

**Affirmative Action and the Perpetuation of Racial Identities
in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

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Introductory remarks

Building a nation or promoting national unity, which is one of the historic objectives of post-apartheid South Africa as we set out to give shape to the new historical community that is evolving here, raises a whole range of issues such as the class leadership and class content of such a national(ist) movement, the nature and feasibility of social cohesion, our understanding of a multicultural polity, intercultural communication, among other things. In post-apartheid South Africa, all of these themes are at issue but because of the continued salience of the racial faultline in this social formation, I shall concentrate on the vitally important question of racial identities and what we have to do about them.

Minister Mosiuoa Lekota's comments some two years ago on the question of non-racialism¹ spotlighted the troubling relationship between the policy of affirmative action and the perpetuation of racial identities in post-apartheid South Africa. The latter is one of the unintended consequences of the former, if we give the architects of the policy the benefit of the doubt, which I believe we should.

Because of the vital importance of the subject for the consolidation and deepening of the democratic polity in which we live today, I believe that the Minister's comments should spark a national debate on the question of what we mean by a non-racial, democratic South Africa. For, it is a fact that racialised identities, as we know from situations such as Nazi Germany, Ruanda, and many others, have genocidal potential.

It is common cause in the social sciences today that social as well as individual identities are constructed, not "given". The state, or more generally, the ruling classes, in any society have the paradigmatic prerogative of setting the template on which social identities, including racial identities, are based. Subaltern groups and layers of such societies necessarily contest or accept these identities over time. In our own case, recent examples of such contestation are the categories of "Bantu" and "Coloured". We must remember, however, that even though they are constructed, social identities seem to have a primordial validity for most individuals, precisely because they are not aware of the historical, social and political ways in which their identities have been constructed. This is, ultimately, the psychological explanation for the well-known tenacity of such identities. That they can be deconstructed and reshaped is manifest in the unravelling of the supposedly immutable "Afrikaner" identity which is taking place before our eyes right now.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is also common cause that "race" is not a valid biological entity. It is, however, equally taken for granted that race is a social reality. Segregationist and apartheid South Africa was, as we all know, a byword among the nations as a racist society in the 20th century. This was, and remains, the reason for the sense of hope that was engendered world-wide by the demise of the apartheid regime. There are still many people who hope that the post-apartheid dispensation will show the

¹ See page 11 below

world that it is possible to open the way towards the realisation of the dream of a raceless, perhaps even a classless, society.

Affirmative action policy

The policy of affirmative action, levelling the playing fields, representivity or whatever other suitable name we care to use, is in my view one of the most sensitive issues in the new South Africa, not because it is wrong in any sense but because of its unintended consequences. It evolved in a most elaborate process of public consultation that culminated in the core legislation of the Public Services Act, the Employment Equity Act, the Skills Development Act and the Skills Development Levy Act. All of these are, laudably, geared towards the imperative of the redistribution of economic, social, cultural and political power and resources that constituted the fundamental reason for the struggle against racial capitalism in general and apartheid in particular. Only reactionaries and hide-bound conservatives are opposed to these objectives of the post-apartheid government. The vast majority of the people support them as a matter of course.

My point here is not to criticise the intentions or the specifics of the policy even though I will say that as implemented, on balance, it is a policy that benefits mainly the rising black middle class and in effect deepens the inherited class inequality in our society. The real point of Minister Lekota's intervention was the perpetuation of racial identities, the irresponsible practice on the part of political, cultural and other role models of referring unproblematically to "Blacks", "Coloureds", "Indians", and "Whites" in their normal public discourse, well knowing that by so doing they are perpetuating the racial categories of apartheid South Africa and wittingly or unwittingly entrenching racial prejudice. This discourse is embedded in the legislation I referred to and in the social practices and inter-group dynamics they give rise to or reinforce. Let us consider relevant aspects of this legislation in some detail.

Act No. 55 of 1998 of the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa is better known as the Employment Equity Act (EEA). Section 2 of the Act describes its purpose as being

- ... to achieve equity in the workplace by –
- (a) promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and
- (b) implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce.

