

# BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

by Leo Marquard.

**I have for some time been wondering about the origins of black consciousness, what it really means, and what I, as a liberal, think about it. I have read many statements about it and for the most part I find it impossible to distinguish the language and idiom of black consciousness from that of nationalism.**

I have known and lived with Afrikaner nationalism and think I understand something of how it came about and how it works. I think I understand, too, how nationalism in Europe was generated during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and how it fed upon itself to such an extent that it became self-perpetuating. But that was not white nationalism. It consisted of a number of nationalisms such as French, and to a lesser extent German, and they had two important characteristics. First, they were mutually antagonistic except when, for example, French nationalism found it advantageous to encourage and combine with Italian nationalism, purely on a temporary basis. In the second place, every separate nationalism was founded on the awakening of national consciousness.

I can understand the concept of Zulu or Bemba consciousness and how it becomes Zulu or Bemba nationalism. But what puzzles me is how black consciousness can emerge into black nationalism in South Africa, let alone Africa. Zulu and Sotho nationalisms are not one nationalism, and the leaders of the new states in Africa are fighting hard to suppress local nationalisms. In Zambia, for instance, President Kaunda seems to me to be anxious to avoid clashes between Bemba and Lozi nationalism; but there is as yet little sign of a Zambian nationalism.

If one is to accept the statements of those who profess to propagate black consciousness in South Africa they go one step further and wish to call all South Africans who are not classified as white, black. I can understand that the term nonwhite is negative and has all kinds of undertones; but I do not believe that all those who are not white are black. Yet we are being asked to call them that and are told by some Coloured leaders that they, too, are black. This seems to me as irrational as our population registration. Coloured or Asian leaders may support what they think to be black nationalism, but this does not make them black nationalists. Mr Adam Small and others say openly that they call themselves black because they want to show solidarity with all the oppressed people in South Africa. That is an honest statement though I do not

think it is sensible to try to make words mean something different from their accepted meaning.

I do not know where the idea of black consciousness started. As far as I am aware it is American in origin, though it may well have been triggered off by the spectacular success of African nationalism since the last war in ridding itself of colonialism. But it seems to me to have become popular as black power in the United States and to have been exported from there. As far as I know the conception of black power as a kind of all-in union of separate black nationalisms has not made much impact in Africa. Nor, if history is any guide, is it likely to do so, for it implies an African *internationalism* in whose existence it is hard to believe.

I do not like black consciousness and its off spring, black nationalism, for the same reasons that I have never liked nationalism of any kind because it is a self-seeking doctrine that, however much it may protest to the contrary, thrives by the oppression of other groups. When I read a statement recently about black consciousness I found it full of the sentiments, even the phrases of Afrikaner nationalism which I distrusted when they made their appearance fifty and more years ago. There was the same talk about securing your own national identity, your own language, and your own culture, and in that glorious day when that has been achieved, you will be able to accept on equal terms the English-speaking South Africans, or the whites, as the case may be. And I thought to myself: 'Do we have to go through all that a second time?' I know that there were weighty reasons for the rise of Afrikaner nationalism just as there are for the rise of anti-white movements, but when I see what nationalism has done to South Africa and to the rest of the world, and how difficult it is for it to 'stop going on', then I dread the rise of black nationalism. Whatever its advocates, black, Coloured, or white may say it won't stop at securing its own rights.

As a liberal I mistrust nationalism whatever its colour and however noble its expressed ideals sound. I regard it as an unmitigated evil whose aims, so nobly and grandly proclaimed, are illusory, whose methods always end in the worship of power for its own sake. I understand black consciousness but from what I have seen of it so far I find it difficult to believe that it is not black nationalism in thin disguise. Hence my distrust of it.□