

NOTES: INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE
WITS CENTRE FOR DIVERSITY STUDIES
BLACKNESS: ESSENTIALISMS, INTERSECTIONS AND FAULTLINES
KEYNOTE PANEL
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'BLACK MAN'S BURDEN' ... SOUTH AFRICA'S COLLECTIVE BURDEN?

Spare a thought for Penny Sparrow and Dianne Kohler-Barnard.

For those of us who used enviously to walk near the then whites-only Durban beachfront, simply to marvel at the dotting umbrellas of white families enjoying themselves across the largely empty seaside, today's crowds can conjure up images of an invasion. Africans were allowed to dip into the sea only in places such as stony Umgababa some 40 kilometres away.

And so, spare a thought for Penny Sparrow and Dianne Kohler-Barnard, if to some of them, life before 1994 is remembered with some longing.

Of course Penny Sparrow and her ilk do know that, strictly-speaking and in the natural order of things, there are black monkeys and white monkeys. The fundamental issue transcends monkey-business. It is about a sense of entitlement to historical privilege. It is about nostalgia for what was and the rationalisation of what still remains.

South Africa's history and demographics have rendered our land a giant social experiment. It defies the typology of colonial settlement and then, at independence, mass emigration back to the metropolis. Sociologists coined the notion of colonialism of a special type precisely because the settlers had decided to make this their permanent home.

Many profound implications flow from this characterisation. To cite just three of these:

Firstly, without such reverse mass migration, a unique demography is created in a free South Africa; and liberation has to entail the capture and transformation at once of both the metropolis and the colony. The liberators are required to manage and lead both the erstwhile oppressed and oppressors. To turn the provocative, racist and sexist prose of Rudyard Kipling on its head: in South Africa, 'the white man's burden' has, both in theory and in actual practice, become 'the black man's burden' ('man' used in this instance as denoting the more universal 'human').

Secondly, liberation under such circumstances posits the possibility of co-option and assimilation of the liberators into the dominant paradigm of the metropolis. The definition of such liberation can, among the black elites, easily revolve around the mantra, 'we have arrived'! The danger arises that social progress can narrowly be measured, by the multiracial elite, in terms, on the one hand, of the pace at which the black elite ascends to the social pinnacles of the metropolis. On the other, both elites would then worry about the crumbs to be thrown at the multitudes along the fence of social division.

Thirdly, the question cannot be evaded whether these marginalised multitudes will simply take this in their stride, in the face not only of absolute poverty; but also of the relative poverty or inequality that stares them in the face everywhere and every day! For, tension will always bubble, in search of thorough-going transformation.

The fundamental issue then arises: how can Blackness be defined under circumstances such as these? In any case, do such typologies as Whiteness and Blackness exist? I suppose that the framing of the question around essentialisms, intersections and fault-lines derives from this consideration.

It can be argued, though, that socialisation does essentialise. To the extent that race is a social rather than scientific construct, and was drilled into South Africa's material conditions and social psychology, a certain degree of essentialism was created within the categories to which apartheid had condemned South Africa's population. As such, the process of liberation constitutes, in part, an ongoing struggle to deconstruct such socialisation and essentialisms.

This, of course, is not to suggest that liberation should entail the homogenisation of South Africa's diverse people in an imaginary melting pot. Indeed, the basic tenets of our constitution captured so splendidly in the motto of the coat of arms, *!Ke E !Xarra !!Ke* (diverse people unite), recognise the identity of being South African as but an overarching umbrella under whose shade reside endless multitudes of 'sub-identities', including across the Black population.

The act of deconstructing racial and racist socialisation has to embrace the totality of human endeavour. The pursuit of a democratic, integrated, equitable and prosperous society is at the heart of the campaign against racism and other forms of intolerance.

At base, racism exists in the unequal distribution of wealth and income. It feeds on inequitable access to opportunity and services, and thrives in social networks of varying utility for the rich and the poor. The reproduction of these social relations – even if in less intense forms – in the nascent democratic society, is the fertile soil within which racism is itself reproduced.

However, it should be acknowledged that material reductionism can miss the attitudinal, spiritual and ideological drivers of racism. These elements do "exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form". (Engels, Letter to J. Bloch in Königsberg, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm)

And so, the fracas that South Africa today experiences – in the racist taunts in social media and elsewhere, in the campaign for access to and transformation of higher education, and in the recurrent battles at shop-floor and local communities – are not a disjointed set of events. Rather, they form part of the chain of deficits in our search for a democratic and equitable society. These deficits include the experience of young professionals in our country who encounter a glass ceiling and a stubborn colonial culture in the workplace; and a 'fog of racism' which is subtle and blurred (Touré in *Who's afraid of Post-Blackness*, Quoted in P McKenzie, 'Fog of racism blurs lines of contempt', 6 January 2012).

