Scorched-earth democratic South Africa: Governance utopianisms as derivatives of scientific dogma

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A B S T R A C T

This article explores theorisation that identifies the locus of South Africa’s scorched-earth lived experiences in the fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries as well as governance utopianisms, wherein the latter are derivatives of the former. It explores South Africa’s lived experiences over the past 28 years in order to demonstrate that politicians’ reverence for governance utopianism has failed to appreciate the unity of realities, facts, values, objectivities, subjectivities, permanences, fluxes and changes, which consist of complex intricacies that are not amenable to dogmatic “incontrovertibly true” sets of authoritative principles and catchy governance utopianisms, because humanity’s imagination and creative thought are experimental in nature given the diversity of spatialities and “geography differences.” From desktop-based research literature survey and theorisation, the article advances a theoretical argument that if “science is one,” and if reality is unitary, then fragmentary theories and models are creatures of humanity’s world of imperfections.

Additionally, the article analyses statistical evidence drawn from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) in order to demonstrate that the scorched-earth metaphor is real for South Africa’s 28-year democratic governance. It finds that in South Africa’s twenty-eight years of democratic experiment, lived experiences resemble scorched-earth metaphor with no silver lining in sight. Philosophically, the paper concludes that if what resides on God’s left is on humanity’s right, then the “rightness” and/or “leftness” of people consists of intractable complexities of particularity, individuality and incommunicability that have led to fragmentary science, fixation on dogma and binaries as well as politicians’ reverence for governance utopianisms, simultaneously as society’s lived experiences resemble normalised scorched-earth.

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Introduction

Describing a “democratic” South Africa in the present, Suttner (2022: n.p.) states that “We have the situation where the economy and society are already experiencing very low growth, very high unemployment, very high inflation, very high debt levels, high and increasing inequality, and continued corruption that often bears no consequences for the wrongdoers.” Whereas the Bill of Rights, which is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, commands that the state must take “reasonable measures” to ensure that citizens’ rights to basic services are progressively realised (RSA, 1996), almost 30 years later the majority in the nation continue to be exposed to high risks of insecurity, violence, illegality, corruption, crime and poverty. Indeed, there are significant lapses in South Africa’s governance in relation to democratic constitutionalism, the authority of the state, security, legality, order, stability, ethics and morality (Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, 2013, 2017; Dhamija, 2020; Calland & Sithole, 2021; Dhai, 2022; Bennun, 2023; Boesak, 2023). The continued suffering of the majority of South Africans in terms of the sub-standard conditions of living under the democratic dispensation has been established and corroborated by the violent service delivery protests (Tsheola, 2012a; Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014; Tsheola & Mmotlana, 2018; Tsheola & Molefe, 2019). Service delivery deficiencies in a democratic South Africa, which have seen a variety of protracted violent public protests, especially in townships, are well documented (Tsheola, 2012a; Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014; Tsheola & Mmotlana, 2018; Tsheola & Molefe, 2019; Gcabashe, 2023). Even the July 2021 civil unrest, widespread looting and destruction of
property in KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng Province, which were regarded as political, have been equally explained as a function of the severity of the poverty of the majority of South Africans (The Presidency, 2021). Hence, this paper uses a militaristic analogy of scorched-earth because the once promising democracy is now a “boulevard of broken dreams” and “valley of … ghosts,” to use Lerner’s phraseology (cited in Wooldridge, 2012: 14). Industrial-scale political corruption under the over decade-long state capture (Fazezakas & Töth, 2016; Labuschange, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019) and Covid-19 since 2020, amidst the disastrous state capitalism, should raise eyebrows whether or not the ruling elite and their patrons could have deliberately caused widespread destruction of South Africa’s democracy in order to assure themselves of the permanency of supremacy at all costs. However, the present paper frames a question thus: How did the promising, globally acclaimed constitutional democracy of the 21st century get here in less than 30 years? This paper sets out to grapple with this question using a theoretical argument that locates the primary problem in the academic and political arenas wherein reverence for scientific dogma, conceptual binaries and governance utopianism are preeminent amidst the scorched-earth lived experiences in constitutional democratic South Africa.

Given twenty-eight years of constitutional democratic experimentation, it could be asked if there is any silver lining in the clouds for South Africa, following the ruling party’s 6th Policy Conference during July 29-31, 2022. Harvey (2022: n.p.) answers this question unambiguously with the title of his paper, thus: “Ramaphosa delivers same old lies at the ANC policy conference about moribund NDR.” The abbreviation NDR describes the ANC’s National Democratic Revolution, whose main aims are captured in the Freedom Charter, which is supposed to “answer the pressing and immediate needs of the people and lay the indispensable basis for the advance to socialism” (O’Malley Archive, n.d.: n.p.). Whereas South Africans exist on starkly opposite sides of the coin, the majority of the poor as well as the wealthy elite equally require the exercise of constitutionalism and state authority to protect their rights to life and dignity, and to defend them against illegality, disorder, instability, violence and criminality (Suttner, 2022). It is ironic that even those allegedly corrupt cadres in the ANC require the exercise of constitutionalism and state authority for their protection and defence. As a liberation movement, the ANC consisted of disciplined cadre that sacrificed their lives for the nation. As a ruling party now, the ANC has incrementally lost this noble quality of leadership of society (Dhamija, 2020; Calland & Sithole, 2021; Dhai, 2022; Bennun, 2023; Boesak, 2023). Whereas former president Mbeki and others in the leadership of the ANC continue to have reverence to the ANC of yesteryears, this kind of “romanticism” will remain a pipe dream because the present party cadre is consumed by a culture that does not allow for sacrifices for “a better life for all;” instead, it exudes of self-enrichment and venality to corruption at all levels (Dhamija, 2020; Calland & Sithole, 2021; Dhai, 2022; Bennun, 2023; Boesak, 2023). Criminality, corruption and dispensation of patronage are firmly “embedded” in the ANC of today; and, the intensification of this phenomenon means that the party lost its moral authority. It is now accepted, even within the party itself, that the ANC, in Suttner’s (2022: n.p.) phraseology, “has lost vibrancy” and that “It exists in a liminal state, on the threshold between life and death, mainly living for those still able to draw high salaries from state coffers.” The ANC, as governing party can no longer tenably claim any legitimacy to leadership of society. In the process of dealing with the subject at hand, as described above, this paper shows that the main aims of the NDR, as captured in the Freedom Charter, have remained pipe dreams, and that the reasons thereof reside in the academic and political arenas.

