

THE INSTITUTE OF BLACK STUDIES

by Nimrod Mkele

This can be described as the conference that almost did not take place, for no sooner was it publicised than the security police took an intense interest in it. They demanded the names of the speakers, the conference programme, the constitution of the Institute of Black Studies and the papers to be read at the conference with the threat that if they did not get the papers, they would take steps to ensure that the conference was banned. That banning threat was carried out and the conference had to move to a different venue. More of this later.

Let us get back to where it all started. The Institute of Black Studies arose because some of us felt that there was a need to establish a journal of Black opinion and arts which would explore Black thought on issues affecting Blacks in a socially productive way. During discussions it soon became evident that what was needed was an organisation through which Blacks could articulate their views on issues affecting themselves and South Africa. Thus was born the Institute of Black Studies which serves as a forum for the expression of Black intellectual viewpoints. It is intended to stimulate thinking, writing and research on issues affecting Blacks and generally to examine and reassess the values, standards and prejudices by which we live.

Such a forum was essential at this time because internal and external developments have created pressures on South Africa which call into question the tenets and dogmas of what has come to be called 'our traditional way of life'. These forces are rapidly making obsolete the traditional roles South Africans are accustomed to play and the values by which they order their lives. In short, the old master-and-servant relation between White and Black has broken down. These processes need to be understood if adaptations are to be made intelligently to the changes that are taking place.

On the one hand the whites view this less as a signal for the need to dismantle apartheid than as an alert to entrench white privilege. They reinforce their position by sophisticated and awesome repressive measures the function of which is to set up barriers against seeking constructive and intelligent solutions to the problems facing South Africa today.

The Blacks on the other hand reject White values which depersonalise, dehumanise and devalue the Black man. They find the White man's yardsticks irrelevant to Black experience. They believe that they have a contribution to make and a role to play in the changes that are taking place in our country and that they can best do this by examining and looking at our situation from a Black man's point of view.

It is true that Whites have attempted to 'understand' the Black man, but largely for purposes of economic and political control. Thus their endeavours to 'understand' the Black man were, and still are, handicapped by the very nature and quality of the relationships that subsist between these groups. Even the analytic tools developed by their social scientists are products of their specific culture and needs and tend therefore to be coloured by their cultural assumptions and needs.

The result is that among Whites an understanding of Black aspirations, attitudes and intellectual perspectives remains an almost total void of vague and superficial assumptions that contribute practically nothing to an understanding of the forces at work in South Africa.

There is an added fact that because South Africa is a divided society, with Whites occupying the dominant role and the Blacks the subordinate, communication reflects the limitations of our racial and occupational roles. For communication is limited to the requirements of the master-and-servant situation. This limits understanding among South Africans. In a situation in which Whites deliberately set up barriers to and even legislate against understanding the stage is set for an irrevocable schism.

It is this stifling of communication by 'suppression of communication acts' that has led to a polarisation of Black-White views and opinions and attitudes. Is it surprising then that Blacks have begun to talk **to** themselves, **among** themselves; **about** their own needs and aspirations? For the Whites talk **to** themselves, **among** themselves, **about** Black needs and problems.

Black consciousness must therefore be seen against this background: as the Black Man's claim to self-determination and self-definition. The Black man rejects the White man as his reference point and accepts only himself as his own frame of reference. He finds the White man's values of questionable validity and his 'yardsticks' irrelevant to Black experience. He therefore insists on the legitimacy of Black Identity and the validity of Black experience. He wants to be accepted on his own terms, not on the negativistic and devaluative terms of the White man.

The most important single factor that characterises South Africa as she enters the last quarter of the 20th century is the virtual absence of dialogue between Black and White men and to a lesser extent among Blacks themselves. The fact that this is in large measure due to legislative proscription does not make it any less dangerous. It in fact widens the communica-

tion gap already existing and sharpens the polarisation of attitudes still further.

Today's need is more than ever to get a meaningful input by Black analysts and communicators to examine these changes and their implications closely. Since we ourselves are a part of the process of change we are of necessity involved in seeking a definition of the roles **we** are to play in our changing world. The Institute of Black Studies was thus formed to enable Blacks to imbue the quest for a better understanding with the empathy and critical approach that will make for a positive and meaningful contribution to the debate on the future of our country.

