IDENTITY POLITICS AND CLASS STRUGGLE: SOME THOUGHTS

Introduction

To start off with, there is a need to narrow down the scope of our discussion: we are here dealing with *the struggle against oppression*. In this regard, both "identity" and "class" are relevant categories, since both are experienced as society-wide, historical and self-perpetuating. Moreover, a kind of dialectical relationship exists between the two, in that very often there is a contestation as to which is the dominant form of oppression – is it race, is it class? – and which should therefore be the driving focus of the struggle for liberation – will victory in the struggle against racism free society from all forms of oppression (or at least create the springboard for such a project?), or is it the task of class struggle to usher in a new world free of all forms of oppression?

Such an approach as is proposed here is necessarily an oversimplification, since the world as we know it cannot be reduced to a simple binary – race versus class. Yet, the value of such an approach lies in the promise of clarity that stands to be gained.

Revolutionary Implications

Every struggle is not a revolutionary struggle. On a day-to-day basis, oppressed groups are confronted with the need to employ *defensive* or *protective* strategies – to defend their gains or to protect themselves from ongoing or deepening levels of abuse. In addition, oppressed groups will, from time to time, embark on *proactive strategies* against oppressor groups, but within the ruling paradigm (that is, within the capitalist framework). In other words – necessary though these forms of struggle are, they are essentially non-transformational in character and intent.[1] But – and this is an important but – there is always the potential that such struggles could roll over – escalate – into struggles with revolutionary implications. For this reason, revolutionary struggle should not be seen as "a thing apart," but as something flowing directly from the day-to-day struggles of the masses. It follows then, that one's revolutionary theory matters in the day-to-day struggle. If one's anti-racism struggle is not at the same time an anti-capitalist struggle (as Adolph Reed reminds us[2]) then our best outcome will be no more than a "bleached" neoliberalism. Similarly, if workers are only (or largely) concerned with workplace-related issues, the best that this form of struggle (usually referred to as "economism") will lead to are incremental reforms in the workplace.

In short, purpose and orientation in the day-to-day struggles matter.

Racial Essentialism

By "essentialism" is meant: as a group, having an "underlying reality or true nature" – the essence – that might not be directly observable, but that accounts for one's shared identity.[3] "Essence," as a defining property, according to Susan Gelman implies that:

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[1] See Ellen Meiksins Wood's *The Politics of Capitalism*, Monthly Review Press, volume 51, number 4, 1999.

[2] Adolph Reed: *Identity Politics is Neoliberalism*, June 2015. See website https://bennorton.com/adolph-reed-identity-politics-is-neoliberalism/ [Accessed 8 June 2020].

[3] From Susan D Gelman's *Essentialism in everyday thought*, 2005, available at website: https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/05/gelman [Accessed 2 April 2021]

… category members are alike in unknown ways, including a shared underlying structure; that there is an innate, genetic, or biological basis to category; and that categories have sharp and immutable boundaries.[4]

This is amplified in Lawrence Jarach's definition:

Essentialism is the idea that there exists some detectible and objective core quality of particular groups of people that is inherent, eternal, and unalterable; groupings can be categorized according to these qualities of essence, which are based on such problematic criteria as gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, and class.[5]

It is a truism that we all have multiple identities; we are all part of several social collectivities, so identity in itself is not at issue. The problem arises when a predisposition with group distinctions (i.e. "differentialism"[6]) leads to discrimination such as happens in the case of "master race" theories. To counter this, Pierre-André Taguieff, proposes that our approach should be based on an *ethics of altruism*, in terms of which the "thou" is placed on a par with the "I" – in other words, for one to display an overarching consideration for the needs and rights of others. [7]
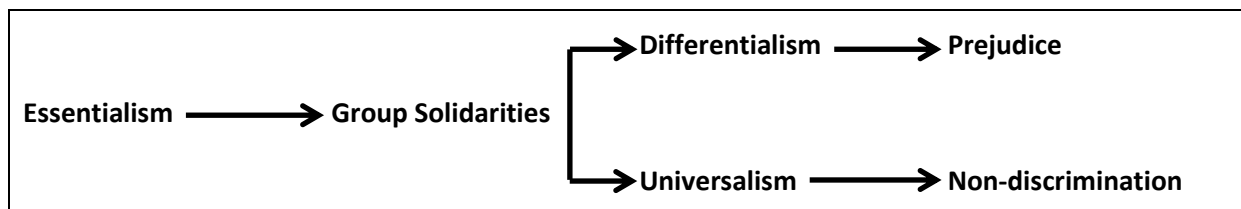
One of the most contested (and fiercely defended) forms of Essentialism is surely "*racial* essentialism.*"* Despite science's having long ago confirmed race as a myth, this has done nothing (or little) to dispel *racialism* as a reality. Barbara and Karen Fields likened belief in race to belief in witches. Neither race nor witches has a biological basis, but "when [racial] practices are repeated widely and persevere for decades and centuries, racist practice produces a general belief in race."[8]

