

Harold Wolpe Trust Open Dialogue

19 July 2007

TH Barry Lecture Theatre, Iziko Museum, Cape Town

'Race, Class and Affirmative Action in South Africa'

Prof Devandiren Pillay

Department of Sociology, WITS University

and

'Rethinking the Ultimate Goal of Affirmative Action: Who and What is it For?'

Dr Kristina Bentley

Independent Teacher, Researcher and Author

Prof Pillay:

Good evening everyone. I do remember being quite a trouble-maker at the last Wolpe occasion I attended, but this time I'm going to be much more measured (albeit after two glasses of wine), because this topic requires a clear head and rational thinking.

Most of you will already know that Harold was a highly respected sociologist – I am a sociologist and I can tell you, we hold Harold in very high regard. He was one of the first to critically engage with the liberal perspective on South African history and to emphasise that race and class are intertwined. He foresaw that this intertwining would one day become disentangled - and that is what we are seeing today.

My starting point is emphatically that race does not exist biologically. It exists only in our minds. There is only the human race. Race is socially and historically determined.

INSERT SPEECH

During his talk, Prof Pillay mentioned the following book: *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* by William Julius Wilson, a US writer.

Dr Kristina Bentley:

Good evening. I wanted to start what I have to say with two images that got me thinking. The first is a picture taken at the height of the civil rights movement in USA. What intrigued me was the headline in the newspaper pictured: 'We must have justice, regardless of the price'. What does that mean? It assumes there is only one version of justice, but there could be many ways of honouring justice.

The second picture shows people holding a banner with the slogan: Affirmative Action is Racism in Action. What strikes me here is that the people in the picture are all very young – when we talk about these issues, we need to think about who is being affected by these policies, and whose identity is being shaped by these issues.

INSERT SPEECH

Questions from the floor:

1. Thanks to both speakers for valid and clear descriptions of the arguments. But the arguments are flawed in some ways – the focus seems to be on the redistribution of wealth, not the creation of wealth – if we really want to end poverty, shouldn't we be looking at growing the economy, as is being done in India, for example?
2. Those who suffered under Apartheid are not the poor, but the black; whether they're wealthy now (and it is not a sin to be rich) or poor now, the point is that those who suffered are black. How do you label those who suffered if you don't want to use race as a label?
3. Prof Pillay: you argued that diversity is important, provided that people in jobs have a minimum core of ability. But why is diversity important if race is an illusion? Dr Bentley, you suggested using class as a factor rather than race – would that not simply lead to similar problems? In addition, personal characteristics (such as poverty or unemployment) may not always be the result of structural issues; they may actually be the result of personal shortcomings - how do you take that into account?

Responses:

Prof Pillay:

Your perspective on India is very misguided. What we read about India in economist magazines is an illusion. Just as an example, the rate of suicide amongst farmers is huge, because of commercialization of farming and the massive pressures that come with that. You have the classic scenario: enclaves of development with massive poverty all around. The biggest phenomenon in India is not IT as *The Economist* would have us believe – the biggest phenomenon in India is the Maoist uprising happening in the countryside, which is never reported on.

You say it's not a sin to be rich: it is a sin if other people are starving – a big sin. When we talk about what our struggle was all about...at minimum it was for socialist democracy. The statement "I didn't struggle to be poor" is such a slap in the face for the struggle – it's all about eradicating *my* poverty, with no thought for the poverty of anyone else. What animates that kind of person is

their hatred of rich white people with big houses, not because not everyone has one, but because *they* don't have one.

The last point was about diversity: race is a reality in the sense that people believe in it and it's a political fact. You can't do away with it, and we come from this racist past, with institutionalised racism - white people and categories of black people, as well as discrimination against disabled people and women. Those three are the most important branches of discrimination. Diversity is important, politically and from the perspective of social justice.

Dr Bentley:

In terms of growth versus redistribution - to listen to Trevor Manuel's budget speech, it sounds as if growth is what we have right; it's redistribution that we haven't achieved.

In terms of dispensing with race as a sign, I think we need to look at institutions rather than individuals, because individuals spring from institutional environments which apartheid established – hospitals, schools, workplaces etc.

I didn't say that race was a poor proxy for disadvantage – it's a good proxy for disadvantage, and I agree that we shouldn't use class to the exclusion of other criteria.

Questions from the floor:

1. All of these things like culture, class, inequality, spring from and are embodied in the concept of capitalism. The situation we face now has been explained as having been spawned pre-1994 when the white capitalists promoted a few blacks in a BEE scenario, who then became billionaires over a period of five years. These black promotees, together with the white majority, have served to demobilize the black majority.
2. Could we have a definition of class please?
3. Prof Pillay, when you started your talk you said there's only one race, the human race. But throughout your talk the words black and white cropped up with regularity. I'd rather go with your contention that there's only one race, and I believe we should reflect that in our speech. You said later that race is always with us, but to me that's Dr-Verwoerd-Speak – we have to come up with ways of getting around our problems without reference to race. To say that we can't get away from it is not good enough.

