



Neo Ntsoma

# ‘Our turn to eat’

SOUTH AFRICA’S ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

There is no other country in the world where the expression “we demand” is more often heard in the public space. We demand apologies; we demand higher wages; we demand resignations. In this demandist culture we act out our demands in the very familiar script of singing, dancing and often gratuitous violence. This South African spectacle exists in place of thought. It is the death knell of deliberative democracy. But most importantly, it is the antithesis of civic duty.

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**MEDIATED**

By Jonathan Jansen

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**O**f course we know where this demandist culture comes from. Those of us who lived on both sides of apartheid know about protracted struggles marked by demands: demand the end of unjust laws, of racist government, of separate schooling, of forced removals, and scores of bad things we fought against. Then and now, there is nothing wrong with demanding things from government, whether that authority is legitimate or not. But when this demandist culture transfigures our humanity, renders active citizens impotent, negates reflection, and leaves us beholden to the state for good things, then something has gone horribly wrong in the public arena. Singular examples must suffice.

Think for a moment how easy it was to mobilise hundreds of youth and adults into marching against a private art gallery that put on display a painting some people did not like. You did not have to think; all you had to do was follow the official demagogue encouraging you to not buy “offending newspapers” that published the painting and demand that the gallery not only take down the painting, but destroy it. Thinking about artistic freedom and other democratic virtues was beside the point. Demand the painting come down. And if not, we will do it for you – as the two men who destroyed the painting actually did, cheered on by the demanding crowd.

A recent event further alerted me to the dreary state of being amongst our youth. The long row of high school youth visiting the campus had one thing in common: a glum face. One by one they stopped by my table for a sampling of stew and dessert. Each visiting student took the food on offer and walked straight past the servers who greeted them warmly on approach. Not a word from any of the youngsters from more than 20 different schools. This was a little too much and so I called them back: “it would be good if you said ‘thank you.’ The food is free and we did not have to do this. Someone worked very hard to make these meals.” Then, mumbling, some would utter the two words of grace.

When you relinquish thinking and act simply on the basis of your guttural senses, and when you receive human gifts without the capacity to acknowledge kindness, then you lack the constitution through which young (and old) find purpose in civic duty. Civic duty is about giving of your talents and, at a higher level of service, giving of yourself. This higher level of civic duty implies sacrificial service or, in common parlance, putting your body on the line for others. Others come first, something so roundly captured in the phrase ‘public service.’ It is, in its purest form, sacrificial service expecting nothing in return.

The young bald and energetic professor stood out in a room filled with youthful social entrepreneurs. He stands out as the youngest tenured professor at his university who wrote a brilliant new book called *Give and Take: A revolutionary approach to success*. Adam Grant found that people come in two main groups, givers and takers. Takers, from the moment they meet you try to relieve you of your money. They manoeuvre and manipulate for the simple goal of taking what you have for their benefit. Givers, on the other hand, find ways of connecting people with needs to those who can provide for them. But there is a third group, most of us, says Grant, who try to find a balance between giving and taking. They give, but expect reciprocation. There is a transactional quality to their relationships.

Grant’s research found that in certain fields, givers are over-represented at the bottom of the success pyramid; because they give they often end up with less. Yet givers, unexpectedly, are also over-represented at the top, this research shows. That much for the American context.

My sense is that South African society in the post-apartheid period reflects similar trends, with takers heavily represented at the upper ends of an inverted pyramid and givers at the lower, thin end of the apex. Nobody could have expected the speed and aggression with which South Africa morphed into an acquisitive society. “Our turn to eat” is an expression that is heard often on the streets. It is as if we collectively built up this gargantuan appetite during the apartheid years only to be released into the corridors of wealth and power with the sole purpose of filling up.