Section 1 explains that "designated groups" means black people, women and people with disabilities' and that "black people" is a generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians'. As I shall point out presently, it is of some significance to note that because members of the South African National Defence Force, the National Intelligence Agency and the South African Secret Service are not defined as "employees" in terms of the Labour Relations Act, the EEA does not apply to them. In this paper, my focus is on those aspects of policy that refer to black people, although some of the points

made implicitly have a bearing on the ways in which affirmative action affects the other “designated groups” It is also necessary to point out at the outset that in practice, both in terms of the EEA and of other relevant legislation, the distinction between “African”, “Coloured” and “Indian” people is consistently maintained, i.e., the notion of “black people” tends to fall away or to be hauled out only when it is convenient².

In order to understand my critique of the policy and practice of AA, it is necessary to clarify a few important concepts and policy implications. To begin with, let us consider the distinction between affirmative action and transformation. If one takes the wording of the EEA as one’s point of departure, the term “affirmative action measures” refers to those that are

... designed to ensure that suitably qualified people from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce of a designated employer.

Because affirmative action measures are an aspect of transformation, it is easy to confuse them with what we might call transformation measures. South Africa is a country in which, by definition, transformation measures rather than AA measures are necessary in order to bring about fundamental social change or “normality”. Professor Sampie Terblanche (2002:27), who has written a stimulating if not uncontroversial *History of Inequality in South Africa*, has the following to say about the EEA and related legislation:

Although these laws have undoubtedly helped to address the legacy of apartheid and racism in the workplace, they have benefited only the aspirant African petit bourgeois, who have jobs and are members of trade unions. Unfortunately, these laws have also increased the costs of employing labour and negatively affected the growth potential of the economy³.

One of the implications of this statement is obvious, i.e., the fact that structural economic and social change, i.e., *transformation, properly so called, is essential in order to get most black people to the point where they might become beneficiaries of AA*. In a country with a real unemployment rate of plus-minus 50%, job creation, which depends on precisely such structural changes, is the priority. It is, therefore, disingenuous on the part of government and other political spokespersons to claim that the creation of a few thousand jobs in a particular sector or the building of a few thousand houses for people who previously had to live in shantytowns are examples of “affirmative action”, or even of “black empowerment”. For, it is clear that *the term, affirmative action, can only be meaningful in the context of individuals who are similarly qualified or skilled and where those who “belong” to one of the “designated groups” have to be given preference over the others*.

² Towards the end of 2004, there was a heated dispute about the composition of the Springbok rugby team that was about to tour the United Kingdom and Argentina. The selectors were accused by, among others, the director-general of the Department of Sports, of having overlooked “African” players by packing the team with “Coloureds” who, it was said, are not “really” black. (See Smith 2004).

³ Also see Terblanche 2002:120-121.

Given the nature of the transition to liberal democracy in South Africa, only the loony right opposes the principle of affirmative action, taken as part of an ensemble of strategies and policies towards realising the larger goal of historical redress. However, it is a fact that because of the racist policies of white supremacist South African regimes, there is, even after 10 years of political freedom, a very small pool of skilled labour and a large percentage of virtually untrainable people as the result of the ravages of Bantu- and other tribalised education policies during the apartheid era. Under such conditions, it is obvious that any “empowerment” strategy would have to give priority to education and (skills) training; and, it is indeed the case that legislation to this effect has been on the statute book since the late 1990s⁴. It is, however, also a fact that very little progress has been made in this regard. Indeed, in 2004, the Department of Labour instituted a drastic overhaul of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), institutions that were created precisely in order to facilitate the skills training programme. This exercise became necessary because, with a few laudable exceptions, that particular approach has been a spectacular failure. Although the figures are contested by government representatives, it is claimed that there is a 90% drop-out rate in respect of learners (apprentices or candidates for skills training) that are accommodated (recruited) in terms of the SETAs scheme. The alleged attitudes of the learners themselves are perhaps an indication of how the scheme is perceived by a new generation of youth that have a very strong sense of entitlement. According to Carol O’Brien, manager of small business at the South African Chamber of Business (SACOB),

... they see the learnerships as a stop-gap while they look for something else. At Sacob we find that about 25% of our learners have absconded or found other work. ... There is just no commitment from the learners themselves in terms of their contracts (Robinson 2004).⁵

On the other hand, because government has to demonstrate visible change for the better, we are faced in South Africa today with what often appears like a switchboard of square pegs in round holes, i.e., people who are simply not up to the job to which they have been appointed. This is the reason why Terblanche and other economists believe that the appointment of “designated persons” who are clearly inexperienced and undertrained has led to a disaster in both the public and the corporate sectors. The cruel dilemma faced by the powers that be is captured by Adam et al (1997:212):

... (The) accelerated drive to blacken the South African institutions at all costs frequently means the sidelining or retrenchment of experienced civil servants of the old order.