Responses:

Prof Pillay:

A definition of class: I adopt a flexible definition. In this book that we are publishing soon, we have a very broad definition of working class, namely: all

those unemployed who work in the formal or informal sector and all their dependents. Then middle class, which is more or less clearly definable, and then the capitalist class, defined as those who own the means of manufacture. It is the working class broadly defined, who have not benefited from the new South Africa.

In terms of there being only one race...I am totally sympathetic to you. When I refer to black and white I'm talking about social constructs. You can shake your head but you can't do away with it. Using alternative terms like historically disadvantaged etc, is a possibility, but they carry a lot of definitional problems.

I'm sympathetic to your general argument, and if we could get away from that, that would be the ultimate goal – we want to de-racialise our public discourse, but it's not always possible. There's an interesting example from Cuba on this issue – Cuba wanted to have a totally de-racialised discourse, and they worked on that. But after 10 years, in the 1970s, they realized they couldn't measure how black people had progressed in Cuban society.

They decided to actually count numbers of black people in management, schools, government etc, because they had to measure. The method they used was self-identification, but the point of the example is that adopting an entirely de-racialised discourse can lead to further problems.

Dr Bentley:

I was struck by the point about capitalism – we present these policies (affirmative action policies) in such a way that they appear to be about redress, but when you really look at it, it's all about the apex of the pyramid. The vast majority of people making up the lower levels of the pyramid don't see any real difference.

Don't be too hard on Prof Pillay about the race categories – he's not the only one who uses them. To this day, they're also legal categories in this country. Just think about the Employment Equity Act and similar legislation.

Questions from the floor:

1. If black people were appointed in senior positions and given support and mentorship, taking into account the quality of education they had, don't you think that they would succeed? Because my perception is that the people who don't want to appoint black people decide to appoint blacks who are incompetent and don't have qualifications, so that at the end of the day they can 'honestly' say: black people can't perform. They sabotage the government policies.
2. You mentioned that Malaysia was a flawed example. I was wondering whether class-based redress measures would have worked better in Malaysia?

Responses:

Dr Bentley:

In response to the comment about people being set up to fail: it's not the kind of thing that much hard evidence can be gathered on, but anecdotally it does happen. Perhaps the point you make it even more relevant to the issue of what is happening to the youth of the country. We need to think about skilling and educating the massive percentage of the South African population that is the youth. I do agree that we also need mentoring and so on in the workplace.

Prof Pillay:

The charge that some are deliberately, for racist reasons, appointing unqualified black people to sabotage government policies: that's a very strong charge. I won't say it doesn't ever happen, but you need to have real evidence to make a major charge like that.

What I didn't mention in my talk, though, and what I increasingly find black and white people legitimately complaining about, is the other dimension of so-called affirmative action, namely political appointments. Black people who are highly qualified can't get the jobs, even if they're ANC members, because you have to be part of the inner circle of the ANC. It's very dangerous. The SABC is a good example of where political appointments are rife.

Questions from the floor:

1. I find the way in which arguments are constructed to be very interesting. Many people construct their arguments to as to portray themselves as heroic individuals, taking up cudgels against the government. But this debate is really about power – it's about the redistribution of power, and the construction of arguments tends to hold on to power. Changing the criteria (eg using class instead of race) may not unpack the power issues here.
2. Thank you to the person who said we shouldn't use racial terms. In your talk, Dr Bentley, you spoke about justice, and I'm glad you did. You also related the concept of justice back to the poor needing certain basic things. My problem comes in where you underpin this argument of justice solely with a classist system. You did briefly refer to other criteria, but it seems that no-one tonight decided to broaden what affirmative action should be – perhaps it should affirm the psychological qualities which are even more prevalent in South African society today. It's not just about economics.
3. It seems there's a great confusion between the idea of class and the overthrow of class exploitation – is it possible for there to be substantive redress within our existing capitalist economy?

Reponses:

Dr Bentley:

On the point that this discourse is really about power: I agree, but I also think the evidence does speak for itself. I just thought of three examples that have nothing to do with race, but have been turned into race issues for political reasons: rape, crime stats and HIV.

The question about broadening affirmative action to focus on something more than class – I did confine my talk to class, and there are a whole range of different ways we can go about assessing how best to serve justice – but perhaps we can talk afterwards, because that is a long discussion!

On the point about class and class exploitation: when we abandoned RDP in favour of GEAR, many felt that the government had ‘chosen’ capitalism as the country’s path. But this is not a binary – it’s not always a choice between either capitalism or socialism – I believe we need to temper the policies we use to achieve a middle ground on which redress can occur.

Prof Pillay:

To answer your question about redress within capitalism, you have to define what you mean by capitalism. You have done so by saying ‘the existing capitalist system’. In my opinion, the free market economy is devastating for the poor. We should know this by now. In the 1980s the rich gained ascendancy by means of figures like Thatcher and Regan, and via institutions like the World Bank. Now we have to claw our way back. Social democracy of the Scandinavian variety is a good alternative, I believe. And there’s one state in India, Kerala, where the Communist Party has been in power for years, and their system is also a good alternative.

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