>)

ⁱⁱ Steven Friedman (2014) 'the ambiguous legacy of liberalism: less theory of society, more a state of mind?', in Peter Vale, Lawrence Hamilton and Estelle H Prinsloo (eds) *Intellectual Traditions in South Africa: ideas, individuals and institutions*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tony Judt (2010) *The Memory Chalet*. New York: The Penguin Press.

^{iv} Ron Aronson (2017) *We: reviving social hope*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

^v 'Te veel armoede stomp ons af', *Beeld* Mei 4, 2018.

^{vi} Kenan Malik (2014) *The Quest for a Moral Compass: a global history of ethics*. Atlantic Books.

^{vii} Neville Alexander (2013) *Thoughts on the New South Africa*. Auckland Park: Jacana.