And not only on the part of the oppressors. In South Africa, the "four race theory" has widespread appeal. More than a quarter century after apartheid legislation was expunged from our statute books, there is little sign that we have moved appreciably away from categorising our citizenry as White, Black, Coloured or Indian.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] From Lawrence Jarach's article, *Essentialism and the Problem of Identity Politics*. Available at the website: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lawrence-jarach-essentialism-and-the-problem-of-identity-politics [Accessed 3 April 2021].

[6] Differentialism is . . . affording **differential** treatment to different persons attributable wholly or mainly to their description by race, caste, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex whereby persons of one such description are subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of another description are not made subject or are accorded privileges or advantages that are not accorded to persons of another such description. (https://glosbe.com/en/en/differentialism Glosbe.com. [Accessed 9 April 2021])

[7] Taguieff, P-A. (Trans Melehy, H). (2001). *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and Its Doubles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[8] From the article *How Race is Conjured: Interview with Barbara and Karen Fields.* June 30, 2015. From the website https://socialistworker.org/2015/06/30/how-race-is-conjured [accessed 1 September 2018].

However, "race" can be a proxy-term for a complex mix of features. So, one can consider one's-self "black," and understand this to mean a South African whose ancestry is exclusively or mainly indigenous to the Southern tip of this continent, or simply because one feels a belonging to a specific group generally regarded as "black." And so, one could be a "black anything" – a "black citizen," a "black manager," a "black worker…" and, indeed, a member of the "black working class."

We have arrived at an inflection point. The history of South Africa can be told/seen/interpreted as one of racial oppression or as one of class oppression – or as a combination of the two: as capitalist domination of the black working class.

Black Consciousness (BC)

Lawrence Jarach, in his article, *Essentialism and the Problem of Identity Politics*,[9] makes a key observation when he says: "For a person or group of people on the receiving end of racism and sexism (etc.), essentialism can appear to be a powerful defensive perspective and counter-narrative." Thus, a critical part of the anti-colonial struggle has always been the effort to falsify the narrative of "black inferiority" with the counter-narrative of universal human equality.[10]

In the same vein, philosophies such as Negritude[11] and Black Consciousness should be seen as "counter-narratives" in the fight against oppression and the intellectual basis of oppression.

The beginnings of BC in South Africa are traced to 1969, when "Steve Biko and other black students frustrated with white leadership in multi-racial student organizations formed an exclusively black association: the South African Students' Organization (SASO)."[12] Leslie Ann Hadfield tells us that

> Black Consciousness began to be defined as "an attitude of mind" or "way of life" of black people who believed in their potential and value as black people and saw the need for black people to work together for a holistic liberation. SASO students explained South Africa's main problem as twofold: white racism and black acquiescence to that racism.[13]

Thus, a core project within the BC Movement was to transform "black acquiescence" into a sense of "black pride" – a positive, creative sense of self – to challenge the status quo.[14]

The BC Movement is credited with having played a pivotal role in the Soweto uprisings of 1976, and was considered instrumental in shaping resistance to apartheid throughout the 1970s and 1980s, which culminated in the eventual demise of the apartheid state. Although the movement spawned a political organisation – The Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) – its primary purpose was not the

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[9] Op Cit.

[10] One of many examples in this regard would be Ben Kies's path-breaking *The Contribution of the Non European Peoples to World Civilization.* (1953). Unity Movement History Series.

[11] Négritude (which can be translated as "Blackness") "is a framework of critique and literary theory, developed mainly by francophone intellectuals, writers, and politicians of the African diaspora during the 1930s, aimed at raising and cultivating "Black consciousness" across Africa and its diaspora." (Wikipedia, 31 March 2021).

[12] From Leslie Ann Hadfield's article: *Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement.* Published online: 27 February 2017. See website: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.83 [Accessed 5 April 2021].

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

conquest of power so much as to resist European influences and, "from the bottom up," to focus on "building a world that was authentic to black people."[15] This is shown in the following quote by Grace Kyende Kinoti[16] attributed to Steve Biko:

> Black Consciousness … takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.