This article is presented in four parts, including this introduction. The second part provides literature survey in order to establish the validity of the scorched-earth metaphor for South Africans’ lived experiences under democratic governance. The literature survey demonstrates conclusively that South Africa’s democracy is in the present era, following over a decade-long state capture and the 28-year ANC rule, indeed consistent with the characterisation as a “boulevard of broken dreams” and “valley of … ghosts,” (Lerner cited in Wooldridge, 2012: 14). Also, this part discusses theorisation of the unitary realities, oneness of science and humanity’s politics in order to lay the conceptual foundations bases on which statistical evidence analysed in the subsequent part, which is the third part of the paper, has to be understood and explained. Research methodology of the article, which involves desktop-based research, literature survey, inclusive of theorisation of the governance utopianism as derivatives of scientific dogma, and elementary statistical analyses, are not accorded a separate part of the paper because they are not specialised nor technical. Finally, the article offers conclusion and recommendations.

Unitary Realities, Oneness of Science and Humanity’s Politics

The absurdity of attempts to explain the continued severity of the sufferance of the majority of South Africans under a constitutional democracy by predicating such understandings against the cruelty of apartheid amounts to academic intellectual sloth and political denialism (see Maharaj, Desai & Bond, 2011; Tsheola & Lukhele, 2014; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014). Whilst the ruling ANC remain consumed with itself (Tsheola & Molefe, 2019; Boesak, 2023), the governance mechanisms in almost all spheres of the South African existence have been deficient and defective (Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, 2013, 2017; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022). The inexplicable replacement of the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) with the 1996 foreign-grown Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) revealed the ANC’s governance utopianism which is inconsistent with the uniqueness of the spatiality and geography difference of South Africa (see Tsheola, 2002a, 2002b). Regarding the former national liberation movement’s aspiration to achieve “a better life for all” South Africans, the adoption of GEAR was always going to be deficient as well as the hyperbolic launch of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsiSA) together with the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa) in 2006, proved to be deficient (see Tsheola, 2012b). At the point of twenty years of the democratic experiment, it was already unambiguously evident that the promise of “a better life for all” was a pipe dream (see Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, 2013, 2017; Tsheola & Lukhele, 2014; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014; Chipkin, 2016; Lannegren & Ilo, 2017; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022). Since then, the ANC government has virtually subjected South Africans to a
dizzying rollercoaster of basic services deficiencies, poverty, inequality, unemployment, corruption, state capture and dysfunctional state institutions, violence and defective governance (see Chipkin 2016; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Lanegren & Ito, 2017; Mamabolo & Tsheola, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; Tsheola & Mmotlana, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Tsheola & Molefe, 2019; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022). To this extent, this paper seeks to frame a theoretical argument that suggests that the locus of the reasons for a democratic South Africa being in its current state of despair, facing a realistic disaster, has to be established in the academic and political arenas, wherein fixation on scientific dogma, conceptual binaries and governance utopianisms has scorched lived experiences of all South Africans.

Notwithstanding his “well-known antipathy to Utopian thinking,” Marx writes in Capital thus: “what separates the worst of architects from the best of bees ... (is that) the former erects his structure in imagination before giving it material form” (cited in Harvey, 1996: 14). That is, humanity possesses “a creative space” that allows “imagination to play both a constructive and a key role” (cited in Harvey, 1996: 14) in conceiving the world to live in and the aspirled lived experiences. Human imagination allows for creative thought that has generated knowledge of pragmatic value to altering the totality of humanity’s unitary reality of existence. Equally, human imagination has destroyed the very life-support systems by creating perfectly avoidable disasters. Humanity has the creative capacity to conceive and implement adequate governance measures to enhance the overall living conditions of all, yet the contemporary world is in the grip of defective governance, maladministration, corruption, risks and disasters, poverty, inequality, unemployment and gender-based-violence, among others (Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, 2013, 2017). Perhaps, humanity’s priorities are twisted. Disciplinary fragmentation has meant that the notion of unitary realities, “science as one” and relativity, rather than absoluteness, of knowledge have become unintended epiphenomena victims of centuries of fixation on scientific dogma, conceptual binaries and governance utopianism (Tsheola, 2012b). Hence, this paper points to the reversion with conceptual binaries, scientific dogma as well as governance utopianism when the complexities of the unitary realities entail sophisticated imagination and creative thought.