Terblanche (2002:447-448) also makes the point that these tokenist appointments are in fact further weakening the neoliberal, minimalist state in South Africa. It is as though,

⁴ The most important of these laws are the Skills Development Act of 1998 and the Skills Development Levies Act of 1999.

⁵ This opinion is particularly poignant in the light of the institutional vision of the National Skills Authority formulated in October 2000 in terms of which the acquisition of skills by relevant young people “... is not about the provision of diversionary activities simply to keep unemployed people active for short periods of time or about merely filling programmes offered by training providers” (Department of Labour 2000:3).

unintentionally, by means of the preferential appointment of less skilled and less experienced “black” people in decision-making posts, the government were loosening the nuts and bolts of the civil service and of the public sector of the economy. Of course, all such judgements have to be understood against the background of an apartheid state that itself was exceptionally inefficient in all general departments and that could compensate for wastage, corruption and outright theft by tightening the screws on the black non-citizens in favour of the comforts and privileges of the *herrenvolk*.

One has, moreover, to pose the very real question whether there is any viable alternative in the context of a transition to democracy that is framed by the geopolitical reality of a triumphalist world capitalist system. There are precious few cabinet members or even ordinary members of parliament in the ruling party (or in any other parliamentary party) who still believe in the unadulterated socialist alternative many of them were propagating in the 1970s and the 1980s. Consequently, if the capitalist system is to be “normalized” in South Africa, the complexion of the owners of capital and the managers of capitalist enterprises has to change radically and literally.

Empowering the middle class

This brings us to the issue of black empowerment. It is essential that a distinction be drawn between what is called Black Empowerment (BE), specifically Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and AA. Whereas the latter obviously refers in the first instance to the working people of the country, the BEE aspect of redress is, at least in practice, very much about the upper and middle classes. The South African government in fact often uses the concepts of BE and BEE as a convenience in order to “sell” the incremental progress that *has* been made as serious “transformation”. Besides the government’s and the ANC’s apologists, there is hardly anyone in South Africa that does not acknowledge the fact that only a thin layer of people and, in some cases, a particular group of influential individuals, are being economically “empowered”. In recent months, some of the more left-inclined members of the governing alliance have raised their voices ever more stridently against what is beginning to look alarmingly like textbook cases of the concept of “crony capitalism” in an Economics 101 course⁶.

The economic arguments for and against the particular version of BEE that has been decided on in practice, specifically the enrichment of a coterie of individuals, many of whom have been prominent political leaders of the struggle against apartheid, as opposed to - or in more benign versions of the policy - next to, the prioritisation of job-creating small- and medium-sized enterprises, including worker co-operatives, among the disadvantaged majority, have been thrashed out in exemplary democratic fashion in South Africa’s electronic and print media. Today, there is an emerging consensus that the mere granting of shares to some influential “black” individuals by large South African as well as multinational corporate entities is not the only, and certainly not the optimal, form of BEE since it necessarily widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Ironically, the most trenchant critique of this phenomenon has come from Solidarity, the former all-white Mineworkers’ Union, the members of which used to be among the main beneficiaries of apartheid’s job reservation policies. Referring to some of the new-rich beneficiaries of the BEE policy, the union’s spokespersons maintain that

⁶ The “Schabir Shaik Trial” which, disastrously, compromised the stature and the position of the then Deputy President of South Africa is the most high-profile concrete example of this phenomenon.

... (in) their specific case the inequalities have already been eliminated
... (and that) ... allowing the black elite to buy the cheaper shares will
not eradicate poverty, but will only create new forms of inequality and
widen the gap between the rich and poor. (Petros 2004:4)

Instead, they propose that ‘rather than targeting a particular race for offering the shares, they should be given to “low-income groups”’ (Petros 2004:4). In spite of numerous points of difference in approach and orientation, their critique is endorsed by the leadership of COSATU and of other worker formations.