Precursor to the BC Movement

Preceding the emergence of Steve Biko and the BC Movement in South Africa was a narrower, more conservative form of (African) essentialism whose rise coincided with the post-World War II independence movement. This was an era which ushered in the rapid transition from colony to independent nation state of a number of countries in what is today referred to as the Global South. It is an essentialism mostly associated with Anton Lembede, who in 1944 became the first president of the ANC Youth League. Today, some of Lembede's ideas might seem quite dated, for example:

> African nationalism is based on the following cardinal principles:
>
> 1. Africa is a blackman's country.
> 2. Africans are one.
> 3. The leader of the Africans will come out of their own loins.
> 4. Co-operation between Africans and other Non-Europeans on common problems and issues may be highly desirable. But this occasional co-operation can only take place between Africans as a single unit and other Non-European groups as separate units. Non-European unity is a fantastic dream which has no foundation in reality.[17]

A fervent black nationalist, Lembede advocated "colour bar thinking within the Youth League, whose constitution stipulated that membership was open only to all African men and women between the ages of 12 and 40 but permitted young members of other sections of the community who reportedly lived like and with Africans and whose general outlook on life was similar to that of Africans also to become full members."[18]

Modern-day Manifestations

If we fast-forward to the present-day, then we see that there are perhaps two dominant forms of racial essentialism at play: that represented by extremist groupings such as the EFF and BLF on the one hand, who could arguably be seen as the direct descendants of Lembede; and on the other hand, a more moderate form of multi-racialism (often erroneously referred to as "non-racialism"

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[15] From page 8 of the Senior Honours thesis in Global Studies of Grace Kyende Kinoti entitled, *Towards a World Where Many Worlds Fit: The Black Consciousness Movement as Ontological Resistance.* (March 2020). University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
[16] Ibid.
[17] From Sarah Mokone's article, *Majority Rule: Some Notes.* (1991) in the Teacher's League's Educational Journal.
[18] Ibid.

and symbolised by the "rainbow nation" metaphor) represented by those favouring affirmative action and other forms of piecemeal change of the kind which poses no threat to the existing order.

Recently, a third-stream, closely aligned to the BC philosophy, was given impetus by the student protest movement of 2015-2017 – that of "black identity politics" in terms of which "blackness" was elevated to a kind of near-hegemonic or leadership status in the #RhodesMustFall and the #FeesMustFall struggles.

In the introduction to their paper on identity and privilege, Asanda Ngoasheng and Daniela Gachago[19] make the following observations:

> The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements of 2015 and 2016 have foregrounded a renewed interest in identity politics, i.e. the tendency to politically associate and organise based on identity, rather than issues or ideology, and the need for decolonisation of the curriculum as part of this identity-seeking project. The student protests relied heavily on identity politics. The movement was framed as a black one in all tertiary institutions in South Africa, and black pain was centred as well as the black intellectual. The intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality played out in interesting ways as demonstrated in the following two incidents. The complexity of race and class was emphasised by the nature of the participation of white students in the protests, who took on the role of "allies" – supporting a movement led by black students highlighting black experiences of continued oppression in white spaces – using their white privilege – strategically by for example acting as human shields and protecting their black counterparts from police brutality during #FeesMustFall protests or setting up support stations, handing out drinks and snacks during occupation of buildings and demonstrations. The intersection of race, sex and gender was demonstrated by the leadership of black feminist women in the movement and the pivotal role that the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Trans Collective played, particularly in the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protests. The presence of black, often transgender, women in this movement was one example of the shifting of political power although these voices were increasingly marginalised during the 2016 #FeesMustFall protests. All these factors have renewed the debate around both the importance and the dangers of identity politics. They have also rekindled discussions around the complexities of intersectionality – the recognition that social positions like race, age, social class, ethnicity, culture etc have an impact on how we experience oppression.

Critique of Identity Politics

The above quote aligns perfectly with what Louise O'Shea has to say about identity politics:

> The common theme here is, first, that experience of oppression confers an incontrovertible authority that alone qualifies a person to speak, analyse and present strategies to challenge or eliminate oppression. Second is that those who do not share this experience can do no

[19] *Dreaming up a new grid: two lecturers' reflections on challenging traditional notions of identity and privilege in a South African classroom*, at http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1947-94172017000200011 [accessed 4 September 2018]

more than play a passive role supporting those who do, or else become complicit in the problem.[20]

While conceding that experience is an important factor in the struggle against oppression, O'Shea nevertheless considers it inadequate, on its own as a foundation from which to develop an analysis of oppression or to devise political strategies to end oppression. The causes of oppression, says O'Shea, cannot be elucidated from experience alone.[21]

Thus, in attempting to understand the causes of oppression, it will be necessary to move beyond the limits of experience.