If “science is one” and realities are unitary, could it be that the future of humanity rests in finding grand unified theory? This paper shows that sociologists and geographers have already addressed this question, pointing out that spatiality and “geography difference” have always militated against such an overarching and totalising theorisation (see Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, Whatmore, 2009; Given, 2011). This paper hasten to acknowledge the discursive power of scientific dogma and conceptual binaries that are ironically lamented as the locus of humanity’s problems. Humanity has failed to address life-threatening problems amidst politicians unquestioningly retorting “science-based” interventions, which they seek to distinguish from knowledge that they would describe as unscientific. Scientific dogma has itself exaggerated the divide between facts and values, making it impossible to resolve pressing societal insecurities, uncertainties, instabilities, volatilities, violence and disasters. The binaries of theory versus empiricism, left versus right, capitalists versus anti-capitalist, revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary and so on are deeply embedded in humanity’s imagination and creative thinking that they have become the defining parameters of academic research and governance utopianism (Tsheola, 2012b). This paper asserts that these binaries, which are improbable to eliminate, are humanity’s self-created instruments of self-erasure.

**Humanity’s World of “Madness:” Fixation on Scientific Dogma and Binaries**

Isaac Newton’s (1721) and Pareto’s (1897) classical works provide the best possible entry to engagements about the world of humanity and fragmentary scientific theorisation. It is trite that human imagination and creative thinking are powerful as to defy the forces of gravity, creating scientific milestones such as successfully sending the James Web Telescope into deep space. But Pareto (1897: 9) defines humanity’s limitations thus: “Above, far above the prejudices and passions of men soars the laws of nature. ... Man can come to understand them, he is incapable of changing them.” Barring such limitations, social sciences have always lagged behind natural sciences and, ordinarily, attempted to adapt models and theories therefrom in the hope of explaining social realities. Generally, social sciences have historically been predicated as imperfect functions of natural sciences’ progress. In an eloquent demonstration of the binaries of “facts” versus “values,” Isaac Newton (1721) argues that he “can calculate the motions of heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people” on earth (cited in Orrell, 2010: 9). Notwithstanding the powerful imagination and thinking, human mind is imperfect; and, social realities are a complex world of “values” and the so-called “unscientific” knowledge.

It appears that social sciences progress has been imperilled by humanity’s imperfect mind and world of “madness.” Given the intricate connections between “facts” and “values” in humanity’s world, theorisation has historically invoked religious and theological principles (Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009; Given, 2011). Contesting the binaries of absolute versus relative and facts versus values, Leibniz challenged Isaac Newton’s (1721) theorisation of space and time in terms of absolute theory. Drawing from relational theory, Leibniz argues that the absolute theory of space and time diminishes “God’s powers by making it seem as if He was located in (rather than creator and Lord of) space and time” (cited in Harvey, 1996: 4). Exploring a similar philosophical formulation, Harvey (1996: 4), explains fixation on conceptual binaries in humanity’s world of “madness” through a hypothetical statement thus: “If God is located somewhere in space then maybe what appears to be on His left is actually to our right!” Evidently, fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries has impaired the progress of knowledge (Tsheola, 2012b); and, politicians have ordinarily defended the continued fragmentary theorisation because it generates sound bites for governance utopianism. Rather than limitations of imagination and thought, it is this elusive nexus in the academic and political arenas that accounts for humanity’s inability to creatively conceive pragmatic solutions to enhance lived experiences. Hence, Mkandawire (2011)
laments gate-keeping in research scholarship, which is a nexus of unscripted collusion between academia and politics, whereas Maharaj et al. (2011) highlighted the dangers of “intellectual sloth” in South Africa’s disastrous development trajectories.

Paradoxically, scientific dogma and conceptual binaries are undeniably useful tools for making humanity’s imagination and thinking intelligible; simultaneously, they create confusion in terms of the “oneness of science” and unity of realities. Politicians have freely juxtaposed their “othering” rhetoric through binaries such as left versus right, capitalist versus anti-capitalist (socialist), progressive versus conservative, radical versus reactionary as well as revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary (Harvey, 1996; Tsheola, 2012b), in the process undermining the creative power of humanity’s imagination and thought. The same kind of binaries have been common in scientific alienation and knowledge fragmentation within the academic research arena (Maharaj et al., 2011; Mkandawire, 2011). Even worse, fixation on conceptual binaries in academic discourse has meant that such terms are assigned “all sorts of different meanings … often depending upon the unspecified map deployed” (Harvey, 1996: 5). The fixation on dogma and binaries, which are paradoxically important signposts for the progress of science, implies that the progress of knowledge is equally fixed in that it forces the distinction between subjectivities versus objectivities, thereby undermining the unique qualities of humanity’s world of “madness.” The latter world consists of complex intricacies of permanences, fluxes and changes, as well as inseparability of incessant mutual configuration of facts and values, that are not amenable to the fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries. A well-considered exploration of values and subjectivities, whilst retaining the integrity of evidence, facts and objectivities, may enhance the quality of theorisation, knowledge generation and efficacy of pragmatic solutions.

