

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND WHITE LIBERALS

By Richard Turner

The argument between "black consciousness" and "white liberalism" is heading towards greater confusion. Important problems of goals and tactics underlie the argument, but at the moment these issues are being obscured by misconceptions and by semantical confusions. In this article I want to look at one or two of these specific issues rather than to give an evaluation of the situation as a whole.

The major misperception is to see "black consciousness" as essentially an attack on "white liberalism", and nothing more. In fact, the attack is directed essentially against "white racist society" (SASO manifesto Point 1), and the question of "white liberals" is considered to be of relatively minor importance. It has been given disproportionate significance in the way in which the white press has reported "black consciousness" meetings. For obvious ideological reasons there has been an attempt to distort "black consciousness" in an attempt to discredit both "black consciousness" and "white liberals" simultaneously.

To untangle the confusions it seems to me to be useful to distinguish between two different points which are being made about "white liberals". The first point is that, as a group, white opponents of apartheid are not a significant political force, and are certainly not going to be the chief agent in the overthrow of apartheid. It would therefore be wrong for blacks to orient their political activity towards an appeal to whites to help them. There has always been a tendency for black political organisations to make appeals to the moral sensibility of the whites. It is this strategy that is being attacked by proponents of "black consciousness". And of course they are quite right to attack it. Blacks cannot leave their case to be argued by whites in the context of white political institutions.

ASSUMPTIONS OF SUPREMACY

The second point that is being made is that the behaviour and beliefs of "white liberals" often constitute a striking example of precisely how deep the assumptions of white supremacy run. It is in this sense that an analysis of the phenomenon of "white liberalism" is important to the case of "black consciousness".

However, it seems to me that their analysis is confused by a very loose use of the concept "liberal". To put it another way, the range of attitudes lumped together and described by the term "white liberalism" is uselessly broad. I shall first develop the critique of "white liberalism", and then attempt to present a more precise set of categories in which to embody the critique.

According to point six of the Saso manifesto: "Saso believes that all groups allegedly working for "Integration" in South Africa — and here we note in particular the Progressive Party and other Liberal institutions — are not working for the kind of integration that would be acceptable to the Black man. Their attempts are directed merely at relaxing certain oppressive legislations and to allow Blacks into a White-type society". That is, they are considering "an assimilation of Blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by White society". (Point 5)

The point here is that this attitude remains arrogant, paternalistic and basically insulting. It involves the acceptance of the idea that to behave like whites is the

ideal; it is to accept the concept of the "civilising mission" of the whites, the idea that, although blacks are not biologically inferior, they are culturally inferior. They may be educable, but they need whites to educate them.

For any group to treat another like this would be unpleasant, but for whites to make this sort of assumption about their cultural superiority is also laughable. It is arguable that the main "contribution" of western civilisation to human history was the development of a new and higher level of exploitation of person by person, and of a new and higher level of materialism. The theoretical Christian principles of Europe were contradicted by the factual concentration on the acquisition of material goods through the efficient exploitation of one's neighbours. Christian Europe was based on servile labour and, as it expanded, internally with the development of industrial capitalism, and externally through imperial conquest, it refined the mechanisms of exploitation. The working class at home, the "natives" abroad, were so much raw material for the accumulation of wealth. Naturally more efficient accumulation led to better science and technology, grander architecture, more sophisticated cultural leisure-time pursuits for the rich, and so to the illusion of superiority in "civilisation". But this superiority was based on an ethical void. Whites are where they are in the world essentially through having developed a great capacity to wield force ruthlessly in pursuit of their own ends. That is, there is an integral relationship between the nature of the culture of the whites and the fact of their dominance in South Africa. The refusal of blacks to want to be "like whites" is not racism. It is good taste.

THREE CATEGORIES

In the light of the above, I would now like to suggest that it would be useful to use three categories to classify the political attitudes of whites in South Africa: racist, liberal and radical. Racists believe that blacks are biologically inferior or "different". Liberals believe that "western civilisation" is adequate, and superior to other forms, but also that blacks can, through education, attain the level of western civilisation. It is worth noting that many blacks have also accepted this position. Booker T. Washington in the United States, J.T. Jabavu, and the early leadership of the ANC, are examples. Radicals believe that "white" culture itself is at fault, and that both blacks and whites need to go beyond it and create a new culture.

It is important to notice that all three of these categories apply to blacks as well as to whites. There are black racists of all kinds, black liberals, and black radicals. Black consciousness is a form of radicalism. So far the argument has been formulated in terms of the categories "liberalism" and "racism", with resulting confusion on both sides. The introduction of the third category enables us to clear up these confusions, and to point to the real problem, which is the need for a new culture.

