

# Race, Class and Ethnicity in South Africa

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This paper is an attempt to focus on the place and role of race, class and ethnicity in South Africa. Its limits will however become immediately obvious for it does not attempt to provide a detailed and exhaustive analysis of these concepts and socio-economic and political dimensions in South Africa.

The question of the place and role of race, class and ethnicity has been at the centre of the debate about the character of the South African problem and the strategies necessary to solve it. Broadly speaking there are three views or theories which have dominated this debate.

Firstly there is the liberal bourgeois view which sees race and ethnicity as the dominant and determinant variables shaping the nature and content of the South African Society. And because of the bourgeoisie's inability to comprehend society in terms of class and struggle, the concept of class does not enter into their analysis of the South African situation. Thus to them the central and crucial variables are race and ethnicity expressed in terms of apartheid and tribalism. Their strategy for the solution of the South African problem involves the elimination of apartheid and ethnicity and their replacement by non-racialism and multiracialism. I do not intend to spend too much time exposing the bankruptcy of the liberal bourgeois conception of the place and role of race, class and ethnicity for a great deal has already been said about its weaknesses.

Suffice it to say however that the liberal bourgeois theory seeks to "solve" the South African problem through a reformist strategy which does not threaten the fundamental capitalist socio-economic and political structure. Thus its reluctance to incorporate economic and class relations in its analysis of the South African situation in a way reflects its vested interest in the status quo for in so doing it is unable to discuss black domination and exploitation as having roots in the economic structure of the South African society. Change in South Africa therefore means some social engineering involving the removal of apartheid and tribalism or ethnicity.

The second view is the one which sees the South African situation in terms of class only with race and ethnicity as mere epiphenomena with no specific place and role in the South African situation. This view therefore relegates race and ethnicity to the status of mere secondary elements whose understanding is not necessary to the understanding of the South African situation and the formulation of the necessary strategies. Inherent in this approach is therefore the reduction of all social phenomena and problems and social struggles in South African to class and class struggle only. The essence of this class reductionism is that it implies that, in analysing and assessing political struggles, social ideologies, events etc., these must be read off or deduced logically from analysis of the class structure without taking into account other social phenomena such as race and ethnicity. Everything is reducible to the economic base and class. This is the essence, the core of the pure class theory or class determinism.

The third view is the one which accepts the central and crucial place and role of class and class struggle in analysing the South African situation and in formulating strategies for the elimination of black domination and exploitation whilst according to both race and ethnicity a place and role in this analysis and formulation of a strategy for black liberation and for social change. And this is the approach to which I subscribe.

Thus these two last approaches, although both Marxist approaches differ in that the pure class theory posits a mechanical and class reductionist approach whilst the third approach, although accepting that class is central in any materialist analysis of society, accords race and ethnicity a place and role in any analysis of the South African situation. The rejection of the pure class theory is therefore not a rejection of class as a central and crucial phenomenon in any analysis of the South African situation but a rejection of what amounts to a crude and mechanical and simplistic analysis and interpretation of the South African situation. The question of the place, role and relationship of race, class and ethnicity is not only of crucial theoretical significance but it is also a matter of powerful political significance for it is on the basis of the resolution of this question that the proper ground work can be laid not only for political strategies for the struggle against black exploitation but also for the construction of a future South Africa. In the final analysis the question of the relationship between race, class and ethnicity resolves itself into the question of the base and superstructure. If one proceeds from the mechanical analysis of the pure class theorists, then the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure will be that of an active base and passive superstructure. Viewed from this perspective the superstructure becomes merely an epiphenomenon, a mere passive derivative with no place and role in the social content and development of society. But economic determinism, in the sense of a mechanical and automatic deter-

minism could not have been further from Marx's trend of thought. And as Engles aptly puts it.

"We regard economic condition as the factor which ultimately determines historical development . . . Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position is the cause and alone active, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is, rather interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself".<sup>3</sup>

Implied here is that the study of the base must always be accompanied by the study of the superstructure as well as the manner and degree of interaction between the two. The two have a dialectical relationship and dialectics is the heart of Marxian social theory. To posit a mechanical economic determinism is therefore to posit a crude and mechanical materialism.

