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APARTHEID AS IDEOLOGY

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Writers on South African race policy frequently distinguish between the 'administrative-repressive' structure and the 'utopian' or 'declamatory' aspects of apartheid, between the ongoing processes of racial discrimination and the ideal of total territorial separation between the races.(1)

Van Den Berghe(2) argues that the contradictions between the "idealist" and "realist" strains in apartheid may be resolved, "insofar as each operate at a different level. The answer lies in the old dilemma of means versus ends that is inherent in the exercise of power." This kind of argument conceals the problematic nature of apartheid. The fact that politicians' actions frequently diverge from their expressed intentions is not in itself very interesting. It is the construction which political actors place upon the relationship between means and ends which reveals the nature of ideological assumptions. In South Africa, the consciousness of a dichotomy between the ongoing activities of the political order and the professed objectives of the regime reveals the contradictions of the South African situation.

Nationalist politicians are sensitive to the criticism that the means seem inefficacious in securing the ends, or that the "ideals" of apartheid are subverted by economic development. The party is divided ideologically between "idealists" and "pragmatists," between those concerned (like Vorster) with attending to the arrangements of the society, and those for whom the burden of politics involves the reconstruction of society in a Utopian mould. Much of public debate takes the form of a controversy over the efficacy of present measures in securing future ends. Undoubtedly the contradictions are less heavily underscored now than during Verwoerd's premiership, when "ideal apartheid" acquired condiderable coherence and resonance, but the consciousness of the dichotomy remains.

There is among Nationalists neither the complacent idealisation of the status quo which characterises conservative rule, nor the total rejection of all elements of current activity which typifies the radical posture in politics. Nor is there that forced identification of means and ends by which the Stalinists reconciled the dictatorship of the party with the dictatorship of the proletariat.

(1) cf H. Adams, Modernising Racial Domination , (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971)
'Apartheid as Utopia and Reality', pp. 67-73

(2) P. Van Den Berghe 'Apartheid, Fascism and the Golden Age' Cashiers d'Etudes Africaines 4 (1960) p. 599.

Apartheid reflects the Afrikaner's - more generally the white South African's - sense of being in a transitional situation, of applying "modern" methods to serve "traditional " ends, of preserving the values of communalism despite a commitment to the economic development. There is, in current political assumptions, a commitment both to industrialisation and to communalist goals which uncomfortably straddles both radical and conservative views of reality. The world is not comprehended in one piece. It is itemised into components which do not fit together. Conservative statements clothe a radical desire to transform reality; conversely, radical demands are encapsulated and etiolated in the ongoing routines of bureaucracy and economy.

To say that South Africans have a confused picture of the world, occasionally clarified by the forceful rhetoric and logical coherence of a Verwoerd is not enough. If, as Harris states, ideology is the language of the purposes of a community, these ideological confusions point to the real dilemmas facing political actors. These contradictions are embedded in the whole structure of white domination. In some of its manifestations it bears the mark of an imperial order imposed on a local "underlying population" - its administrative forms reflect the influence of British government abroad. Yet these are underpinned by radically opposed sentiments in favour of national self-determination. The state is highly authoritarian and increasingly subject to a central bureaucracy, yet it has been strongly influenced in its development by populist assumptions about the subordination of the state to the Volkswil. The Afrikaner state is heir both to the structures imposed during the development of British influence in South Africa and to the forces which opposed that influence. Somerset and Bezuidenhout, Milner and Hertzog have exercised contradictory influences upon the shape and texture of South African political ideas.

Both the imperial physic of "good government" and its antidote of popular government interact explosively in the digestive tract of the Afrikaner body politic. The doctrine that the blacks of South Africa have a God-given right to self-determination concatenates with the imperial impulse to determine the social base and political forms expressing this "natural right," as well as the timing of its introduction. Afrikaner consciousness was shaped by the experience of colonisation. The role of coloniser is a distasteful one. It is particularly so because of the assumption implicit in modern empires that the essence of imperial statesmanship is as Burke put it, "well to know the right time and manner of yielding that which it is impossible to keep." When the colony is "internal" and the colonised the majority of the population, the problem is acute.

No wonder that whites reject the description of their hegemony as "colonial." Yet it is not easily laid aside. The alternative is to recruit blacks into the white political order.