OBJECTIONS

Two objections are likely to be raised to this classification. Firstly, the term "liberal" has a long tradition. It is normally understood as referring to a set of beliefs about the limits of government, the importance of the rule of law, the rights of freedom of speech and assembly, and so on. Now obviously in this sense radicals, including proponents of black consciousness, can also be liberals. The problem here is whether we are to accept the traditional meaning of the word, or the meaning which has tended to become associated with the word in South Africa, particularly amongst blacks. Perhaps the only solution is to remember the ambiguity which the term has now acquired.

The second objection, from the direction of black consciousness, is in its strong form, that whites cannot be radical, and in its weak form that the existence of white radicals obscures the issues, prevents the development of self-consciousness amongst blacks, and so politically is no different from the existence of white liberals. The strong version is obviously untrue. To show that the weak version is also untrue, it is necessary to indicate what positive role there is for white radicals to play.

In an interview in 1969, Eldridge Cleaver was asked the following question: "Since the National Conference on New Politics, held two summers ago, what we have seen for the most part is not viable working coalitions, but whites acquiescing to the blacks, somewhat because of guilt feelings, rather than offering constructive criticism. What effect does this have on such a coalition?" Cleaver replied: "The guilt problem is part of the racial heritage of America. But such guilt feelings make many people non-functional from our point of view. This stance of acquiescence can be detrimental if a black is advocating a bad programme. Such a white cannot distinguish between what different blacks are saying; all he recognises is that a black is saying it. Motivation that is spurred by guilt doesn't make for reliable whites, and we have had many problems with people of this type." (The Nation Jan. 29, 1969)

PATERNALISM

The attitude that Cleaver is criticising is in fact the ultimate in white paternalism. "White" because it involves, on another level the "They all look alike" mentality of racism; "paternalism" because it treats blacks as being incapable of listening to criticism and engaging in rational argument. Thus one must not confuse a) the fact that any political policy/strategy in South Africa must have as its unquestionable basis the objective of satisfying the needs of the black masses, irrespective of whether this clashes with white interests, with b) the idea that one must go along with the policy/strategy of any particular black leader just because he/she claims to be aiming at that goal. A political strategy has to be rooted in the needs of a particular group or groups, but it is also something which can be argued about in terms of objective criteria. Will the strategy work? Is it based upon an adequate analysis of the situation? In such discussions what is important is the validity of the argument, rather than the colour of the arguer. Even if there is to be, as is probably necessary, a tactical division of labour between white and black opponents of white supremacy, the results of their activities will be interrelated, and so will benefit from conscious co-ordination. In "private life" one has a right to demand to do one's own thing. But in politics the way I do my thing has implications for the way you do your thing.

Thus, for whites, in the face of the phenomenon of "black consciousness", to believe that they must now simply shut up and leave it to the blacks would be a serious

mistake. Nevertheless, whites do need to re-evaluate themselves and their political roles, particularly in the light of two specific criticisms. For it is argued that in South Africa a black is likely to be much more politically effective than a white a) because there are no barriers between him/her and other blacks; and b) he/she is immediately, by the very fact of being black, pushed into political action. The white, on the other hand, is continually tempted by the possibility of a return to a life of privilege, and is in any event only working with blacks to work out his/her own personal psychological problems, in order to "find himself through contact with the Black man" (SASO News Letter Vol. 1, No. 3).

OVER-SIMPLIFICATION

However, although these points are important for whites to consider, it is also important for blacks to realise that they all involve over-simplification if they are absolutised. Even leaving aside the difficulties arising from divisions amongst black groups, there are two other problems here. 1) The idea that blacks can immediately communicate with blacks, and cannot meaningfully communicate at all with whites, involves an inadequate theory of communication. No two individuals have the same experience of the world. This means that they will always see things in more or less different ways. So communication between two people is always difficult. It is made more or less difficult by the size of the gap between the two sets of experience, and by the skill or otherwise of the two communicators in trying to put themselves into one another's shoes. In South Africa a black and white will usually have had very different experiences, and this is likely to complicate communication. But it is not an absolute gap. Also, different blacks have different life experiences. They have in common the experience of being discriminated against, but each individual experiences this in terms of his/her own particular social situation and personality. There may also be areas of their lives where their experiences are entirely different — a wealthy, educated urban Indian man has a life experience different in many respects from that of a poor African peasant woman, and communication problems are likely to result. 2) The idea that blacks are automatically political, while whites only engage in politics for contingent personal reasons is a similar over-simplification. Whether or not individuals move out of the circle of their private concerns into the sphere of public co-operative action with their fellows is always a matter of choice. However bad an individual's situation is, he/she risks something in some ways worse by trying to change it — he/she risks being endorsed out, or losing the meagre salary he/she does have, or perhaps going to prison. Thus one has to make a choice, and that choice involves some sort of reflection on oneself and on one's own values. Some situations make this choice easier than do other situations. In particular, it is perhaps easier for a black to make this choice than it is for a white. But the difference is one of degree, not of kind.