But just as Marx was against a mechanical and crude economism, he was against class reductionism which seeks to ignore the relevance of race and ethnicity in the understanding of the South African situation. Class relations, although the central relations in South Africa are not the only relations, there are social relations such as race and ethnic relations, for a social structure is a complex network of social relations both class relations. An individual is therefore at one and the same time part of the class structure and the religious, racial, ethnic national structures. There is an interconnection and interaction between and among these structures with the class structure. The latter, however, occupies a central and dominant position. Viewed from this position race and ethnicity therefore cease to be mere passive phenomena but rather become social phenomena with relative autonomy or independence. This however does not imply that class relations are embodied within race and ethnic relations for class relations, as expressions of relations of production, have an independent existence of their own. Race discrimination, prejudice and ideology in South Africa are therefore not mere passive elements whose existence is determined mechanically and automatically by the economic structure. They are however social phenomena with a relative autonomy. They play an important role in shaping and circumscribing the limits and possibilities for social change as well as the tempo of such a social change. White racism and the articulation of racial consciousness by blacks cannot therefore just be ignored on the basis that they are expression of false consciousness and an epiphenomena of the economic base. Economic domination is thus also accompanied by racial domination. Racial discrimination and prejudice by whites have played and continue to play an important role not only because they serve as a justification for the exploitation of blacks, maintaining white racial purity and to preserve a social system which

will facilitate exploitation but also because they have actively participated in shaping the South African socio-economic formation. This has in turn provoked a racial response by blacks which cannot be dismissed as an expression of false consciousness or chauvinism.

The relative autonomy of race and its important role in the shaping of the South African socio-economic formation is reflected in the general white resistance against the dismantling of some outmoded racial barriers which no longer serve white economic needs, or more appropriately the needs of white capitalists for which they were erected. What this resistance illustrates is that race has acquired a relative independent capacity to actively intervene, though temporarily, in hampering the generalisation of the capitalist relations of production as the only relations according to which the socio-economic and political organisation should be defined.

This important role that race plays in the socio-economic and political organisations of the South African society has in turn engendered a reaction by blacks along racial lines. This response does not reflect a false consciousness but rather a racial consciousness engendered by social reality and reflecting social reality. The moralist appeals to blacks not to respond along racial lines fail to grasp this reality of race. It is as if the acquisition of racial consciousness is voluntary. In fact it is a consequence of objective conditions of which race is an important component.

Racial consciousness is a concrete and tangible reality which affects and in most instances conditions, relations between groups and interactions between and amongst groups. It also has a significant input in the orientation and functioning of the state apparatus. Thus even if race consciousness and its consequences are regarded purely as manifestation at the ideological level, this is not and should not be a reason to ignore its real socio-political effects and implications. To ignore the dimension of race as the pure class theorists do, is to ignore the inescapable fact that racial divisions do serve to perpetuate and reproduce the socio-economic and political dominance of certain classes and class fractions or one racial group by another racial group as is the case in South Africa today.

But as argued somewhere in this paper, under certain given conditions race does acquire a certain relative autonomy to the extent that it plays a conditioning role by shaping people's political outlook to their material needs. Under such conditions the promotion of racial interests, even if this may undermine their material interests, becomes an important objective. In this instance race becomes, in relative terms, a limiting factor to the pursuit and realization of material interests. Thus despite the centrality of class and class interests, there are limits to the promotion of class interests, in the short term, at the expense of racial interests. In other words racial interests may, in cer-

tain instances overshadow class interests. The relationship between race and class should therefore not only be viewed as being dynamic but also dialectical. Just as the solution to the problem of relationship between the structure and the superstructure lies in the conception of them forming a dialectical totality and so also does the solution of the relationship between race and class lie in our conceiving them as constituting a dialectical totality, i.e. on active totality in which different instances of the whole interact actively. This differs fundamentally from the Hegelian absolute whole which renews itself perpetually by some metaphysical and mystical power. Race and class must therefore be conceived as instances of social totality but in which class occupies a central position and plays a crucial and determining, in the last instance, role.