Hence the theme of the Inaugural Conference: *The Black Perspective*. We had to answer the questions: Who am I? How did I get to be like this? What am I doing about it? In other words: Where am I? How did I get here? Where do I go from here? *We had to tell it like it is because we know it like it is since we live it like it is*. In short, we had to define ourselves, our present position and our role in today's South African situation. This was a conference **of** Blacks, talking **to** Blacks, **about** Blacks. It was Blacks looking at themselves.

The speakers included three expatriates from the United States, namely: Ezekiel Mphahlele ('Zeke'), Mphiwa Mbatha and Herbert Vilakazi. The rest of the speakers were from South African universities and the intellectual public.

Without doubt the conference attracted a great deal of publicity in the press. It appears to have had the widest press coverage of any conference in South Africa in recent times. This was due, it appears, to the fact that it was the first conference of its kind in which, as one paper put it, a black think tank had gathered to talk about the issues of the day. It was held in the middle of the Soweto troubles and predictably people wanted to know what Blacks would say about themselves and their needs during this grave time of crisis. Not least was the calibre of the speakers themselves, for they represented some of the foremost brains in the Black community.

Hence the inordinate interest of the security police in the conference and their undisguised hostility towards it. For in South African a stage has been reached when the powers—that be do not want to **hear** Blacks, let alone let them speak. As a result the conference was banned in Johannesburg; we were fortunate to find a venue at the Wilgèspruit Fellowship Centre in Roodepoort, a magisterial district adjoining Johannesburg.

Because of this the conference started a day late. All papers were read except one by Mr N. Mkele which was to have formed the keynote address. The change of venue also affected attendance. If it had been held at the original venue attendance would have reached 500 a day; as it is we had to be satisfied with between 100 and 200 people a day, but on the last day the figure reached 500.

Including the opening address by the chairman Mr B. Ngakane, 14 papers were read. Let us now take a brief look at the conference papers. They covered the historical, sociological and psychological perspectives of the Black man's existence. They looked at the Black man's World view through his writings and examined the process of alienation as reflected

by Black writing. The last three papers were devoted to the processes of change and the role of Black consciousness in the Black man's struggle for liberation.

The papers did not cover that important area of the day-to-day living of the Black man—his current existential reality, the role he plays, the organisational forms through which his life is channelled and the educational preparations for his role in South African society. Nor, apart from writing were the other arts (music and the plastic arts) covered. This was due both to a lack of time and speakers in these areas. Future conferences should examine these areas in depth and an effort must be made to develop experts in these areas, especially in the arts.

A cursory examination of the papers shows them to be of high calibre. They represent an objective attempt to examine Black experience in depth: they examine its origins, its existential reality, delineate the changing character of our social being and outline the forces that make for change. In a brief report it is impossible to do justice to the wealth of ideas, constructs and insights contained in those papers.

It is one of the tragedies of the South African situation, with its plethora of laws that proscribe communication, that papers by Zeke Mphahlele and Fatima Meer may not be published. Zeke Mphahlele is a victim of the 1964 blanket ban on Black South African writers. Fatima Meer was banned immediately after the conference. Mphahlele's first paper is an examination of Black experience by a South African exile; his second paper examines the alienation process that afflicts Black writers. Fatima Meer's paper looks at what 25 years of apartheid has meant to the Black man. These papers are in themselves a valuable contribution to an understanding of the meaning of the concept of Black experience and can by no stretch of imagination be regarded as 'subversive' even when allowance is made for the wide definition of that term in South African statutes.

A side effect of the conference is that several newspapers are threatened with prosecution for publishing features and comments by Mphahlele and extracts from his papers. The papers would have been published by now, but for the attentions of the security police who raided our office, carried off the papers (in some cases the only copies available) and conference tapes along with our secretary. This has set publication back seriously, for we have had to retype several papers.

In conclusion, it needs to be said that Blacks demonstrated that they could talk about themselves and examine issues affecting them dispassionately in the midst of one of the most prolonged and determined confrontations to face our country. That they could do that in the midst of conflict augurs well for South Africa. Whether white South Africa will read that message correctly is another matter.

Judging by the enthusiastic response of the public and the press and the continued interest still being shown it appears that the conference met a long felt need of the Black people for articulating their own views and of whites in seeking to understand the Black man's viewpoint and aspirations. □