

Grey, believed that some such provision was necessary, as indeed it was. Surely it is hind-sight which assumes that Shepstone ought to have known that the Reserves were going to become warrens of barbarism. There was a famous controversy between Shepstone in his last years and President Reitz on this matter: those who support President Reitz must commit themselves to the view that the Free State system of distributing almost the whole African population on European farms as farm labourers was better than a Reserve policy.

Inadequate justice has been done to the epic fight which the young Theophilus Shepstone (only in his early thirties and with no great influence behind him) put up against the colonists, Sir Harry Smith and Benjamin Pine, to preserve some land for the Africans and to prevent them from becoming merely cheap labour for white farmers. At the time it was the best thing he could do for them. It cost him popularity and peace. His motivation can only have been a sense of justice.

David Welsh has proved to the hilt that "the evil that Shepstone did lived after him". May we also plead that the good he did in his early years may not be "interred with his bones". □



*Sir Theophilus Shepstone*

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## FALLACIES OF

# ” THE WHITE ENLIGHTENMENT ”

by John Wright

Natal readers of *Reality* may remember the angry reaction of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, Chief Executive Councillor of the Zulu Territorial Authority, to a leading article that appeared in the *Natal Mercury* in September last year under the headline 'Evolutionary Currents'. The article took Chief Buthelezi to task for referring to certain whites as 'those who keep me in the shackles of slavery', and went on to put forward the *Mercury's* own interpretations of 'the real slavery' of South Africa's black peoples and to make a number of general assessments of their history and culture. In a long and sharply critical reply, Chief Buthelezi rejected the *Mercury's* arguments as an example of 'white paternalistic arrogance' and expressed in no uncertain terms the depth of his disillusion with the politics of white 'moderation'. His letter, with a reprint of the offending article, was published in the *Mercury* on October 2.

In its own way each is an important document. In showing the intensity of the resentment felt by black South Africans when they see themselves as patronized by whites, Chief Buthelezi's letter focuses closer attention on the *Mercury's* article than would normally be given to a newspaper editorial. 'Evolutionary Currents' turns out, in fact, to be the most revealing example to appear for some time of that newspaper's periodic commentaries on the particular characteristics of South Africa's racial groups. While the *Mercury's* editorial judgements are not usually distinguished by any great degree of insight, its position as a large metropolitan newspaper with a predominantly white readership lends some importance to its leading articles as indicators of white public opinion, and especially of white attitudes to African culture and African achievements. It is admittedly a dangerous exercise to try to deduce the state of public opinion from newspaper articles alone, but it seems a safe enough assumption that most of the *Mercury's* white readers — and the great majority of white South Africans — would accept the important cultural and historical judgements

contained in Evolutionary Currents' without question. The article is therefore worth some comment, the more especially as it provoked so strong a reaction from one of Southern Africa's foremost black leaders. It is reproduced here in full.

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**The patience and forbearance with which leaders of the Bantu homeland governments endure the frustrations of separate development is often admirable. They have a good case and sound arguments on their side. It is therefore all the more regrettable when they occasionally lapse into extravagant and nonsensical over-statement, as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi did this week when he referred to Whites as "those who keep me in the shackles of slavery."**

Even allowing for a generous measure of hyperbole, that statement bears no relation to reality. This sort of talk antagonises even moderate and enlightened Whites and does not serve the cause of African advancement.

The real slavery of most of Black Africa, including countries that have won their political freedom, is the bondage of ignorance and primitiveness from which it is slowly and painfully emerging.

The impact of an advanced Western civilisation territorially superimposed on the primitiveness of Africa has given the African new standards, new desires and new expectations without necessarily giving him the means of realising them through his own efforts.

South African Whites are neither more nor less altruistic than other people. Where nothing existed before, they have by their enterprise and initiative built up for themselves and their children a way of life based on their inherited civilisation. They have claimed their rewards, sometimes too greedily and selfishly perhaps, but they have also shared, not generously enough perhaps, their achievements and their institutions, bringing progress and striking an evolutionary spark in a dormant wilderness

The disparity in levels of advancement is not a question of superiority or inferiority in terms of human dignity or worth. It is simply a fact of history.

