

SOUTH AFRICA'S CLASS AND COLOUR CONFLICT

by Wendy Woods

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There is a growing conviction among blacks and whites in South Africa today that the essence of the tension between the races is based not on colour but on class — that a black man is not discriminated against because he is black but because he is a member of a huge working class which must be controlled and exploited to keep the power and wealth in the hands of the ruling upper class. This theory suggests that the fact that a working class man is black simply makes it easier for the ruling class to recognise and therefore to exploit him.

O. C. Cox, in his book: "Caste, Class and Race", says: "Race prejudice is a social attitude propagated among the public by an exploiting class for the purpose of stigmatising some group as inferior so that the exploitation of either the group itself or its resources may both be justified".

This author argues that race prejudice rose to unprecedented heights in the 19th century when European colonial expansion called for some justification. Statesmen proclaimed colonial peoples to be "inferior", "requiring protection" a "lower form of evolution", a "burden" to be borne altruistically. All this pious concern and condescension masked the financial advantage that came from exploitation. Segregation developed as a device for preventing sympathy and sentiments of equality. Sexual and social taboos placed on the colonial peoples prevented them from developing expectations of equality and freedom of choice.

So we see that the emphasis in this theory is on exploitation and that race prejudice is a device used to maintain the economic status quo. It is not easy to argue against this theory because the facts in South Africa seem to bear it out so manifestly. But race prejudice cannot be cast aside so easily as a conscious intellectual device to be used and discarded at will.

First of all, what is prejudice? The New English Dictionary gives the following definition: a feeling, favourable or unfavourable, towards a person or thing prior to, or not based on, actual experience.

What is race prejudice? Allport gives a definition: an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group.

This definition describes the attitudes of thousands of whites towards blacks in this country. And these attitudes

are deeply ingrained in both the conscious and the sub-conscious mind of the individual as a result of environmental conditioning. So unconscious are some of the prejudices that the victims would be shocked to hear that they had them and would vehemently deny that they existed at all. But if we whites are to prepare ourselves at all realistically for life for ourselves and our children in this country, the starting point of this preparation must be in our own minds.

How does race prejudice work? Firstly, we must accept that it is completely irrational. This is an unpleasant fact to face because we like to think that we are the intellectual masters of our own opinions. A man who believes that all blacks are lazy, stupid, dishonest and shiftless will claim that he has ample proof and experience to support this belief. If he is then presented with evidence to the contrary, he will resist it and may even become angry because his generalisation has worked well for him up to now and the thought of reaccommodating his opinions with the new evidence disturbs him and makes him anxious. Or he may use the common mental device that permits people to hold to prejudices in the face of much contradictory evidence. The device of admitting exceptions: "There are some good blacks but . . ."

Race prejudice is caused by many factors — unconscious absorption of attitudes from parents, the need for people to belong to an in-group and reject an out-group, lack of real education, lack of exposure to other cultures, the need for status, fear of the unknown. The list could go on and on.

So far we have only spoken of prejudice as an attitude of mind. It is when people actually translate their dislike for certain groups into action that we have discrimination. Few people keep their antipathies entirely to themselves, and the more intense the attitude the more likely it is to result in hostile action.

There are varying degrees of hostility. Allport gives a graded list, starting from the mildest:

1. Anti-locution: People freely expressing their antagonisms;
2. Avoidance: If the prejudice is more intense the individual will avoid members of the disliked group, even at the cost of considerable inconvenience;
3. Discrimination: Here the prejudiced person will exclude (if he has the power) all members of the group from

certain types of employment, political rights, educational or recreational opportunities;

4. Physical attack: Under conditions of heightened emotion prejudice may lead to acts of violence or semi-violence;
5. Extermination: Lynchings, pogroms; massacres and the Hitlerian programme of genocide mark the ultimate degree of violent expression of hostility.

The intensity of prejudice among whites generally, but particularly among the Afrikaner Nationalist group, is in direct proportion to their unconscious fear of the black majority which they see around them. Lead an Afrikaner Nationalist into a discussion on integration and he will probably ask the crude question: "Would you like your daughter to marry a black man?"

Once he says this it is clear that the focal point of his fear has been touched. What he is really saying is that he feels that his whiteness is threatened, and all his responses are centred around warding off this threat. The Afrikaner Nationalist is not an individualist. His whole sense of identity is bound up with conforming to his own homogeneous in-group. He tends to conform in religious worship, in unquestioning allegiance to authoritarian figures, in political ideology and in exaggerated loyalty to his in-group. Criticism of his attitudes is interpreted as an attack on the autonomy of his group (Boerehaat). He is terrified of losing his Afrikanerhood and his whiteness. Threaten these and he feels that his very self will cease to exist, and will therefore cling to them with passionate intensity.

No one could seriously believe that a white working class in this country would have been exploited, deprived and made to suffer in the way that the black working class has. Legislative restrictions in this country appear to diminish the lighter one's skin-colour gets. In other words the cardinal sin of the South African working class is its blackness. And it is this blackness which has been the primary catalyst in the formation of the attitudes and the hostile acting-out of these attitudes on the part of the white ruling class.

So while the theory of economic exploitation holds, the question of colour is central and it is perfectly logical that when the working class reacts it does so on the basis of black solidarity. In fact after hundreds of years of physical, mental and spiritual debilitation and debasement of blacks, one can fully understand that the dynamics of present working-class politics in our society is the rekindling of the collective self-esteem of blacks because they are black and not in spite of it as many prejudiced whites would suppose.

Self-esteem is the most precious gift society can give to the individual. Without it the personality is severely handicapped. A man may have an impressive intellect, creative talent or sound physical capabilities but if he has low self-esteem he will not be able to make full use of them and develop his potential and will also be hampered in his inter-personal relationships.

Self-esteem does not develop from the external environment of the individual. A man may have a high-income job, an expensive car and a large house — all the criteria of success in the competitive capitalist society — and still have low self-esteem. In fact the very possession of all these status symbols can often be an indication of the need of the possessor to boost a low self-esteem.

Conversely a man may live in a "location" in a small house which he cannot own, in cramped conditions of work at a job far below his mental capacity, for low pay — and he can have high self-esteem. This is because self-esteem is not an intellectual concept — it comes from the core of the personality and is a deep and certain consciousness of self-worth and self-liking.

Many black men and women are saying verbally and by implication in their actions: "I exist and therefore — and for no other reason — I like myself. I have opinions, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, aspirations and because they are mine — and for no other reason — they are valid." This message is coming through loud and clear, but how many whites are hearing it? How many whites feel that it is very much in their interest to hear it?

There are ways of hearing, but they are not easy to put into practice. The first thing is to realise and accept that our own thought-processes are bent to suit what we imagine to be our self-interest and are not based on the reality of our present situation.

We are in the habit of relying on old political cliches which comfort us and block out the realities which cause us anxiety. It's easier to say "But majority rule can never work — the country will be a shambles" and carry on with our daily routine, than to open up our minds to the facts, expose our anxiety, examine it for what it is and develop a tolerance for it.

This is a painful process and it is only the start. We must delve down and get at what we are really thinking and feeling so that eventually we can say without shame "I am frightened, I feel threatened and I don't know what to do about it. I feel helpless. All I know is that I want security for myself and my family."

These are real attitudes — not cover-up ones, and once we can be honest with ourselves we will really be able to perceive what others are saying to us. □

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