The symbolically important ever-widening gap between the “black” rich and the “black” poor is a matter which I shall consider from another perspective presently. Economic and other social analysts and journalists have issued a series of devastating statistics, all of which tend to confirm these trends. For tactical reasons, the ANC-led government has had to retreat from its previous aggressive promotion of and allegiance to the neo-liberal policy of self-imposed structural adjustment known by the acronym of GEAR⁷. This has also involved a more cautious approach to the earlier injunction to entrepreneurial black people to enrich themselves without feelings of guilt or reservations of any kind. The infamous call by the then Deputy-Minister of Trade and Industry, Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, on such individuals not to be shy to become “filthy rich”, even though she may have had quite different considerations uppermost in her mind, undoubtedly evinced an attitude of

... crass materialism, implying the neglect of the poor majority in the
drive to self-enrichment by an elite (Adam et al 1997:201).

It should be said, however, that the appearance of a few wealthy black people on the scene is accentuated by the previous dearth of such individuals. For, it is a fact that even in their own “crass materialist” terms, the actual unequal distribution of the spoils of the capitalist system between “white” and “black” owners and managers of capital has hardly shifted. Nyati (2004) states unequivocally that

... (ten) years into South African democracy, transformation is
conspicuous by its ab-sence in the private sector. Black profes-
sionals continue to encounter systematic barriers to their upward
mobility. ... Companies view affirmative action as a threat to white
privilege. They know that affirmative action provides to blacks what
unearned white privilege has provided to whites for decades, a
competitive advantage.

According to the government’s own assessment of the impact of ten years of
empowerment measures, by 2001 a mere 13% of “top managers” and 16% of “senior
managers” were black, while the growth in the ranks of “skilled professionals” and
“middle managers” was even slower.

⁷ Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy.

This shows that empowerment in the workplace is continuing, but very slowly. Progress was slow in extending black ownership, with a recent estimate of black equity in public companies indicating 9.4% in 2002, compared with 3.9% in 1997, from being virtually non-existent before 1994. The number of Previously Disadvantaged Individual (PDI) directors of public companies grew from 14 (1.2%) in 1992 to 438 (13%) in 2002, but the proportion of PDI executive directors remained very small. ... (PCAS 2003:41)⁸

There are numerous indications⁹ that the ruling party has had to take a step back in the matter of BEE because of the persistent criticisms and even condemnations that have been flung at it by, among others, its own Alliance partners in the South African Communist Party and COSATU as well as by prominent pro-ANC individuals and public intellectuals such as Moeletsi Mbeki and the renowned playwright and author, Zakes Mda¹⁰. An overall assessment of what has been achieved is difficult because of the large number of variables involved. However, there is no doubt that the ranks of the “black middle class” have been swelled over the past ten years to the point (in 2004) where, on the basis of a reasonable incomes-related criterion, it is said that some 1,5 million “black” people have joined the ranks of the middle class since the late 1980s¹¹. At the same time, there is overwhelming agreement that the vast majority of the poor have gained virtually nothing from affirmative-action or black economic empowerment legislation. Even conservative black members of the Establishment have begun warning that it is essential that not only “a select few” be seen to be the beneficiaries of AA, BEE and affirmative procurement strategies¹². The failure to distribute the benefits of state power and largesse across all classes of people has even come under fire from international institutions, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) who cannot be suspected of

⁸ In this essay, I shall not discuss some of the petty details of corporate intrigues and subterfuges by means of which the classic tokenism that we know from the U.S. context has come to blemish South Africa’s body economic. The granting of “cosmetic equity” by white-owned firms to fading black “entrepreneurs” has nothing to do with empowerment, however defined. The Minister of Finance has recently come out firmly against such practices but the dilemma facing the captains of industry and other owners of capital that want to comply with the legislation becomes evident when they claim, however disingenuously, that the need for the complicated empowerment structures they are creating is determined by their having “to fast-track empowerment given the unavailability of black capital” (Rose 2004:1). So desperate are the white heirs of capitalist development in South Africa that they have, since 2001, annually published what they call *The Little Black Book*, which is described as “the premier reference on a pool of intellectual capital from which the nation’s current and future leaders can be drawn” (*Financial Mail* 2004:1). The men and women in this compendium, some of whom would be extremely uncomfortable to see themselves in this august collection of individuals, are supposed to be the main actual and potential drivers of black empowerment and, thus, vital points of reference for the entrenched capitalist class.

⁹ See, among many others, recent utterances by President Mbeki and Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladlana, listed in the bibliography.

¹⁰ Mda (2004) speaks for many people in his article “Suffering in the wake of black empowerment” (see Appendix).