A simplistic and, perhaps, misleading philosophical positioning could suggest that it would be easy to abandon conceptual binaries and fragmentary theories because reality is unitary and “science is one” in reverence for overarching totalising theorisation. Unfortunately, the latter is confronted by challenges of spatiality and “geography difference.” Presently, Western science, knowledge and methods continue to overshadow indigenous knowledges and all else (Amo-Agyemang, 2021). Hence, South African traditional healers were informed that their Covid-19 interventions were not scientifically tested, amidst legislation that seeks to integrate traditional medicine with mainstream Western procedures. Science is facing this intractable dilemma wherein humanity is unable to benefit from the wealth of knowledges (Amo-Agyemang, 2021), even as there is acceptance that “science is one.” According to Pareto (1897: 9), “It is only the imperfections of the human mind which multiply the divisions of the sciences, separating astronomy from physics or chemistry, the natural sciences from the social sciences.” Pareto’s (1897) argument could be updated to include indigenous and traditional knowledges as sciences. At the core of fragmentary science are the dogmatic methods and procedures, rather than evidence of the quality of knowledge generated. Scientific dogma refers to the existence of sets of assumed authoritative principles that are held to be “incontrovertibly true,” providing frameworks for scientific progress. Fixation on scientific dogma creates problems for the progress of knowledge itself because humanity’s imagination and creative thought are experimental in nature, devoid of any claim to dogmatism. In tacit support of Pareto’s (1897) argument, Orrell (2010: 163) states that scientific methods of research have since the 1960s produced models that are “imperfect patches; instead of elegant proofs, or reductive formulae, they offer only fuzzy glimpses of the complex reality.” Knowledge generated through fragmentary scientific dogma and binaries offers partial perspectives of the complexities of the unitary realities (Tsheola, 2012b; Amo-Agyemang, 2021). Lacking in the necessary degree of “openness,” the unprecedented multiplicity of models and theories has not adequately captured “the complexity and diversity” of the unified and mutually configuring realities of human existence (Ferber & Nelson, 1993: 65). Understanding the unity of realities, natural sciences dreamed of Grand Unified Theory that could explain “all the known physical forces and the evolution of the universe,” sometimes straddling into hyperbolic hopes of establishing a single model and/or theory that would unite “all the physical and social sciences” (Orrell, 2010: 162). Whereas some sociologists attempted to establish grand theory, social science theorisation produced impeccable outcomes given the intractability of spatiality and “geography difference” (Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009; Given, 2011). Hence, the continued adoption of free market mechanisms for application under diverse spatialities and geographies has created a scorched-earth at global, regional and national scales. Politicians’ reverence for catchy sloganeering and governance utopianism provided defence to fragmentary scientific dogma and conceptual binaries at the expense of pragmatism for socio-economic transformation. This same scientific arena has captivated a democratic South Africa since at least 1996, leading to the present lived experiences that resemble scorched-earth. This reality will be elucidated in the next section using evidence from Statistics South Africa.

Spatiality and “Geography Difference” Theorisation

Spatiality and “geography difference” reside at the heart of the difficulty of social sciences achieving totalising theorisation (Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009; Given, 2011); however, these “incommunicability, particularity, and irreducible individualism” are not necessarily cast in stone (Harvey, 1996: 9). Whereas sophisticated and mindboggling, social science has to confront fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries, if it has to produce knowledge of pragmatic significance in the world of people’s “madness.” In humanity’s world of lived experiences it may be that the distinction based on facts versus values and objectivities versus subjectivities, among other binaries, is unhelpful to decision making about interventions for socio-economic transformation (Tsheola, 2012b). Indeed, strict separation of facts versus values and objectivities versus subjectivities in humanity’s world of “madness” may amount to sleight because of the impossibility of holding value and subjectivity constant. Additionally, spatiality and geography difference create complexities within the contexts of simultaneous permanences, fluxes and
changes in humanity’s world. Due to the pre-eminence of elusive dogma-based and binaries-framed theorisation (Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009; Given, 2011), insecurities, disasters, instabilities, defective governance and such other vice have continued to visit humanity’s world of “madness” amidst unprecedented scientific milestones and multiplicity of fragmentary models. For instance, the 21st century civilised world did not have to suffer over 559.6 million and 6.4 million infections and deaths, respectively, to Covid-19 as of July 08, 2022 (World Health Organisation, July 08, 2022), if it were not for evident paralysis and fixation on scientific dogma and knowledge binaries. As a world-renowned constitutional democracy, South Africa imposed draconian Covid-19 regulations, disguised as science-based, shutting-out all alternative “knowledges.” Indeed, there are millions of people who were infected by Covid-19 and have survived without relying on the so-called science-based procedures; and, the academics nor politicians have cared to establish and understand how these “other” peoples have survived, except for concluding on dogmatic assumed authority about natural immunity. Spatiality and geography difference are of pragmatic significance in simultaneously understanding facts, values, objectivities and subjectivities as part of the unitary totality of humanity’s lived realities within the contexts of permanences, fluxes and changes.