To talk of the "shackles of slavery" in these circumstances, and at the stone-laying of a new educational building for Africans, is laying it on a bit thick.

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It would be difficult to find a more concise statement of the stereotypes which most white South Africans adopt in their common practice of disparaging 'black' in comparison with 'white' culture. Underlying the article's whole line of reasoning is the unquestioning assumption that the black man needs to be 'advanced'. It is not stated from where to where he must advance: it is axiomatic that he must move away from his 'primitive' traditional ways towards accepting the new standards, new desires and new expectations provided for him by an 'advanced Western civilization'. What constitutes this civilization is not defined, nor is there any recognition of the fact that African culture might have some 'advanced' merits of its own. It is simply taken for granted that 'African' is synonymous with 'primitive' and 'Western' with 'civilized'.

This sort of thinking rests on two great fallacies: that some cultures are more 'advanced' than others, and that white South African society is part of what is called 'Western civilization'. The first is directly descended from the social Darwinism that was current in Western ideology in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to this view, history was the record of the evolution of human societies from 'lower' to 'higher' stages of development, as in the case of animal organisms, with higher races and cultures distinguished from the lower by their greater moral virtues and greater technological accomplishments.

This idea has long since been rejected by most social scientists, but in its time it was a very convenient philosophy for the colonial powers, who could use it to justify their forcible seizure of overseas territories in terms of the need to uplift and enlighten the 'primitive' indigenous peoples. In the same way as the Afrikaner people justified, and still justify, their history of land-grabbing and exploitation of black labour in terms of the Calvinist doctrine of the superiority of the chosen few, so English-speaking South Africans, less inclined to accept religious dogmas than the Afrikaners, but still needing a moral justification for sharing in the suppression of black South Africans, found it in the idea that 'Western' peoples were superior to Africans and therefore entitled to subdue them and guide them towards 'civilization'. In a more sophisticated form, this idea still survives strongly in the policies of the United Party and in the leading articles of newspapers such as the *Mercury*, though it is worth pointing out that not one of South Africa's fifteen other major English-language dailies and weeklies manages to put across quite so unthinking a white supremacist line as the *Mercury*.

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It is extremely difficult to get to grips with the sort of argument, as put forward by the *Mercury*, that bandies about vague and subjective terms like 'advancement', 'primitiveness' and 'civilization' without defining them. The *Mercury* does at least make the claim that it is not assessing differing degrees of 'advancement' in terms of human worth, though its use of the word 'primitive', with its strong connotations of inferiority, would seem to constitute a flat contradiction of its assertion. If, however, one accepts its statement, the only conclusion is that 'advancement' in the *Mercury's* view means 'technological advancement': that societies with sophisticated technologies are more advanced in all ways that count than are those without. One wearies of pointing out the naivety and clumsiness of this view, but it is popular among white South Africans who, of all peoples, need to be told over and over that mere possession of technical knowledge is no guarantee at all that it will be used responsibly. The usual examples advanced in support of this denial are those of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, Imperialist Japan and other regimes classified by the 'free world' as 'unfree', but all the so-called civilized nations have examples of barbaric behaviour standing to their discredit.

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In any case, the ranking of societies in a hierarchy of 'advancement' is a largely meaningless exercise when levels of advancement cannot but be judged subjectively. When white South Africans claim that they are more 'advanced' than blacks, what they should be saying is that they hold power over blacks: that through historical circumstances they have

