

Race, Class and Affirmative Action

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As we celebrate our achievements along the road to a non-racial and non-sexist democracy, we cannot ignore the rising social inequality and persistent, widespread poverty in our country. Most of the rich remain white, while the vast majority of the poor remain black. Will affirmative action, whether in the form of employment equity legislation or black economic empowerment, address this problem?

The two dominant narratives of affirmative action in South Africa revolve around the vexed question of 'race' (over-shadowing gender and disability). The first is an ostensibly 'non-racial' approach, which seeks to deny the saliency of 'race' as a factor in public policy and discourse, while the second is a highly racialised approach, which seeks to insert considerations of race into all arenas policy and discourse.

If I had written this 20 years ago, it would immediately be assumed that the non-racial narrative would belong to the anti-apartheid movement, whilst the racialised one was that of apartheid ideologues.

Today, however, many beneficiaries of apartheid are the standard bearers of the non-racial approach, whilst the victims seem to be more interested in a re-racialised discourse.

However, if we use a class-based lens to view the problem of inequality and poverty, we can unmask the hollowness of both narratives, whilst at the same time appreciate the emotional space from whence they emerge.

Unfortunately, politics is animated in the first instance by our emotional responses, which clouds our ability to objectively assess issues. This means that such debates cannot be resolved purely on a 'rational' plane, as some would like, without acknowledging the hurt and pain embedded in many of our responses. In other words, a high degree of humility and tolerance is called for.

When black people, particularly in places like Cape Town, see white people continuing to enjoy all the privileges accumulated under apartheid, including the best houses to live in, the best places to enjoy themselves, and the best jobs, many seethe with resentment. After all, what was the struggle about, they argue, if white people can remain racist and prevent black people from advancing?

On the other hand, white people are alarmed when black people are promoted to high positions before they have accumulated the necessary qualifications and/or experience. This becomes most acute when policemen fail in basic duties, municipal services collapse, government policy fails to be implemented properly, or the rugby team loses.

These observations can lead to extreme views: on the one hand, that white people are racist until proven otherwise, and on the other, that black people are incompetent until proven otherwise. These emotional responses do not need scientific evidence to

support them, just a few dinner-table anecdotes. They are absurd and untenable - but they held by many people in our country, especially in their weaker moments.

Nevertheless, both observations have relevance, and need to be appreciated. It is a matter of striking a balance between achieving sufficient diversity in all spheres of public engagement, whilst at the same time ensuring that teachers can teach, policemen can police, nurses can nurse, and managers can manage.

However, neither the highly racialised approach, nor the ostensibly non-racial approach, will allow us to strike at the root of the problem. The first one locks us into re-racialised black or even narrower ethnic nationalisms, which undermines our non-racial objectives, whilst the second locks in white privilege under the guise of a non-racial 'free' market, where everyone has to compete equally in a blatantly uneven playing field.

Both are preoccupations of the middle classes, and are not necessarily of immediate interest to the millions of poor and destitute - the majority of our population.

A class-based approach asks what is the underlying cause of rising inequality and persistent poverty? Was apartheid in the first instance primarily about racial discrimination, or was it in essence about class exploitation?

In other words, is the continuation of poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa a result of unresolved white racist practice (or, conversely, newly emerged black racist practice)? Or is it because we have been following international 'best practice' for the rich, namely an orthodox economic trajectory that is making the rich obscenely richer and the poor poorer, in South Africa and in the world generally?

By targeting policies towards the *real* economic fundamentals - food, shelter, clothing - the stated objectives of black economic empowerment would be achieved, without having to overly racialise our public discourse. A redistributive growth strategy that targets the urban and rural working class (broadly defined), will mainly benefit black people. On the other hand, higher taxation, either directly or on luxury goods, will target rich people, who are for the immediate future mainly white.

This does not mean that redress measures that mainly benefit the middle classes are of no importance, particularly in professional institutions such as universities. The point however is that they are side shows, and should not be confused with the main drama - the elimination of gross class inequality.

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