But if race plays an important role and occupies an important place in the organisation of the South African society, ethnicity however has no such saliency except from the point of view of the regime's divide and rule strategy. But the regime's policy of attempting to retribalize blacks and encourage the development of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness has not been successful except in isolate incidents.

The most notable instances of the white regime's attempts to cultivate ethnicity as an ideological mechanism by means of which it can continue to maintain and reproduce white colonial domination are the creation of Bantustans and other government created ethnic institutions etc. In certain instances it has not only created ethnic institutions in order to create conducive conditions for the breeding of ethnic consciousness and ethnic conflicts but has also directly fanned the dying flames of ethnic consciousness. For example the sporadic ethnic conflicts, popularly termed faction fights in the mining compounds are largely the result of incitement by the mine management working as conduits of the regime. Other instances abound in which incitement and instigations are direct causes of ethnic conflicts. Government interest on attempting to keep the flames of ethnic consciousness is of course obvious. It is to maintain the age only colonial policy of divide and rule so as to weaken the resistance of the colonized.

But ethnicity, as an ideological dimension of social reality, has lost its salience amongst the black people of South Africa. Hence it does not play any significant role in black liberation politics. This seems to reflect the extent to which the process of detribalization, which seems to have been engendered by the needs of capital, has taken place. This has entailed the destruction of tribal states and the general proletarianization of the uprooted peasantry in line with the logic of capitalism which expresses itself in the tendency to break down ethnic and national barriers etc. Another important factor which seems to have played an important role in the submersion of

ethnicity in South Africa had been the spectre of which racism and racial domination. The effect of white racism has been to unite blacks along racial lines rather than ethnic lines.

But more important perhaps is the fact that white racism and the policies of racial discrimination have not only succeeded in undermining the ideological and political potency of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness but they ironically succeeded in welding the different ethnic groups into a black nation whose emergence has in turn helped to further submerge ethnicity, giving nation and national consciousness more political saliency than ethnicity and ethnic consciousness.

Race and nation and not ethnicity are therefore the principal superstructural phenomena which have helped and continue to help shape the social and political outlook of blacks in South Africa.

An understanding of the place they occupy in the South African social formation and the role they play in this formation, and their relationship to class and class struggle is important not only theoretically but also politically. A pure class theory, which shunts them to the side is not likely to enrich our knowledge of the place and role of the phenomena of race, ethnicity and nation.

The adoption of the pure class approach has the following implications: In the first place it results in the rejection of the notion of national liberation of blacks in South Africa i.e. the right of black self-determination. This is what explains the rejection by the South African Communist Party of the nation of the black republic in the 1920s. This is because implied also in the rejection of the black national self-determination is the assumption that the black national question in South Africa was resolved in 1910 with the formation of the union.

But the act of the union of 1910 was not an act of resolving the black national question and self-determination, it was rather an act to transfer power from the metropolitan state to the local white settler colonialist. More importantly also it was an act to consolidate monopoly capitalism and British imperialism. Hence blacks did not feature in the formation of the union except as victims of the union as evidenced by the intensification of their domination and exploitation. The formation of the African congress in 1914 was a clear testimony that blacks did not see the formation of the union as a means of resolving the national question. The national question has therefore remained unresolved, precisely because colonialism has not been removed.

It therefore amounts to sophistry to argue that the national question has been resolved to the posit the notion of "Colonialism of a special type in

which the oppressing white nation occupies the same territory as the oppressed people themselves and lived side by side with them as if that is not the case with "normal colonialism". In any case in almost all colonial territories the oppressor and oppressed occupied the same territory.

Secondly, the adoption of a pure class approach, does not only make it possible to reject the active role that race plays in South Africa but also to justify, from a seemingly sound theoretical position, a coalition between whites and blacks in the struggle not for national liberation and self-determination but for the extension of civil rights.