Racial prejudice versus Racial Discrimination

There are those, like Hillel Ticktin[22] who prefer to focus on racial *discrimination,* rather than "race" (which Ticktin dismisses as a form of prejudice). For Ticktin, "racial discrimination" is the form of social domination which was instrumental in shaping the very history of this country – a form of domination that continues to exert a defining impact on the country today, more than a quarter century after apartheid's official demise. He is, of course, referring to the *class* roots of discrimination, in terms of which the process of *forced* proletarianisation unfolded in South Africa.

Few have recounted the narrative of SA's modern history better than Frederick Johnstone in his path-breaking book, "Class, Race and Gold."[23]

Johnstone in a nutshell[24]

Racial prejudice – or more trenchantly, racism or race hatred – has many causes, but in the context of South African history, certainly the most significant of them would be the economic system. That is to say, *racial discrimination, black poverty and capitalism* are all indissolubly linked.

It is not disputed that from the mid-to-late nineteenth-century onward, SA was incorporated into the global capitalist system as an "enclave economy"[25] (that is, as one which was developed not for the needs of its people, but to serve the interests of the imperialist rulers) for the exploitation of the country's mineral wealth, chiefly gold and diamonds. What is also not disputed is that the mining industry, and in turn, the country's entire economy, was from the start based on "ultra-cheap," "ultra-exploitable non-white labour" (to use Johnstone's terminology[26]).

The wars of dispossession against the indigenous tribal formations in this country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were part of the process of worldwide capitalist expansion – part of the

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[20] From Louise O'Shea's article: *The problem with identity politics* (July 2017). See website https://redflag.org.au/node/5900 [Accessed 10 April 2021].
[21] Ibid.
[22] Hillel Ticktin (1991). *The Politics of Race: Discrimination In South Africa.* : Pluto Press, London
[23] The full title is: *Class, race and gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa.* Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul (London, Henley and Boston) in 1976.
[24] This section is largely borrowed from the Unity Movement's Bulletin article entitled *Class Roots of Racialism in South Africa* (Vol 22, No 1, November 2015)
[25] "Enclave economy" is a term used by G C Mhone in his article *Enclavity and Constrained Labour Absorptive Capacity in Southern African Economies.* Published in 2001 by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
[26] Op cit.

process of primitive accumulation known as "colonialism." In South Africa, the land grabs and enslavement of local people were followed by a devastating process of social upheaval, in the service of the mining industry, which in the early twentieth century, was the heart-and-soul of the SA economy. Herein lie the roots of racial discrimination and racism which to this very day continue to bedevil our social relations.

Johnstone highlights the following key factors:

- The viability of the mining industry in this country (especially the gold mining industry) was critically dependent on ongoing flows of *ultra-cheap, ultra-exploitable* labour power. Without this, there would have been no mining industry, as production costs would have been too prohibitive.
- In order to secure the necessary ultra-cheap, ultra-exploitable labour power, imperialism turned its attention to the indigenous (black) masses, and set in train a further process of land grabs and proletarianisation. This included poll taxes and Land Acts designed to break the peoples' independence, and to force them to turn to wage-labour as a means of survival. Among the addition factors which ensured their vulnerability to exploitation were the following:
  - Harsh, draconian labour conditions on the mines, amounting to virtual slavery
  - Restriction of workers' contractual rights through the contract system. For example, the Master & Servant laws made breach of contract by non-white workers a criminal offence. These restrictions effectively ensured that there would be no competitive wage determination.
  - The pass system, which was a system of "movement control" and strict labour regimentation.
  - The compound system, which was about accommodating mineworkers in conditions akin to concentration camps.
  - Semi-proletarianisation rather than full proletarianisation, in terms of which the rural subsistence economy functioned to partly support the livelihood of mining labourers, so that the mine wage did not have to bear the full burden of the labourers' reproduction.
- By contrast, workers of a non-indigenous background (in short, white workers of European origin) brought to the workplace their "democratic" rights, and organised (often, fiercely) in defence of these rights. As such, they spurned any notions of class-solidarity with their non-white counterparts, preferring to remain a labour aristocracy, and, with the help of the state, to ensure enforcement of their own set of colour bars against the non-white workers. These colour bars included the following:
  - The job colour bar – in terms of which all skilled jobs were reserved for workers classified as white.
  - The White Labour Policy – in terms of which the state-as-employer gave preferential treatment to white workers over non-white workers
  - Highly discriminatory working conditions for non-white workers (including lower pay for the same work, inferior working conditions, etc. – all backed up by legislation).