Thus in both cases, the question of political action and the question of communication, there is a difference of degree, rather than of kind, between black and white, and there are also other factors to take into account besides colour. Even if colour is the main factor, and the difference of degree is very large, as is probably the case in South Africa today, it is nevertheless important to bear in mind the nature of the difference. For if black leaders believe that they have an intuitive understanding of the needs of the black people, and no need to motivate them to act politically, then they are not likely to be very effective leaders.

DIMENSION

To misperceive this difference of degrees as a difference of kind is also to ignore a further crucial dimension to the question of change in South Africa. Black consciousness is a rejection of the idea that the ideal for human kind is "to be like the whites". This should lead to the recognition that it is also bad for whites "to be like the whites". That is, the whites themselves are oppressed in South Africa. In an important sense both whites and blacks are oppressed, though in different ways, by a social system which perpetuates itself by creating white lords and black slaves, and no full human beings. Material privilege is bought at the cost of mental atrophy. The average white South African is scarcely one of the higher forms of life. For whites who have recognised this the desire to change South Africa is not merely the desire "to do something for the blacks". It is the urgent need for personal dignity and the air of freedom and love.

Having said all this, I would like to return to my earlier assertion that white critics of white supremacy are not a significant political force. This statement needs qualification in two ways. Firstly, although as a group white radicals are not a vital force, many of them have skills which make them useful as individuals in political activity.

Secondly, there is one major area of political work where they are perhaps best equipped to work. This is, as proponents of black consciousness have pointed out, in the area of changing white consciousness. It is vitally important to analyse the ways in which whites oppress themselves, and to devise ways of bringing home to them the extent to which the pursuit of material self-interest empties their lives of meaning.

LITTLE THOUGHT

Very little thought has been given to this problem. The characteristic "liberal" approach has been either to argue that the end of apartheid is really in the material interest of the whites, or else simply to appeal to abstract ethical principles, as against material self-interest, without making any attempt to show how the infringement of these principles vitiates the unique life of each individual. Whilst whites are wedded to materialism they will fight against change. In order to bring about this change as smoothly as possible there should be as many whites as possible who want to become full human beings and who recognise that to do so requires co-operation with all their fellows in changing South Africa.

At present, white consciousness is cabbage consciousness a mindless absorption of material from the environment. The synthesis which both Steve Biko and Alan Paton were looking for, the synthesis of cabbage consciousness and its antithesis black consciousness, is human consciousness, and it is the possibilities and promises of human consciousness that we all need to explore.

I have tried to show in this article where the attacks by "black consciousness" on "white liberalism" are justified, and where they are too sweeping. Finally I would like to say that it seems to me that the time has come when both sides could fruitfully bury the argument. By now it should be clear to even the most insensitively paternalistic "white liberal" that he or she needs to examine his or her values very carefully indeed. For the proponents of black consciousness the best way to convince black people that salvation will not come from "white liberals" is by simply getting on with the work of community organisation.

OTHELLO IS NO MOOR!

Rand Daily Mail

CAPE TOWN.— A unique presentation of Shakespeare's "Othello" opens at Cape Town's Space Theatre on June 22 — without an Othello.

This is because British playwright Donald Howarth, on finding that he was not allowed to cast a Black man in an all-White production, has adapted the play to conform with the rules of South Africa. He has overcome the problem by reconstructing the play, leaving out the Moor, Othello, and introducing three new characters.

He says in spite of this the play does not differ drastically from Shakespeare's original version. In rewriting some of the lines Mr. Howarth has adhered to established "Shakespearean language" but emphasises that he has tried to make the action more suitable to modern times.

Mr. Howarth, who once firmly supported the British boycott of South African theatre, said that after meeting Athol Fugard and Yvonne Bryceland during the London run of the play *Bosman and Lena*, decided to come to South Africa to take a "closer look." He said he had grown tired of the "total freedom" of Britain.

Discussing the strong comic elements of *Othello* he said that people were "so serious as to be almost inhuman." He said he wanted to crack this attitude and make people laugh. However, with his limited knowledge of South African audiences he was "slightly apprehensive".