¹¹ See Bisseker 2004:19. The question of definitions of “the middle class” in South Africa is discussed in some detail there. Recent work by Schlemmer (2005) questions the melodramatic figures flaunted in the popular media.

¹² See Ncube 2004.

anti-government bias¹³. A *Business Day* editor has gone as far as challenging those who s/he believes are justifiably criticising government for not levelling the playing fields for all South Africans, writing not so tongue-in-cheek:

If we are going to make a go of a free-market economy in a society so unequally wealthy, then we need to find some very clever way to make the poor feel their plight is worth it. Redistribution has to be *guaranteed*. Now how do you do that without changing the whole game? (*Business Day* January 24 2003. Emphasis in the original)

Given the geopolitical context in which the transition to liberal democracy is taking place in South Africa, the economics of BEE is, in my opinion, a terrain of genuine contestation. As a socialist, I have no doubt where I stand on this matter and I shall deal with it when I discuss the possible alternative strategies to those that are being implemented by the South African government at the moment.

Some of the more insightful people in and near government have begun asking whether the time has not come, more than 10 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, to terminate the policies of affirmative action, preferential procurement and black economic empowerment in its narrower interpretation. Most prominent among these has been Professor Vincent Maphai, political scientist, former chairperson of the South African Broadcasting Corporation and current chairperson of BHP Billiton SA.

Affirmative action is a means, not a principle, in his view. As a restorative right, it draws its validity from a system of injustice and imbalance. As that changes, so it becomes less and less necessary. In other words, race-based policies are only acceptable as a temporary bridging mechanism. Subject to certain objectives having been attained, they may be discarded (Brown 2004:21)

This is, unsurprisingly, a minority view among black middle class people generally and among black entrepreneurs in particular. Government spokespersons are uniformly opposed to this kind of talk and, as a result, the polemic that was started by Maphai's widely publicised views was reduced to the proverbial storm in a teacup. The fundamental issue he has raised, i.e., the finitude of AA policies, will not go away, of course. On the other hand, his very clear logic will only begin to sink into the consciousness of decision makers once the economic markets begin to register negative trends that derive from the routine implementation of counter-productive rules and regulations. That they have not done so in any spectacular manner yet is, paradoxically, one of the most hopeful indexes in the statistical landscape of the country.

The perpetuation of racial identities

So much for some of the significant socio-economic issues involved in the strategy of black empowerment and affirmative action in post-apartheid South Africa. At the very least, this analysis has pointed to the questions that have to be addressed urgently if the potentially disruptive contradictions which the policy can give rise to are to be pre-

¹³ See Newmarch 2004.

empted. From my point of view, the more important, indeed historically decisive, issue in this entire question of affirmative action and black economic empowerment is the unavoidable perpetuation of racial identities which is implicit in its very conceptualisation and evident in the day-to-day expression of the policy in practice. In entering into this discussion, I want to make it clear at the outset that what we say about the situation in South Africa cannot be transposed to the context of any other country without careful qualification and consideration of the very different historical and social dynamics. Indeed, it is precisely one of my objections to the policy as implemented, that it depended too heavily on the replication of discursive as well as socio-economic strategies that had been engendered in the USA context and that, in some cases, had already been left behind or, in other cases, had clearly led into a dead-end there.

Having said that, I want to state unequivocally that the policy of affirmative action and black economic empowerment as implemented today is a disastrous mistake and that we will rue the day that the people of South Africa were willy-nilly brought to accept it. Why am I so insistent on what is definitely not a popular position in South Africa? The answers are simple but difficult to put into practice precisely because of the ingrained racial habitus that has disfigured both the construction and the perception of reality by the vast majority of South Africans.

My point of departure is that, without denying the importance of contestation and initiative by subaltern groups, the state – especially the democratic state - has the paradigmatic prerogative, i.e., it sets the template on the basis of which social identities are fashioned. Marx (1998:267) makes this all too obvious point as follows:

State actions were highly consequential in shaping the template of modern race relations. Where and when states enacted formal rules of domination according to racial distinctions, racism was reinforced Where racial domination was not encoded by the state, issues and conflicts over race were diluted.