Resistance

It is a matter for the historical record that the ANC of the 1940s prized group identity over unity of the oppressed as the means for confronting segregation. The ANC was neither willing to terminate participation of its members in the Native Representative Council nor elevate unity of the oppressed over unity of the African people. In the words of RV Selope Thema (himself a member of the Native Representative Council):

> … the unity of the African people [is] of primary importance. Charity begins at home. They, the Africans, want to unite in their economic and social life, and therefore they have to unite as a race. We have a purpose to fulfil as a united African race. Our aims might be opposed to those of other people, it does not matter. We should follow the law of self-preservation. We should love each other first before we loved other people.[27]

The long, bitter history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid ended in 1994, with the transition of the country to a constitutional democracy. While this change resulted in the removal of racially discriminatory legislation from our statute books, it left the capitalist system intact. In a certain sense, therefore, 1994 can be regarded as the advent of regime-change rather than of fundamental social renewal.

The early nineteen-nineties also coincided with the worldwide intensification of neoliberalism, in terms of which capitalist exploitation was intensified on a global scale. Thus, if 1994 began with the promise of social democracy, whereby the state would drive socially-friendly economic and social policies, this was soon frustrated when, instead, there was increasing austerity, job-losses and endless deferment of social-redress measures such as housing provision, educational reform and healthcare provision.

The Current Situation

All eyes are on the post-pandemic future, wherein lies the hope of a global economic recovery favourable to all. Currently, there is talk of a shift from neoliberal austerity politics to a return to an era of social democracy. The Biden administration in America has announced a plan to spend some $2 trillion over the next eight years to renew infrastructure and to reignite the American economy. Global suppliers to the American market would all have cause for optimism – if the American economy grows, it has the effect of lifting all other national economies in the process. Some of Biden's plans include the following:

- Provide health insurance coverage for 97% of Americans in 10 years.
- Raise an additional $4 trillion in tax revenue by increasing the top tax rate to 39.6%, taxing capital gains at ordinary rates, and raising the corporate tax rate to 28%.
- Forgive student loan debt and make college free for those making up to $125,000.
- Raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour and repeal "right to work" laws.
- Expand "Buy American" policies through government purchasing, while using subsidies, federal matching, and incentives to make American products more competitive.
- Invest $1.3 trillion in infrastructure over 10 years.

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[27] From the minutes of the Joint Meeting of the National Executive Committees of the ANC and the AAC, April 17-18, 1949.

- Spend $2 trillion on clean energy during his first term as president.[28]

Added to this, is what appears to be a new orientation on the part of the IMF. Apparently this global ultra-enforcer of neoliberal austerity measures is in favour of raising tax levels of the rich.[29] (Obviously, we must not get too hopeful too soon!)

If the immediate future is indeed characterised by improved economic growth globally, and if SA is part of the resultant prosperity, it can be expected that various constituencies will be vying for a fair share of that prosperity. We could thus see a resurgence in the Fees Must Fall campaign, which could well result in a victory for the campaign. If so, would it be correct to characterise this as a victory for identity politics?

The answer would be yes – a victory for issue-based politics. And this, at the end of the day, would be the kind of role that any form of (enlightened, progressive) identity politics should play: to drive specific issues, but within and as part of, the broader liberatory framework.

Conclusion

For Identity Politics to be a force for positive social change, the following would be necessary:

- Groups based on identity politics should espouse a "politics/ethics of altruism" in line with Pierre-André Taguieff's injunction referred to earlier in this article;
- … such an approach would see them positioning themselves as part of a wider progressive movement for social transformation;
- … in addition, such an approach would result in growing levels of solidarity between different groups waging different struggles. It would mean, for example, that a community fighting against gentrification of its suburb, say, would be able to rely on widespread solidarity-action on the part of the broader struggle.

Thus, without in any way diminishing the role of identity-based politics, if it is positioned within the broader framework of the liberatory/class struggle, there is an enhanced prospect of an acceleration towards real social transformation in our country and in the world.

Charles Thomas
April 2021.

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[28] See Investopedia article entitled, *Joe Biden's Economic Plan* by Deborah D'Souza on 26 March 2021 at website https://www.investopedia.com/joe-biden-s-economic-plan-save-the-middle-class-4769869 [Accessed 14 April 2021]

[29] See, for example, article by Ben Winck and Juliana Kaplan in Business Insider US dated April 11, 2021 at website https://www.businessinsider.co.za/wealth-tax-corporate-tax-support-stimulus-economic-recoveries-coronavirus-imf-2021-4 [Accessed 15 April 2021]