If, as I have argued, colonialism has not been eliminated, the South African problem is a colonial problem whose solution can only be achieved through a struggle for black national liberation and self-determination which also encapsulates a class struggle against capitalism and imperialism. It was this recognition that the union South African was still a colonial country, which led the Communist International at the sixth World Congress in 1928 to observe that:

"South Africa is a black country, the majority of its population is black and so is the majority of the workers and peasants. The bulk of the South African population is the black peasantry whose land has been expropriated by the white minority — Hence the national question in South Africa, which is based upon the agrarian question, lies at the foundation of the revolution in South Africa."

This assessment is as valid today as it was in 1928, and the slogan of "an independent Native South African Republic as a stage towards a workers and peasants republic" was and still is a correct conclusion reflecting the South Africa socio-economic and political reality.

Approached from this perspective the notion of a pure class approach becomes mere theoretical gymnastics and political gerrymandering for in a colonial situation such as the one existing in South Africa today the class struggle has to be preceded by the struggle for black national liberation and self-determination. But this struggle of national liberation and self-determination must be waged and consummated under the proletarian leadership and ideological hegemony.

The struggle for black national liberation and self-determination thus encapsulates the class struggle against capitalism which in turn encapsulates the struggle for national liberation and self-determination. This umbilical cord which must link the two must always be kept in mind lest the struggle for national liberation and self-determination becomes merely a black petty-bourgeois struggle. Race, nationalism and ethnicity are therefore not mere irrational throw-ups of the economic structure or mere passive outgrowths

on the class and class struggle. There is an active interconnection or more appropriately a dialectical relationship between class and class struggle on the one hand and race, nation and ethnicity on the other. But to conceptualize the nature of the South African situation in terms of race, class and nation is to limit the struggle for national liberation and self-determination or blacks only to the total exclusion of whites. This is logical and understandable for a struggle for national liberation and national self-determination tends to define membership in terms of oppressor and oppressed. And in South Africa this conception of the struggle is further strengthened by the pervasiveness of race in the socio-economic and political organization of society. The black struggle is thus a struggle against colonialism, white racism and capitalist exploitation.

Blacks in South Africa therefore experience double exploitation, i.e. both on the ground of race and class.

The rejection of whites in black organizations and black struggle is not an expression of black racism and chauvinism, but rather a projection of the concrete social reality within which they live and which produced such perceptions. To expect blacks to react otherwise or along purely class lines would be to ignore this social reality. This reality of white racism and racial discrimination has logically come to influence in a concrete manner, black conception, formulation and implementation of strategy for national liberation and self-determination, i.e. along racial and national lines.

Because of this intervention of race and black nationalism a pure class struggle is impossible in South Africa. The only viable alternative is a two stage struggle in which the black struggle for national liberation and self-determination must precede the class struggle against capitalism in which race, colour and nationalism will cease to have their own efficacy.

In my view a pure class approach cannot therefore be an oasis for black liberation and self-determination nor can it serve as a point of departure for the creation and establishment of a socialist Azania.

### **Race, Class, Ethnicity and the State in South Africa**

Central to an analysis and assessment of race, class and ethnicity in South Africa is the character, place and role of the state, that omnipresent institution which appears everywhere, regulating the condition of the lives of people from the cradle to the grave.

In South Africa the state is not only a condensation of the class relations but it is also an expression and institutional vehicle for the installation of race relations and ethnicity. It does not therefore seek to unify the white ruling class in terms of class interests only although these are the central magnetic elements, but also in terms of race. It is this that defines the South African

state as racist. But race has also been used to dissolve and submerge the class consciousness of white subordinate classes, especially workers, and thus make them define themselves in terms of race rather than class. The result is that they do not conceive and define the state in terms of class but rather in terms of race. Hence white workers are willing and prepared not only to defend the state but to also die for it. It is this racialization of the relations of production which makes it impossible for the birth and development of a "South African working class" with a "common" class consciousness. Instead there is a white working class and a black working class. Each of them sees society as composed of black and white working classes and each one of them views itself as a member of a particular racial working class and thus behave politically on the basis of racial affinity.