The group of boys in the township knew I was lost as I tried to find a local school. As I rolled down the passenger side window to ask directions I was intrigued by how their eyes darted back and forth between my face and the backseat, no doubt looking for something to grab. The students, at my first teaching university in South Africa, rushed from the graduation hall like gluttonous beasts, ahead of their parents and grandparents, to finish off the foods we had prepared for their families. When I asked my students on Facebook what they would do if they found that one of the food vendors on campus had forgotten to close his shop, the vast majority replied that they would raid the place. Where does this behaviour stem from?

A number of institutions have to fail at the same time to produce the kinds of incivility witnessed in public life. You have no parents or your parents simply do not care about basic courtesies. Your school life is hard and unforgiving with teachers who themselves could not care less about common decencies such

as saying 'thank you.' In your life choices there are no spiritual sources of instruction and guidance through the challenges of life. Your friends boast about behaviours that offend and communicate a series of messages that make it 'uncool' to express any of these positive habits.

But I think that one of the most troubling institutions that communicate greed and grabbing is our system of government. Through myriad social welfare actions, old and young come to believe that their government owes them something. Government should give liberally and not take away at all. Massive salary hikes out of all proportion to reasonableness are on display everywhere in the strike season and, if government does not respond, places get trashed and reputations get destroyed with impunity. This attitude is the antithesis of a culture of gratitude.

I am brown, I am white, I am pregnant, I am unemployed, I am disabled. Everyone has a story of marginalisation or disadvantage which official resources must redress. Of course I do not have to say thank you for any of this; you owe me.

What I know as a university leader is that there is still a small but powerful class of young people who remain idealistic, optimistic and altruistic even within this overwhelmingly acquisitive society. I know from work in communities how many poor people use what they have to offer free childcare services to working mothers or advice to pregnant teenagers or after-school maths to high school learners. Even as foreign or private funding for nongovernmental organisations dried up in favour of government programmes, many continued to provide selfless services to the poor. But this group of "givers" are dwarfed in numbers by the widespread clamour of both the powerful and ordinary citizens to lay their hands on whatever moves, whether that be government tenders or wealthy friends or private goods.

How do we change this acquisitive culture and develop, especially among youth, a strong sense of civic duty?

First, we need a new and different kind of leadership in government, business, education and the home. Many seriously doubt that the current government has the moral capacity to act as exemplars of a new civic leadership, but let us dream for a moment.

Imagine the President, instead of accepting annual salary increases, gave away – along with his entire cabinet – those salary increases in the form of bursaries for the poorest students in the country to go to university. Symbols matter, for even though that money would hardly begin to make a dent in the student bursary needs of the country, it would send the right message into society that civic duty is about giving, sharing and putting others first.

Imagine, further, that the President establishes a voluntary public service facility, such as the Peace Corps, where instead of the authoritarian streak of some of his ministers to force young people to do an extra year of service attached to their degrees, our political leadership appeals to the civic mindedness of idealistic youth and asks them to join such an army of community volunteers in areas of their degree training.

Finally, we are guilty in the post-1990s of dangerously narrowing down our sense of politics as civic duty to the mean-spirited variety of party political thuggery that dominates media coverage today. Our noisy political youth have come to believe that the only kind of politics worth waging is in the form of party or parliamentary agency with material position as its only end. We need to extend our sense of politics to include the many other ways of challenging and transforming power to include, for example, the environmental, religious, sports and the arts – so that more citizens begin to participate more meaningfully in the deepening of our hard-won democracy.

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*Jonathan D Jansen, Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Free State, is also President of the South African Institute of Race Relations. His initial training was in science (BSc UWC) and science education (MS Cornell) and his PhD in international development education (Stanford). He holds honorary doctorates in education from Edinburgh University (Scotland) and Cleveland State University (USA). His academic books include Knowledge in the Blood (Stanford University Press) and his popular books, We need to talk, Letters to my children, and Great South African Teachers, with two students as co-editors (Bookstorm Publishers). He is a columnist for The Times and Die Burger. rector@ufs.ac.za*