The psychological dilemma is intrinsic in the very categories which legitimise racial discrimination: The sense of being a "European", heir to the "western heritage", presents an acute problem, for it conveys to whites not only the emblem of their superiority over blacks, but also a set of implicitly superior criteria by which their own actions may be judged.

The economic development of the country, particularly after the Second World War, sharply exacerbated these contradictions. Economic development implied the increasing interdependence of different racial groups, while the conflicts within industrial society gave rise to the demands for segregation within the developing sectors of the economy. The industrial wealth of the country has amplified the power of the state, yet this power is ineffective in segregating the races on a territorial basis precisely because it rests on a multi-racial industrial labour force. Even those forces working within the economy to undermine the racial hierarchy are themselves maintained by the availability of a cheap and quiescent labour force.

The idea of apartheid summarises these contradictions. It posits as a goal the physical segregation of the races, but it is a sort of "functional" separation which is in reality pursued. The Bantu, stated a Nationalist M.P., "only came here to supply labour. They are only supplying a commodity, the commodity of labour ... it is labour we are importing, and not labourers." (3) Minister De Wet Nel argued that "Bantu may be present in the white areas to offer labour but not for the sake of enjoying all sorts of privileges such as citizenship rights, political rights, social integration, etc." (4)

It is rare to find such explicit documentation for the Marxian thesis that labour is a commodity "made over to another." Segregation policy expresses at its simplest level the idea of alienation between economy and community. It has its roots in the experience of Afrikaners during the last three quarters of a century, in their own alienation from the land and their absorption into the developing sector of the economy.

(3) H. Adams, op cit, 96

(4) R. Horwitz, Political Economy of South Africa, p. 411

The idea of segregation also serves to rationalise the denial of the political and social implications of total membership of a common industrial society. But the idea of segregation is more than either a rationalisation for exploitation or the metaphorical crystallisation of the experience of Afrikaners during their absorption into the industrial economy. Over and above these, it is an accurate comprehension of the essential situation of the blacks in South Africa. Blacks are simply labour units; there is a divorce in white consciousness between the black man and his labour. The "softer" options proferred by the white opposition parties have a bias towards more "humane" theories of industrial management and towards optimising methods of exploiting manpower. Ultimately however, they do not confront the problem of the alienation of black labour with any more coherence than do the Nationalists.

The argument advanced by Adams that segregation serves white interests by deflecting African aspirations to areas where no dangers exist to white rule, that they meet demands for African political rights, and that they conceal white controls over development is implausible in several different ways. First, it is implausible in the sense that, although it may be the government's intention to "deflect", "meet" and "conceal", it has had little success with these deflections and concealments.

The idea that the Nationalists are a species of magicians weaving spells to enchant and captivate is widely held, but surely erroneous -- were it so, the audience would long have grown weary of their inability to produce rabbits from hats or gin bottles from thin air. But it is not so much that Adams inaccurately diagnoses the "functions" or the "interests" which apartheid serves as that he should try to explain it in terms of such functions and interests that is defective about this kind of argument.

Ideologies, it has powerfully been argued, offer "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience." (5) Ideologies offer means of organising and assimilating social experience. They do not so much serve interests as create them by making particular actions appear sensible and coherent. Groups and interests are formed in the metaphors of collective activity. These metaphors make meaningful to individual and collective actors the arena of social interaction, particularly in conflict over the allocation of scarce resources. They help to locate individuals and groups in relation to major social formations and major changes. Ideologies are implicit in all social action: action undertaken without some cognitive framework of assumptions is analogous to the behaviour of an individual lacking (like a new-born baby) a coherent perceptual framework.

(5) C. Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System", in D. Apter (ed) Ideology and Discontent (New York: Free Press, 1964) p. 64.

In situations of stability, ideologies are implicit within the general framework of social values. Politics in such situations involves the "pursuit of intimations" (in Oakeshott's seminal phrase). Because the framework of assumptions and expecations is stable, no thought is given to it. The formulation of rules of conduct is not given explicit attention - changes in the rules ensue in the course of their application.