been far more active in seizing and holding political power in southern Africa than have the black peoples. This has come about very largely because whites — some whites — have been in closer contact with more sophisticated thinking, and have used some of the products of this thinking — a complex technology, and techniques of organising large numbers of people — to ensure their own domination at the expense of the blacks. The *Mercury* rightly describes the subordinate position of black peoples as 'a fact of history', but evades the issue of describing how it actually came about in historical terms. The 'slavery' of black South Africans is ascribed to their 'ignorance' and 'primitiveness', when in fact the actual form that it has taken, and takes now in 1973, is very largely the result of three hundred years of white oppression: of occupying blacks' land, extracting labour from blacks, and using force to stifle voices of protest. Thirty years ago the historian De Kiewiet described one of the main factors shaping recent South African history as the white man's assumption that he had an unquestionable right to as much land and labour as he could get from the indigenous peoples without payment. Historians are only now beginning to follow up this theme, but even a cursory look at the history of southern Africa since the time of Van Riebeeck reveals its validity. The ousting of the Hottentots from the southern Cape where they had grazed their livestock for centuries; the mass destruction of the Bushmen in the eighteenth century, with virtually no attempt made to come to terms with them; the expulsion of the Xhosa from much of the land they once occupied in the eastern Cape — a prime factor in a long series of 'kaffir' wars; the Free State's annexation of large parts of Lesotho, where they still talk of the Conquered Territory; the crowding of several hundred thousand Natal blacks into reserves in marginally productive areas to make room for white settlers; the allocation of large parts of Zululand, after its annexation to Natal, to the forebears of today's sugar barons; the concession-mongering in Swaziland which is still a source of land problems today; the occupation of the best cattle lands of the Transvaal; and ugliest case of all - the aggressive intrusion into Rhodesia of a grasping commercial company: all these are part of the record of the white man's behaviour in southern Africa.

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So is the long succession of measures passed by white governments from the time of Van Riebeeck to the present day designed to keep their black subjects from full participation in the life of the new societies that were coming into being: taxation laws to force black men to work for white; master and servant laws to maintain 'proper' relations between white masters and black labourers, exploiters and exploited; an unequivocal denial of political rights to black people in the Orange Free State and South African Republic; a series of odious moves by Natal whites to prevent blacks from attaining a say in how they should be governed. Only in the Cape was there any sort of experiment in allowing the indigenous peoples to take an active part in political life, and even this was snuffed out after Union in 1910. These facts make a mockery of the white man's pious talk, current now for a century and a half, of his duty to 'civilize' the black man. Every time a few blacks have come remotely within reach of the white man's 'civilization', laws have been passed to keep them in subservience, whether political or economic. The few whites who have wanted to see blacks allowed political rights in South African society have always been unrepresentative of white society and regarded by it with deep suspicion. Chief Buthelezi's

reference to whites as 'those who keep me in the shackles of slavery' is not an 'extravagant and nonsensical overstatement' — it is the hard truth.

In the end a society's state of 'advancement' cannot be judged by its supposed position on some ladder of evolutionary 'progress'; what counts is the way its members behave towards one another in their day-to-day relations, and the degree to which each member can satisfy his own needs and expectations without prejudicing the interests of others. By this criterion, the humblest African state can be



Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, Chief Executive Officer of the Zululand Territorial Authority (Photo: Natal Witness)

every bit as worthy and 'advanced' a society as any of the nations of the West. By the same criterion, South African society, in which the dominant group exploits subordinate groups to gratify its own material lusts, can only be classified as 'primitive'.

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The second great fallacy in the *Mercury's* argument is the assumption that white South African society belongs to the main stream of Western civilization, when in fact it is characterized by values and attitudes that are the outcome of isolation from the West, not of contact with it. White South Africans may be descended from ancestors who once lived in western Europe, and they may still maintain personal contacts with that part of the world, but the essential part of their outlook, the part that shapes their behaviour towards other people, has evolved quite separately from that of Western Europe. Europeans or European-descended people may have introduced into Southern Africa a great number of technological and administrative innovations as developed in the West, but

to claim that this makes local white society a part of Western civilization is to ignore the fact that history has operated to produce a totally different moral climate in southern Africa.

The great achievement of Western societies is to have worked out systems for providing the majority of their members with at least a share of the material benefits produced by a sophisticated technology, while enabling them to live together with a reasonable degree of harmony. At administrative level this has entailed slowly and painfully learning the extremely difficult art of how to maintain a tolerably just balance of interests between all the individuals and groups competing for wealth and power; at the individual level it means that each member of the society has had to learn to take into account the interests of his fellows and to limit his own field of interest accordingly. The essence of this outlook is contained in the Christian injunction, 'Love thy neighbour'. Moral awareness is seen not as some luxury of the conscience invented by weak-minded priests or poets or 'liberals', but as an essential part of orderly human living. Without it a society cannot in the end remain stable, however long it may be able to impose an appearance of stability by force of arms.