Of course, in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, it would be absurd to speak of “racial domination”, at least by “black” people. What is relevant, however, is that because of this sociological insight, any modern government, but more especially one that is at the helm of a distinctively transitional society where it can be assumed that the minds of people, generally speaking, are more open to accepting even radical change, has to be extremely sensitive to the predictable ways in which state prescriptions might limit or alternatively free the imagination of the citizens. Without going into detail here¹⁴, I should like to put forward a few relevant propositions, if only for the sake of discussion.

Firstly, there is no need to use the racial categories of the past in order to undertake affirmative action policies. In the South African context, because of the demographic fact of a black majority at this stage of the evolution of the population’s cultural consciousness, the strategy would be equally effective and more precisely targeted at the level of individual beneficiaries if class or income groups were used as the main driving force of the programme. The large area of overlap between “race” and “class” in South Africa makes this approach possible. In addition, it would make it

¹⁴ A full analysis of this issue can be found in Alexander 2004.

possible for all economically disadvantaged individuals, irrespective of colour, to benefit from the programmes that derive from the strategy.

Secondly, the humiliating experience of racial self-classification and the entire replication of the technical hocus pocus of the apartheid racial ideologues required for the identification of citizens in terms of their “race” would be eliminated. In cases where the monitoring of change in demographic terms is necessary – because such change is feasible in the short to medium term – there would be no problem in finding other ways of registering the fact and/or the tempo of shift¹⁵. Instead of subjecting institutional bureaucrats to the thankless task of becoming like their apartheid predecessors, without necessarily using “techniques” such as the “pencil test” or the test of linguistic shibboleths, the monitoring of the required shifts would become a comprehensible and generally acceptable practice. Similarly, we could use the language skills of people to promote redress in an organic manner. No new civil servant, for example, should be appointed unless s/he has a certain level of proficiency in one or more indigenous African languages. In short, we need to study each domain in which corrective action is to be undertaken in detail, so that we can identify the real sources of disadvantage suffered by the relevant individuals and groups. By using the shorthand of “race”, we not only give advantage to middle class black people as against working class people, we also entrench – avoidably – the very racial categories that undermine the possibility of attaining a truly non-racial democratic South Africa.

Thirdly, without in any way denying the tenacity of social identities, it ought to be clear at least to the more reflective state officials and political leadership that if we agree that identities are not given but constructed¹⁶, we should use every opportunity to bend our people towards the realisation of the non-racial values which are enshrined in Section 1(b) of the South African constitution. The acknowledgement of superficial differences should not become, even potentially, a lever for marginalisation or exclusion of any individual or group of people. This is the essence of a non-racial approach to the promotion of national unity and social integration and cohesion. As against this insight, almost every actual AA measure tends to undermine such integration and cohesion. And, let it be said clearly, no concessions need to be made to the beneficiaries of apartheid and colonialism. *The principle of historical redress remains the lodestar of any serious policy of social transformation in the present phase of South African history.*

Increasingly, government and ANC leaders are beginning to question the need for racial quotas in the many sectors in which transformation is being promoted, precisely because they are becoming aware of the dangerous divisive potential of AA measures as implemented¹⁷. Most recently, Minister of Defence and national chairperson of the ANC,

¹⁵ As mundane as it sounds, it would suffice in most cases to determine what people were classified as under apartheid or, where the individuals are too young to have been classified, what their parents were classified as. Such an approach would, at the very least, problematise the racial categories and afford the relevant individuals the space to distance themselves from these categories.

¹⁶ As stated earlier, the tenacity of social identities in fact derives from the fact that most individuals are not aware of the socio-historical dynamics that creates the identity spaces occupied by each such individual. For most individuals, therefore, there is a strong primordial element attached to “their” social identities.

¹⁷ An unimportant but memorable expression of this potential is the saying that is allegedly widespread among middle class people labeled “coloured”. Because of the allegedly preferential treatment of “African” applicants for posts in the public and private sectors, they are said to complain that “previously, we were not white enough; now we are not black enough”.

Mosiuo Lekota (2004) as well as Minister of Sport, Makhenkesi Stofile (2004) have come out strongly against quotas in the defence force and in national sports teams respectively. At a press conference, Lekota, indeed, put the issue squarely as one of overall national importance:

When will we cease to be Africans, coloureds, Indians and so on and (simply) be Africans? ... This question of representivity, at some point we need to look at this and say there are no Indians here, Indians live in India. ... And these people called coloured ... are probably more South African than anyone ...¹⁸

It ought to be obvious that I am only gesturing in the direction of a much more profound discussion here. Space and relevance to the overall subject of this essay do not necessitate more than what I have suggested but this is a debate that is vital not only for us in South Africa but, indeed, for the entire global village. A possibly significant development in this area is the use by township youth of the term “umlungu” (=white man or white woman) to refer to wealthy black individuals. By conflating “race” and “class” in this way, they are, paradoxically, beginning the dialectical process of de-linking “race” from “class”.