Based on the principles of “openness” and rejection of “premature closure,” dialectics, relational thinking and literary theory have challenged the exclusionary fixation on scientific dogma that feeds from the conceptual binaries associated with facts, positivism and empiricism (Theodat, 2022). Ironically, dialectical and relational thinking presents one of the realistic iterative routes to the pursuit of the totalising theorisation of the unitary realities (Mills, 1959; Harvey, 1996; James, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009; Given, 2011), even if there may be no immediate pragmatic benefit to society’s lived experiences. As Harvey (1996: 6) puts it, dialectical and relational thought confronts scientific dogma and political status quo as well as “standard applications of statistical methods and mathematical modelling procedures, not so much in terms of actual practices but in terms of interpretations and meanings.” Given that knowledge is relative, its progress needs to invoke endless iterations and evolutionary thesis, antithesis, synthesis and self-criticism in order to create and recreate understandings and explanations of permanences, fluxes and changes in humanity’s world of “madness.” In this way, social sciences would escape the fixation on essences and absolutes (Friedman, 1995), thereby evading limitations imposed by divergent spatiality and geography difference. Addressing the anthropocene epoch, Theodat (2022: 348) argues that humanity “alone is in bad company” because it will require extraordinarily “long time to understand the world,” because “without the experience of others,” every contemporary human progress “would be reduced to reinventing hot water every generation.” Science itself has ignored this advisory that there exist a multiplicity of knowledges that cannot be ignored if humanity hoped to adequately understand and explain complexities of spatiality and geography difference within which facts, values, objectivities and subjectivities are intricately interwoven into singular totalising unitary wholes.

**Governance Utopianism versus Pragmatism**

In *Capital*, Marx notes that: “There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits” (cited in Harvey, 1996: 14-15). Humanity’s imagination and thought have ironically modified nature, resulting into disasters associated with global warming, veld fires, pandemics and floods. If humanity’s “madness” is capable of causing devastation by altering forces of nature, it must be equally possible to exert imaginative and thinking power to establish appropriate governance systems and mechanisms to enhance society’s lived experiences in all diverse spatialities and geography differences. As Harvey (1996: 2) puts it, “… the task of critical analysis is not, surely, to prove the impossibility of foundational beliefs (or truths), but to find a more plausible and adequate basis for the foundational beliefs that make interpretation and political action meaningful, creative, and possible.” It is possible to generate and apply knowledge of pragmatic significance to society’s lived experiences, whilst simultaneously avoiding fixation with scientific dogma, conceptual binaries and governance utopianism. Whereas such knowledge discoveries may not gain global headlines nor political acclaim for academics, they could dose-off fires of the scorched-earth significantly to render society’s lived experiences relatively bearable by ameliorating the scourge of corruption, poverty, inequality, hunger, instabilities, insecurities, violence, mismanagement and defective governance, notwithstanding the complicating spatiality and geography difference.

There is no deniability of the notion that “no single theoretical system can possibly ask all the interesting questions or provide all the satisfying answers” (Gregory cited in Gregory et al., 2009); and, an overarching theory may fail to address the diversity of spatiality and geography difference. Besides, the unity and complexities of humanity’s world of lived experiences does not necessitate the search for a totalising theory (Gregory cited in Gregory et al., 2009). But James’s (2006: 7) states that a totalising theorisation could merely be a “sensitising and generalising” overarching, but “open,” method for the investigation of social structures, subjectivities, formations and objectivities that simultaneously accommodate facts, values, permanences, fluxes and changes of humanity’s world of “madness.” As Given (2011: 10) puts it, the end product could be focused “on the higher order organisation of its ideas, rather than in ‘testing’ for the truth of its ideas through close contact with empirical reality.” Indeed, critical imagination and thinking does not need to be seized with testing or proving “the impossibility of foundational beliefs” or truths (Harvey, 1996). Necessarily, overarching theorisation would be “highly abstract” wherein “formal organisation and arrangement of concepts take priority over understanding the social reality” (Mills, 1959: 10). Accordingly, Mills (1959: 10) suggests that such theorisation would be “separate from concrete concerns of everyday life and its variety in time and space.” Whereas such overarching theorisation may be far removed from the realities of society’s daily lived experiences, it could assist politicians who are confronted with the unitary realities of human existence to craft plausible, adequate, creative and pragmatic solutions for socio-economic transformation.
Indeed, theorisation has to search for pragmatic solutions that progressively modify social realities in order to avoid the pitfalls of economics (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Friedman, 1995; Orrell, 2010; Tsheola, Ramoroka & Sebola, 2017), which has gained “its credility from its association with hard sciences like physics and mathematics” (Orrell, 2010: 9). The latter sciences are framed through sets of dogmatic principles rather than a recognition of the unity of facts, values, objectivities, subjectivities, permanences, fluxes and changes in humanity’s lived experiences. If Isaac Newton’s (1721) assertion about “the madness of people” in humanity’s world is anything to go by, then theorisation need not seek for perfectionism; instead, it needs to challenge humanity’s imagination and thought in order to intensify its sophistication and to match the complexities of the lived experiences. But reverence for constructions of straightforward governance utopianisms is preeminent. As the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Marcus Aurelius, writes in *Meditations*, “One thing hastens into being, another hastens out of it. ... Flux and change are for ever renewing the fabric of the universe. ... In such a running river, where there is no firm foothold, what is there for a man to value among all the many things that are racing past him? (cited in Harvey, 1996: 10). The imagination and thinking fatigue that comes with this reality has seen academics and politicians persist with governance utopianism, rather than search hard for plausible but complex pragmatic solutions.