In situations of change, when the rules require explicit formulation, whether to guarantee an existing practice against attack, or to attack the existing but discredited rules, ideology becomes explicit: in strange country, men need maps and compasses. Ideology, the metaphor of social action, creates a set of premises, and a direction for action. The issue of whether ideology is "objectively true" or not is irrelevant - an ideological statment which is not true from a particular perspective will simply not secure any adherents. Successful ideologies secure support because they convey a meaning significant to their adherents. They summon (like a good poem) a range of allusions beyond the words used. They condense meaning through the juxtaposition of different words. Ideology extends political comprehension, just as poetry extends the range of a language, precisely because these juxtapositions. "My love is like a red, red rose" extends the meaning precisely because of the tension implicit between the things compared - even to the thorns beneath the bloom. "War is the mother of culture" had the ring of veracity to a Japan poised on the brink of imperial adventures during the thirties.

It may be, as Oakeshott has claimed, that "political crisis ... always appears within a tradition of political activity; and 'salvation' comes from the unimpaired resources of the tradition itself." (6) But the recognition and the repair of the resources of the tradition may require major renovation and reorganisation. Goals, implicit in the operation of the "traditional community" require explicit formulation. Tradition itself becomes ideologised. In nationalist movements everywhere, traditions have been turned into instruments of political movements which are anything but traditional. Kedourie, reflecting upon the fact that there is a sculpture of the Burning Bush at the gate of the Chamber of Deputies in Jerusalem, comments: "the noumenal has been degraded into the political." (7)

(6) M. Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics (London: Methuen, 1962) p. 126

(7) E. Kedourie, Nationalism in Asia and Africa (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1970) p. 69.

In South Africa, the defence of a "traditional way of life" almost extinct in its social content has been rescuscitated as the political goal of the community. This way of life is, in the last resort, a political community - predominantly a political party which has assembled support from, but in a sense also has superseded, Afrikaner society. Since the Anglo-Boer war, Afrikaner society has been constituted (and reconstituted several times) in the form of a movement - a classless, elite-dominated association. The party it is frequently claimed, is the political expression of the nation. On the contrary, the party and its interlocking associations is the nation.

Apartheid's main premise is the assumption of irreconcilable conflict between white and black in a "common" society. The nature of this common society, that is to say the meaning which it has acquired in South Africa, is a class society, the structure of which is dictated by the operation of the market. The premise of irreconcilable conflict in such a society does not merely "rationalise" or "justify" a particular form of rule; it accurately summarises the situation in South Africa from the perspective of significant groups of Afrikaners. White labour, for instance, was confronted with the possibility of being undercut in conditions of free competition, and political leaders (in the light of events such as the 1922 strike) were threatened with the possibility of militant action if the state did not regulate the operation of the labour market to the advantage of the most militant groups.

Other groups (mainly commercial farmers) were faced with having to compete with industry for labour during a period of rapid expansion in both agricultural and industrial production after the second world war. Both problems had precedents, but thy were vastly exacerbated after the war.

The doctrine of apartheid, was the ideological expression of state intervention in the economy during a critical change in the situation of a large number of Afrikaners. This intervention did not simply, however, serve these interests - it created them. It created a basis by which new formations in white society might become viable, partly by profiding them with a "protected" role, partly by setting the conditions for an alliance between groups of whites in different situations. (There was no self-evident community of interest between commercial farmers operating on a vastly expanded scale and recently urbanised Afrikaners who had been extruded from the land in the process of agricultural development.) The political movement provided a matrix for the creation of this coalition.

It is probable that the efficient cause of the political movement's success was that most significant groups of Afrikaners were conscious of some impediment, relative to non-Afrikaners, in situations of an unregulated economy.

The problem with attempting to express the aspirations of widely divergent particular interests in a single movement is, of course, that certain gratifications have to be postponed while others are gratified. Within the movement's support a stratification system has developed; there is a nascent class system within Afrikaner society itself. The interests of different groups are not identical, especially in situations of affluence, when expectations of improvement are universally entertained. It is this which perhaps explains the dichotomy between "ideal" apartheid and "realism." The "realists" calculate their expectations in secular terms. The "idealists" find in the non-materialisation of Utopia both the cause of present discontents, a framework for the criticism of existing leaders, and a faith to pursue.

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