This racial segmentation of workers is characterized by the according of privileges to white workers and brutal repression and exploitation of black workers. Thus whilst the state displays a social democratic attitude towards white workers, it acts in autocratic and fascist manner towards black workers.

This stratification or segmentation of workers into white and black was introduced as a response to the requirements and logic of capitalism. In other words it was introduced to strengthen the dominance of the white ruling class as well as the exploitation of both black and white workers.

But since the workers are not only divided along racial lines but are also hierarchically organized along racial lines, the result is that not only does this hierarchical arrangement accord white workers privileges but it has also resulted in the black workers being the most exploited workers in South Africa. But attempts are now being made to deracialize labour largely because the racialization of labor is no longer compatible with the needs and requirements of capitalism but these attempts are however being resisted by white workers largely because they threaten their state-accorded privileges. This according of privileges to white workers has facilitated their cooptation and incorporation of white workers into a coalition with the white ruling class against the black colonized.

In a way the state in South Africa is therefore not only a state of the white bourgeoisie, although it is primarily that, but it is also a state of white workers.

Thus the white workers' support and defence of the state and the status quo is not a reflection of irrationality but rather an expression of the character and the logic of capitalism and efficacy of race in South Africa.

If this logic demonstrates anything, it is that similarity of class position does not necessarily and automatically result in class solidarity for the intervention of factors such as race can dissolve condition for class solidarity,

and make members of the same class compete against each other. The state's emphasis of race has made race more tangible than class.

But the state in South Africa has not only acted as an "installer" of race relations but it has also acted as an incubator of ethnic relations among the colonized.

The "retribalization" of blacks and attendant attempts to insert and fan ethnic consciousness also constitute a central dimension of the role of the state in South Africa.

This is done in order to fan inter-ethnic hostilities, conflicts so as to neutralize all attempts to challenge the white colonial state and the rule of the white bourgeoisie.

Thus whilst the state has used race to create a coalition of all white classes, it has however sought to use ethnicity in order to destroy black racial solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

What the foregoing analysis has attempted to show is that although class and class struggle occupy a central and crucial place within any class divided society, the manner in which class and class relations are articulated differs from one society to the next. In other words, it depends on the socio-economic and political conditions germane and specific to each society. It cannot therefore be deduced *a priori*:

More importantly, the analysis has also attempted to show that race and ethnicity are not just mere passive effects of the economic structure but rather that they have a relative autonomy of their own and as such are capable of acting relatively independently of economic laws, although in the last instance economic laws prevail. Central also to this analysis has been an attempt to show that in fact, class, race and ethnicity have a dialectical relationship and it is this dialectical relationship that any analysis of race, class and ethnicity must try to uncover.

To affirm the relative autonomy of race and ethnicity is not to deny the primacy of class and class struggle over race and ethnicity or that of the economic structure over superstructure. It is rather to show that race and ethnicity do play an active role in their dialectical interaction. This is indeed a matter of great political significance in the struggle for liberation in South Africa and the transition to socialist Azania for if race and ethnicity are merely a reflex of the economy, then the struggle for liberation and the transition to socialist Azania and the elimination of race and ethnicity do not require the active and purposeful intervention of revolutionaries but can be achieved and realized through the dynamics of the economy. But if on the other

hand, race and ethnicity are relatively autonomous, as I have tried to argue, then there is need for conscious organization and direct assault on race and ethnicity.

In challenging the pure class theory regarding the nature of the place and role of race and ethnicity in the South African socio-economic formation, we are therefore challenging a mechanical interpretation of the Marxian notion of class and class struggle as well as attempts to think away race and ethnicity. A genuine Marxist interpretation of the place and role of race, class and ethnicity in the South African socio-economic formation must be imbued with dialectic as the logic of totality and interaction between the economic structure and the superstructure, between class on the one hand and race and ethnicity on the other.