**Twenty-Eight Years Scorched-Earth South Africa**

The ensuing discussion will demonstrate that South Africans’ lived experiences under constitutional democracy have increasingly resembled scorched-earth, far from the promise of “a better life for all” and rights of access to basic services (Tsheola & Lukhele, 2014; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014; Chipkin, 2016; Lannegren & Ito, 2017; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022). The panel of experts tasked by the presidency to investigate July 2021 unrest notes that their “…analysis suggests that a combination of complex, multi-dimensional, and obscure factors formed the background and led to the outbreak of violence never before seen in … post-apartheid democracy…” (The Presidency, 2021: 3). But the most profound statement made by this panel is that “The fear of many is that not only will a repeat of such violence find ground in the all-too-familiar context of negative political contestation, where certain interest take advantage of the levels of poverty, inequality, lack of service delivery and social tensions to advance their cause” (The Presidency, 2021: 4). Assuming that the panel did not think that South Africans are thoughtless and hapless citizens, then the real problem that undergird the violent unrest and widespread looting has to be the miserable lived experiences of poverty, inequality, unemployment, basic services deficiencies, the scourge of corruption and, perhaps, defective state governance. Whereas the optics of July 2021 have literally resembled a scorched-earth, the lived experiences underlying those visuals are longstanding and regular for the majority of South Africans. Indeed, the psychological imprints of the July 2021 events are real; and, the panel records “…a worry that the violence has left behind a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability because of the ineffective response of the security services and an appetite for lawlessness by those who might feel emboldened by the apparent lack of state capacity” (The Presidency, 2021: 4). Suttner (2022: n.p.) sums up the scorched-earth South Africa thus: “There are also ominous signs of social disintegration as in repeated tavern killings, multiple rapes including the recent mass rape in Krugersdorp, hold-ups in public places and a range of other killings and disruptions of the peace or sometimes unexplained destruction that just ‘happens’ as part of everyday life.” The scorched-earth metaphor is for South Africans’ lived experiences real, in both tangible and intangible senses; and, the ensuing synopsis paints that picture.

**Statistical Portrait of Scorched-earth South Africa**

StatsSA (2022) estimates that the population of South Africa had reached 60.6 million by the end of June 2022; and, that the official unemployment rate was 34.5%, with labour force participation rate of 56.9% and employment absorption ratio of 37.3%. Furthermore, StatsSA (2022) reports that 61.2% of South Africans were unemployed for less than 12 months, which is considered to be short-term unemployment. A year of unemployment is a long period that may cause hopelessness in society; and, to have over 60% of people in short-term unemployment must be seriously concerning for national security. The violent public unrest of July 2021 cannot be tenably divorced from this misery and hopelessness of unemployment because it involved unprecedented looting of goods. As if that was not enough, annual consumer inflation surged to a 13-year high of 7.4% by the end of June 2022, driven primarily by transport and food (StatsSA, 2022). The economy, as StatsSA (2022) reports, grew by 1.9% GDP rate in the first quarter of 2022; and, that is in contrast to the average annual growth rate of about 5% during 2004 to 2007. Average poverty headcount in South Africa as of 2019/20 was estimated at 56.75%, and this percentage consists of 58.6% and 54.9%, respectively, for females and males (StatsSA, 2022).

Housebreaking or burglary has consistently been the most common crime experienced by households in South Africa. The number of households that experienced this crime in the five years preceding the survey has increased from 2.1 million in 2015/16 to 2.3 million in 2019/20 (StatsSA, 2022). In 2019/2020, the Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (GPSJS) recorded an estimated 1.2 million incidences of housebreaking which affected 891 000 households (StatsSA, 2022). Whereas housebreaking refers to burglary that takes place in the absence of home owners, home robbery is psychologically traumatising because it is violent and, sometimes fatal, because it occurs with people in the house. In 2019/2020, the GPSJS reports that about 169 000 incidences of home robberies affected 139 000 households (StatsSA, 2022). Incidences of motor vehicle theft were estimated at 88 000 in 2019/2020; and, those for murder increased from 12 000 in 2018/19 to 16 000 in 2019/20, whereas the number of households that experienced murder increased from 12 000 to 15 000 over the same period (StatsSA, 2022). The marginal decline in the number of households that experienced murder would not necessarily weaken the societal perception of being under siege.
Experiences of common crime such as theft of personal property and street robbery have increased significantly in South Africa; and, that cannot be dissociated from the severity of poverty and inequality. The GPSJS reports that about 1.1 million incidences of personal property theft have affected 902,000 individuals in 2019/20 (StatsSA, 2022). GPSJS reports that the second most common crime experienced by South Africans, following personal property theft, during the five-year period 2015/16 to 2019/20 is street robbery, which increased from 67,000 to 1.1 million (StatsSA, 2022). The most concerning event with these increasing incidences of common crime during the 2015/16-2019/20 period is that most of them, 47.9% and 34.7%, respectively, involved the use of knives and guns as weapons. There are insecurities among South Africans walking in the streets or when in possession of their personal property. Assault is reported to have decreased from 497,000 in 2018/19 to 294,000 in 2019/20, affecting 225,000 individuals, but it is worrying that 50.1% of these incidences involved the use of knives as weapons (StatsSA, 2022). About 1.4 million incidences of customer fraud, affecting 384,000 persons were reported in 2019/20, whilst 99,000 car hijackings affected 85,000 people during the same period (StatsSA, 2022). Headlines in South Africa are replete with stories of gender-based violence. A day does not pass without a horrific story of abuse or killing of women; and, the society cannot be described as a constitutional democracy that offers protection and security. Women are more vulnerable to crime, largely unaccounted for in statistics reported by Statistics South Africa and such other institutions.