So, we might ask: is there another way? Is it possible in the absence of a social revolution, such as that which began to transform the practices of racial discrimination and racial prejudice in a country such as Cuba, to redistribute power, wealth, skills and knowledge without using the inherited racial and the many other discriminatory categories that characterised the social grid of apartheid South Africa? The short answer to this question is Yes. But let us nonetheless remember that in Cuba itself, in spite of the indisputably radical transformations that took place there, racial prejudice continues to disfigure the face of the society. One of the ironic reasons for this is the fact that through the promotion of an ethos of colour-blindness among the post-1959 generations, race was not only rendered invisible so that racial prejudice lived on in repressed and disguised forms, it also became a taboo subject in public. We have to learn from the experiences of other societies if we do not want to repeat them. Whatever we do, we should not be afraid to address openly and publicly topics such as racism and racial prejudice.

I believe that we should rethink the ways in which we are trying to bring about what we refer to as historical redress, such that we do not unintentionally perpetuate racial identities. Sandile Dikeni reminded us in his column of 10 June 2004 that affirmative action discourse has been transplanted here from the very different context of the Civil Rights struggles of the USA. Here, we are not dealing with a minority syndrome. Black South Africans, those who were oppressed and exploited in the previous dispensation on the basis of so-called skin colour, constitute the majority of the population of South Africa. They have the civic power to insist on new ways of sharing whatever revenue the state can raise from the productive activities of all the citizens of the country and, in theory, through their control of parliamentary power, they can reshape the way in which we identify ourselves, even if this process takes generations rather than

¹⁸ Lekota’s urgency about this matter may be related to tensions in the SANDF, whose members are not bound by the AA legislation as are ordinary public servants.

decades. The basic issue that we must grapple with is the optimal relationship between our national (South African) identity and all manner of sub-national identities.

The socialist alternative

South Africa continues to be a land of good hope, also in respect of the challenge to the human species to find forms of social life where superstitions about “race”, among many others, no longer disfigure the lives of people. Besides the alternative discursive strategies suggested above, it has become clear to many thinking South Africans that in the domains of both the economy and society, less risky and perhaps more effective strategies are possible. By way of example, economists such as Terblanche (2002) in Part 4 of his work on inequality in South Africa, propagates an outright paradigm shift to what he calls “a social democratic version of democratic capitalism” which relies less on the neo-liberal premise that all growth comes via the private sector and demands a much larger role for the state in driving transformation. His nightmare scenario is one where the trend towards a first-world capitalist enclave continues unabated for another 30 years with the result that the bourgeoisie of this enclave will be so much smaller and so much richer relatively and absolutely than what they are at present and “the lumpenproletariat on the periphery” (Terblanche 2002:464) so much bigger and so much poorer. Allister Sparks, one of the country’s best known and most serious journalists argues similarly for a more socially responsible liberal democratic dispensation. Basing himself on the approaches of the Peruvian economist, Hernando de Soto, and others who are located in the “third world”, he, too, proposes a state-driven public works programme akin to Roosevelt’s New Deal and the valorisation of survivalist economic transactions and assets that are held by ordinary people in the so-called informal sector.

Those, like Sparks and Terblanche, who seek an alternative capitalist path of development, a kind of Mona Lisa capitalism, necessarily come up against the logic of the historically evolved system, especially in the present phase of aggressive and rapacious neo-liberal “globalisation”. Theirs is a worthy quest. However, those of us who do not believe that this system can be improved by piecemeal reform have to continue to put forward the socialist alternative, which is based on a different albeit currently below-the-horizon set of values. We simply have to continue to expose the contradictions of the system, initiate and support the most radical democratic reforms, i.e., those that tend to strengthen the position and the security of the urban and the rural poor, and at the same time, continue what Friedrich Schiller, author of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*, called “the aesthetic education of the human species”. I hope I shall be forgiven for suggesting that, next to a few other countries, post-apartheid South Africa is the place where the curriculum of this education is being formulated.

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