To answer the question about the expression of Blackness under such circumstances, we have to return to the assertions made earlier about South Africa's demographics and polity. One of these is that Black South Africans, as the majority and as the primary social agents of change, have a central role to play in shaping the new social constructs and in defining the narrative of such endeavour.

This is not to claim some artificial privilege; but to draw attention to an objective responsibility of agency in the process of social change.

In other words, Blackness should evince the mien of builder and creator, patiently forging a new and all-inclusive humanity. Of course, the fight against racism has to include massive campaigns for social cohesion. But attached to this is the issue of mind-set. For, this effort can demean itself if the social psychology that informs it is that of a mutually-reinforcing interplay between all-conquering bully and hapless victim: in which, with each taunt and blow, the victim confirms the impact to, and feeds the self-satisfaction of, the bully.

Blackness cannot be defined by howls of pain in the face of a stubborn and all-encompassing racism. As during the struggle against apartheid colonialism, it should define its mission among others as being to resist, to persuade, to teach, to cajole and indeed to lead in the name of an all-embracing humanity.

Some 22 years into democracy, the sense of impatience is palpable; the demand for faster progress rather than merely reproducing racial capitalism is growing louder by the day. The clamour for a second phase of transition to a democratic society, for economic freedom, for transformation of higher education – all this and more reflect the sixth sense of a society searching for sustainable social equilibrium.

But sixth senses do not a deliberate strategy and programme make. Desire does not on its own generate capacity and will. To turn grievance into strategy and action should be Blackness' 'attitude of mind and way of life', to paraphrase the proponents Black Consciousness.

Four years ago, there seemed to be emerging within South Africa a broad consensus around not just a diagnosis of current problems, but also the vision and plan to build an equitable society. Whatever its weaknesses, the National Development Plan had started to lay the basis for an all-embracing hegemony of the positive. The challenge was to translate it into practical and visible action, in the context of a social compact of joint and varied actions. However, the jury is still out on whether we have not in fact missed that unique opportunity.

There are many reasons behind today's sense of unguided drift. Objective realities such as the global economic downturn have much to do with this. Poor responses from domestic capital and weak state capacity also come into play. But, from the purview of the discourse on Blackness, we dare pose the question whether, at a subjective level, that capacity which was so pronounced during the anti-colonial struggle – to resist, to persuade, to teach, to cajole and indeed to lead – has not dissipated.

This is a consequence in part of the quality and depth of intellectual and broader public discourse. It relates to matters of conduct and ethics. Unfortunately, in that vortex, it is not only the individual culprits of unseemly conduct who bear the brunt of ridicule. The legitimacy of the polity is undermined, as the very capacity of Black people to govern and raise the nation to new heights is put into question. Racists then develop the courage more openly to act out their long-held prejudices. The chinks in the armour of Blackness become a dubious godsend that confirms racist stereotypes and the fissures through which the bile of prejudice flows.

As with related philosophies such as Negritude, Pan Africanism and Black Consciousness there also have to be conscious efforts to undo “the ideology of the dominant group [that] has led to the weakening of the self-respect, pride and sense of identity of the dominated”, in the words of former President Thabo Mbeki [Speech at the opening session of the National Conference on Racism, 30 August 2000].

Put more positively, and transcending the weaknesses in some of these philosophies, the Black man’s burden in today’s South Africa should find expression in deliberate self-definition and self-assertion, in pursuit of excellence and acting as a force of example on what it means to be human and humane.

Core to such an approach should be an ideal higher than pursuit of equality with whites. It should be about a new civilisation, “thoroughly spiritual and humanistic”, which takes “its place... with other great human syntheses”, “giving the world a more human face”, to quote Seme, Luthuli and Biko, respectively.

In this regard, instructive lessons from East Asia’s remarkable rise include: pride in historical civilisational achievements as well as self-criticism about weaknesses in that history; the acknowledgement of the pain of humiliation and a conscious effort to grow out of it; devising strategies and programmes to modernise and improve living standards; and borrowing from the best that humanity offers and adapting this to domestic conditions.

In other words, Blackness should position itself as an integral and equal part of humanity; in dogged pursuit of excellence on a global scale.

In that way, we’ll transform the Black man’s burden into South African society’s burden.

The Sparrows of this world will be shamed by a society progressing in spite of them; and they will either stick out like sore social freaks or, tail between their legs, they will fall in line.

That is South Africa’s collective burden, enlightening and invincible!

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