The situation described above is also a function of the deficiencies of public service delivery. In recent years, South Africa has experienced rolling blackout that have seen businesses and citizens suffer severely. According to Suttner (2022: n.p.), “This most recent round of “load shedding” left many people with a sense of weariness, despair and low expectations about resolution of the energy crisis.” Service delivery in a democratic South Africa has been sub-standard and deficient (Tsheola, 2012a; Tsheola & Sebola, 2012; Tsheola, Ramonyai & Segage, 2014; Tsheola & Mmotelana, 2018; Tsheola & Molefe, 2019). Overall, improvements in South Africans’ living conditions since 2012/13 have been negligible because the extension of access to services such as sanitation, piped water, electricity and formal dwellings has virtually stagnated around the 2012/13 rates. As of 2019/20, about 10.9% of households in South Africa continued to use solid fuels for cooking because access to electricity remained around the 2012 rate of 86% (StatsSA, 2022). This proportion of households using solid fuels for cooking varies across the national space, reaching highs of 41.5% in Limpopo Province during the same period (StatsSA, 2022). Nationally, the use of electricity for cooking has remained around the 2012 rate of 78.4% households, whereas access to piped water has hovered around 91% during the same period (StatsSA, 2022). One of the most significant indicators of the level of living in South Africa relates to access to land and full ownership of formal dwellings. Whereas 79.3% and 13.9% of households, respectively, live in formal and informal dwellings, only 54.9% fully own the formal dwelling (StatsSA, 2022). The room density for households living in informal dwellings is far greater than that of those living in formal dwellings. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of South Africans have continued to live in the unsanitary squalor of informality without full ownership of land or dwelling in 2019/20.

The flood that hit KwaZulu-Natal Province in April 2022 created damage to physical infrastructure, but also reminded South Africans that a large majority of learners have continued to suffer long distance walks to access educational institutions. Reading from the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) of 2020, StatsSA (2022) reports that 10.1 million learners walked to educational institutions, and that this number consists of 59.4% of all learners in South Africa. Again, this indicator shows the negligible change that has taken place between 2013 and 2019/20 because this number was 11 million in 2013, consisting of 63.4% of all learners (StatsSA, 2022). Inevitably, walking to educational institutions, especially in cases where it occurs over long distances or intractable obstacles, is prejudicial to the educational rights of learners. The constitutionally guaranteed right to access basic education is not supposed to mean mere arrival at the educational institution on daily basis; instead, citizens have to realise such rights without undue difficulties and insecurities. Unsurprisingly, the number of learners who dropped out of school has increased. The 2021 General Household Survey reports that school dropout rate for the 15-year-olds, 17-year-olds, 18-year-olds and the 19-year-olds, respectively, was 3%, 9%, 29.3% and 46.3% in 2021 (StatsSA, 2022). These school dropout rates are concerning because they feed into the cohort of youth that possess no school education or skills that would enhance their prospects of employment, increasing the risk of societal uprising, crime and violence.

This section has described “lived experiences” of the majority of South Africans, far removed from that envisaged in the principles undergirded by the Constitution as well as the Bill of Rights. It has long been established that achieving “a better life for all” in a democratic South Africa would not be automatic, it would require deliberate appropriate action on the part of the state to create enabling environments (Tsheola, 2002a, 2002b, 2012b, 2013, 2017; Fazeekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Mamabolo & Tsheola, 2017; Tsheola & Lukhele, 2014; Tsheola & Makhudu, 2017; Tsheola, Ramoroka & Sebola, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Dhamaji, 2020; Dhai, 2022). As of 2022, this paper concedes that the South African state has not created an enabling environment within which citizens could make use of productive opportunities to secure better and improved lived experiences. But then the state of the nation has become worse, as discussed below.

**State Capture Regime of Political and Economic Corruption**

De Klerk & Solomon (2019) argue that endemic corruption has been institutionalised in a democratic South Africa through the phenomenon described as state capture. Indeed, “Systemic corruption has become the norm in South Africa;” and, it is claimed that “the scale and magnitude of corruption” reached industrial scale in a democratic South Africa under president Zuma’s regime (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019: 64). When president Ramaphosa took over the state presidency in February 2018, under the banner of the
“New Dawn,” there was hope that his regime would reverse state capture and “the politics of patronage” (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019). The Ramaphosa regime effected negligible changes by, among other acts, appointing new boards to South Africa’s troubled SOEs. In a mere five years of Ramaphosa’s presidency, it appears that his regime has caused more damage to South Africa by pursuing the same state capture trajectories, as evidenced by the flagrant corruption under Covid-19. Essentially, a democratic South Africa has degenerated from being “a weak to a dysfunctional state” (Labuschagne, 2017: 53). Evidently, the politics of patronage continued unabated under the Ramaphosa regime because the patriarchal political system which was already entrenched (Chipkin, 2016; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Lannegren & Ito, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022) continued unabated. A democratic South Africa has been confronted with a political culture that accepts that “political power is a mere mechanism to be manipulated in order to gain financially from the state without concern for ordinary citizens,” whilst simultaneously placing the nation at increased risk of the intensification and expansion of state capture (Labuschagne, 2017; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019: 67). State capture is more than just “extensive corruption,” it involves a systemic network structure of corrupt actors who target state institutions through “well-established” high-level state functionaries and political leaders in order to access state resources and political protection in pursuit of private selfish goals at the expense of the public good (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019). Beyond de-institutionalising people, state capture also systematically erodes democratic processes and disables democratic consolidation (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019).

