

Naked truth of neo-conservatism

July 08, 2010 *Edition 1*

In May, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba said he was pursuing the possibility of a complete ban on pornography distributed over the internet and on cellphones. This emerged after he met the Justice Alliance of South Africa (Jasa) to discuss a bill they had drafted in support of such a ban.

Errol Naidoo, the head of the Family Policy Institute (FPI), has claimed that the institute requested Jasa to draft the bill.

The purpose of the draft bill is "to make it illegal for internet and cellphone service providers in South Africa to distribute or permit pornography to be distributed, to ensure protection for women and children".

In the meeting, Gigaba reportedly briefed Jasa about a request he had made to the Law Reform Commission to provide advice on possible legislation against pornography.

"Cars are already provided with brakes and seat belts. There is no reason why the internet should be provided without the necessary restrictive mechanisms built into it," Gigaba was quoted as saying.

Why should we be concerned about attempts to censor what could be considered a fairly marginal form of expression? Because, there are bigger issues at stake. For one thing, it flies in the face of one of the foundational values of democratic communication regulation, namely that adults should have a right to choose what they see, read or hear.

There are real dangers in allowing the state to play parent, as the dead hand of state censorship may not stop with pornography.

Recent amendments to the Film and Publications Act are an example. While the Act was amended to protect children against the harmful effects of pornography, it now subjects many forms of controversial expression to pre-publication classification by a government agency (the Film and Publications Board).

The definition of pornography referred to in the draft bill fails to distinguish between porn and erotica, the latter potentially having artistic merit. It will also catch in its net matters of public interest that relate to sex, such as discussions about sexual abuse. In effect, it will criminalise any public display of sexuality, which will make an important aspect of human experience impossible to represent or discuss.

It is difficult not to conclude that the status quo has a vested interest in criminalising public debates about sex and its role in society.

South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women and children in the world, including sexual violence. As People Opposing Women Abuse has pointed out, this has much to do with the fact that many women live in housing or communal environments that place them at risk of violence.

By blaming pornography for sexual violence, the government can argue that it is doing something about sexual violence, when it is, in fact, failing to address its root causes adequately. Also, President Jacob Zuma's outspoken views and practices as a polygamist, traditionalist and homophobe reinforce heterosexual orthodoxy.

The banning of sexual expression from the public domain will allow sexual practices that disadvantage women to take place more easily, because they will be cloaked in a shroud of silence.

A recent attempt by the Film and Publications Board to prohibit a film (XXY) about the sexual awakening of an intersexed youth as child pornography suggested the authorities might be quicker to brand something pornographic if its contents deviate from the heterosexual norm. Arts and Culture Minister Lulu Xingwana's branding of photographs of naked black women by artist and gay activist Zanele Mohuli as pornographic, immoral and contrary to nation building, has also given us a taste of things to come if "pornography" is prohibited.

As pointed out by community media activist David Robert Lewis, such censorship undermines the essential principle of "network neutrality", where restrictions on the internet are discouraged because they undermine the open and interconnected nature of the internet.

Gigaba's analogy of cars and the internet betrays a dangerous lack of appreciation of this founding principle, as well as a lack of knowledge about the technical impossibility of censoring the internet. A technophobic thread is also apparent in Jasa's legal opinion, which refers to the internet as a "Wild West" where the country's laws are being circumvented by technological advancements associated with globalisation.

The message is clear: new media are spreading moral decay and must be curbed. It is worth considering who Gigaba is getting into bed with on this particular issue.

According to Jasa's constitution, the organisation aims to uphold Judeo-Christian values, and to this end has lobbied for restrictions on the right to abortion. The FPI - which also subscribes to Judeo-Christian views - describes itself as being "at the cutting edge of the culture war", a metaphor used by American conservatives for a war of values against liberals. Naidoo formed the FPI in the wake of the "tragic legalisation of same-sex marriages in South Africa".

Echoing the conservative agenda, the institute upholds the heteronormative nuclear family as the foundation for society and government, and opposes pornography, homosexuality, abortion and prostitution.

Naidoo's inspiration for the organisation came from the Washington-based Family Research Council, which was set up as a lobby group for conservative legislation.

During President George Bush's rule, neo-conservatism matured as a complementary political philosophy to neo-liberalism, as it provided a moral defence of capitalism.

This defence involved the establishment of an international moral order to secure politically, economically and socially conservative values on the US's terms.

It is clear that Jasa and the FPI are Trojan horses for the neo-conservative agenda. So why are such groups allowed to hold sway over public policy, if their objectives contradict so many of democratic South Africa's foundational principles?

In relation to social policy, there seems to be an ideological convergence between South Africa's emerging neo-conservative movement and the Zuma administration.

Zuma's views on homosexuality, his statements promising debates on the death penalty and abortion, and his courting of the Rhema church, have buoyed religious conservatives.

Furthermore, there are growing signs of the Zuma administration mobilising religion to tap into popular support from a largely Christian working class base.

Neo-conservatism must appeal to those in the government who favour a strong authoritarian state, intent on regulating sexual desire and clamping down on the decadence of artists. It allows them to give the state a moral purpose, while downplaying its purpose as a redistributive agent on a more material level.

Yet, neo-conservatism does not favour an interventionist state on equality questions. It depoliticises social problems, attributing inequality to personal laziness rather than structural factors. Neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism create new political rationalities and subjectivities. Leaders can - in the words of American author Thomas Frank - "talk Christ, but walk corporate" and get away with it.

If conservative social impulses coalesce into a political programme, it could gain popular support and lead to a shift to the right. If this happens, society will probably be de-democratised, the position of women may become worse, and censorship and attacks against gays and immigrants may increase.

The apartheid era morality police lost their grip on state power in 1994. For the sake of our future, the new morality police must be stopped in their tracks.

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