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In South Africa, not even the *Mercury* can claim that the dominant white group is concerned with achieving a reasonable balance of interests between all the country's peoples when its own columns — to its credit, let it be said — almost daily expose the massive injustices imposed on Black people by white. Whites have played a vital part in increasing the wealth of southern Africa, but they have never been willing to share more of it with blacks than has been necessary for the maintenance of a class of minimally-skilled labour-producing units ministering to their needs. They have not been primarily concerned with 'civilizing' the black man: like immigrants everywhere they came to a new country to make a better life for themselves, not to bring 'progress' to the indigenous peoples. That the black man has taken to many of the ways they brought reflects no particular credit on the Whites; his 'progress' has been a by-product of their coming, not an intentional result of it. And if blacks need 'advancement', then so, it can equally well be argued, do most white South Africans. Even more than the black peoples, they need to be taught to fit into a South African society where they are in a small minority, and, for their own sakes if nobody else's, to learn to behave with some degree of honesty towards the rest of the country's citizens. For them to talk of 'civilizing' the black peoples is sheer arrogance and self-deception.

So much for the *Mercury's* two basic assumptions about the nature of present-day South African society. If it has failed to understand the present it is hardly surprising that its knowledge of South Africa's past is faulty to a degree. 'Where nothing existed before they (the whites)

have by their enterprise and initiative built up . . . a way of life based on their inherited civilization.' The nature of this civilization has already been discussed, but it can only be infuriating for black South Africans to have their entire heritage, their entire ethos, developed over fifteen or twenty centuries of residence in central and southern Africa, dismissed by one of the mouthpieces of an intrusive, grasping society as 'nothing'. In this one word, the particular styles of social living that evolved in Africa are swept aside as of no account. There is not a hint of recognition that one of the foundations of present-day South African society is the fact that its indigenous peoples had gone far enough along the road of development in politics, in economics, in trade, in technology, to be able to grasp and adapt to many of the new ways brought by peoples from Europe, and to fit without too much difficulty into many of the roles that white men forced them into.

'The whites have built up for themselves . . . ' Not a single word is said about the achievements of the millions of black men and women who, over a period beginning 300 years ago, have laboured in the fields, sweated in the mines, tended the children, and carried the teatrays to sustain what the *Mercury* calls the 'inherited civilization' of the whites.

The whites struck 'an evolutionary spark in a dormant wilderness'. It is an insufferable conceit and a demonstration of gross ignorance for a white newspaper so to dismiss the evolutionary processes of state-building and social development that were taking place in southern Africa long before 1836 or 1820 or 1652 or any other key date in white South African mythology. These processes may have been slow, but they were little slower than those taking place in western Europe before the beginnings of the industrial revolution a bare two centuries ago.

All this is not to say that African societies are models of how men should behave towards one another — they have shown themselves as capable of cruelty and stupidity as any other societies — but simply that white South Africans badly need to reassess the more or less fixed ideas which they hold about the mass of the people living round them. Nor is it to minimize the positive side of white people's achievements in southern Africa, which have been of the greatest significance in raising standards of living and levels of awareness, but to try and set the white achievement in a balanced perspective. **South African society is the product of two main sets of cultural forces that over the last three centuries, and more especially over the last hundred years, have become inseparably intertwined. To deny the importance of the black contribution, as the *Mercury* does in 'Evolutionary Currents', is not merely a case of ignorance or stupidity: it is symptomatic of the deep dishonesty rooted in white South Africa's treatment of its black subjects. Chief Buthelezi's condemnation of the article was fully justified, and its publication was an alarming indication of how 'moderate and enlightened whites' are utterly insensitive to the real position of black people in South Africa today. □**