Under state capture, powerful actors use corruption to influence policies, laws and the economy in order to serve their private selfish interests (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019). According to de Klerk & Solomon (2019: 65), South African state capture “is linked to a silent coup; a political project granted legitimacy under the radical economic transformation” enforced by the ANC. South Africa’s SOEs were destroyed through the institutionalisation of systematic corruption (Labuschagne, 2017; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019), which the state governance failed to prevent. De Klerk & Solomon (2019: 70) note that SOEs and state-related entities were rendered inept under the weight of state capture.

The “Ramaphoria” euphoria that came with his replacement of former president Zuma evaporated into thin air as the personal protective equipment corruption associated with Covid-19 in 2020 dissipated all hope that his regime could constitute “a state capture-free government” (Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022). Reading from Martin (2014), De Klerk & Solomon (2019: 68) describe state capture “as a situation where there is disproportionate, unregulated influence of decision-making processes by interest groups … (that) change laws, policies and regulatory measures through illegal means, including illicit contributions to political parties or actors within political parties, vote buying in Parliament, and buying presidential and court decisions.” In South Africa, state capture was indeed manufactured and entrenched through “the conjunction of politics and business” wherein politicians and business elites established “nepotistic” political relationship (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019: 68).

Hence, state capture phenomenon in South Africa is also conceived as “a type of political and economic corruption which is theoretically defined as a regime type, or a ‘means of social order and control’” (Croucamp & Malan, 2018: 98). Effectively, state capture illegally “challenges constitutional rule and erodes legitimacy and trust,” leading to “a system of patrimonialism, or system of patronage, which has been subverted by parties in the private economy” (Croucamp & Malan, 2018: 98; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019: 69). The ANC’s culture of patrimonial politics has captured the state and derailed democratic governance since at least 2009 (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Martin & Solomon, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Dhai, 2022). State capture was only institutionalised in 2009 under former president Zuma’s regime; however, the foundations thereof were laid since 2005 when he was deputy president of party and the state (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Labuschagne, 2017; Croucamp & Malan, 2018; de Klerk & Solomon, 2019). The most disconcerting eventuality is that when president Ramaphosa was deputy president, it equally appears that Bosasa too was, just like the Guptas did to former president Zuma, preparing for a takeover. Whereas the state capture exposed in 2017 appear to have deterred and disrupted the Bosasa campaign, the Guptas wielded control over the state for over a decade. President Ramaphosa’s “New Dawn” promise and anti-corruption campaign for ANC and, by extension, state leadership were effectively rendered null and void because the sun never rose (de Klerk & Solomon, 2019; Dhamija, 2020; Dhai, 2022; Boesak, 2023). A democratic South Africa resembles scorched-earth imagery.

Conclusions

This article argued that natural science has achieved milestones that have tended to defy and sometimes modify the forces of nature, but that social science theorisation has instead served politicians with governance utopianisms that failed to progressively transform society’s lived experiences. South Africa, under the ANC governance, is a typical example wherein principles of constitutional democracy and basic rights have not manifested in people’s lived experiences. The article finds that politicians’ reverence for governance utopianism has been bolstered by science’s fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries, which do not capture the intricate complexities of the unitary realities of humanity’s lived experiences, which resemble scorched-earth metaphor in a democratic South Africa. As governing party, the former liberation movement, the ANC, has continued to be consumed by political derivatives of scientific dogma and conceptual binaries, whilst South Africans’ lived experiences resemble scorched-earth metaphor. The July 2021 civil unrest and looting in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Province have both literally and figuratively resembled the
schorched-earth metaphor that is the South Africans’ lived experiences. The paper concedes that there appears to be no silver lining in the horizon as the ANC’s 6th Policy Conference of July 29-31, 2022 inspired no pragmatic hope.

From a philosophical perspective, this article frames its conclusion thus: Given the multiplicity of spatiality and geography difference, if what resides on God’s left is on humanity’s right, then the “rightness” and/or “leftness” of people is not only complicating “madness,” but it consists of intractable complexities of particularity, individuality and incommunicability that have led to fragmentary science, fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries as well as politicians’ reverence for governance utopianism, simultaneously as society’s lived experiences resemble scorched-earth metaphor. In the nexus of academic and political arenas lies a comfort zone that creates contentedness with people’s “madness” that regularises scorched-earth lived experiences as normal. Hence, the worst of humanity’s imagination and thinking that has created so much misery and disasters for society persist devoid of concerted confrontation from the academic and political arenas. The paper makes three recommendations, thus: Academics, especially in social sciences, need to self-reflect in order to embrace “openness,” reject “premature closure” and “intellectual sloth,” and confront their fixation on scientific dogma and conceptual binaries; Science has to confront the most difficult of its tasks which is to understand and explain the totalising nature of society’s lived experiences in respect of the inextricabilities and intricacies of facts, values, objectivities, subjectivities, permanences, fluxes and changes, rather than seek for simplistic and straightforward solutions to the complex unitary realities of humanity’s world of “madness;” and, Politicians need to be pragmatic, to be receptive to self-criticism and to desist from their reverence for governance utopianism.

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