

Panel Discussion

Introduction

Panel discussions were inserted into the conference programme as a forum for prominent activists to reflect retrospectively and independently on the issue of race in the anti-apartheid struggle. Panellists were asked to consider the extent to which questions of 'race' were aired and debated within the organisations in which they operated; how conflicts around race were tackled, if at all; the meaning and significance of 'non-racialism'; and how the existential realities of racial difference in the country impacted on efforts to craft non-racial organisations and struggles.

Jane Barrett:

The first question that we were asked to address was how did we understand race in the trade union movement under apartheid and what sort of discussions and debates we had on it. In thinking about that for the last couple of days, it struck me that actually we hardly ever talked about it – formally anyway – within the union movement. We talked about race in the sense of developing an understanding of the connection between race and class. Race was very much an issue that was dealt with in discussion about the history of the working class in South Africa, and therefore the history of the trade union movement. So this issue was formally built into a lot of the trade union education sessions. But in the formal meetings of the trade union movement, I can't actually recall a single occasion where we directly addressed the question of race, either internally as a movement and how it affected us as we worked in the movement or more broadly.

Obviously the issues around apartheid and formal racial oppression were referred to, but an analytical or even a personal discussion about race was absent. Because FOSATU was rooted in a non-racial tradition and because the leadership of the federation saw race and class as intimately connected, there was a common understanding that economic liberation was the key to liberation in this country. And I would say certainly in the 1980s there was a relatively narrow focus on workplace issues.

While there was an understanding of the wider context, the key task was regarded as organising workers in opposition to capitalist exploitation. As the 1980s progressed and the UDF grew, so the connections between the trade union movement and the outside widened. The internal dynamics within the movement started to alter and that I think is really the most interesting period that one could look at. There were the consumer boycotts, the resistance to removals, organisation around housing and so forth, and my recollection is that in the early days of that movement, there was some resistance from within the trade union movement to linking with those community organisations. It's interesting to look back on where the resistance tended to come from. I would say that by and large, those who were leading the argument for the connection were largely black, and those who were leading the resistance to that connection were largely white. I know that's very crude but I think that would be broadly a description of where the pros and cons came from. I think that had to do with a range of complicated dynamics that existed within the trade union movement.

The second set of questions that we were asked to address is really for me the most interesting. How were the realities of race, class and gender managed in the unions? What sort of conflicts and tensions emerged over these issues and was racial categorisation transcended in everyday life? For me, in trying to answer those questions, I have tried to recall experiences or relationships within the union movement, mindful of their particular context. I believe that the experience of race here was profoundly affected by factors of class, gender, language, age, nationality, relative authority in the union and formal education – and I'm sure there are plenty of others. Depending on the combination of these, the experience of racial interaction was different.

Let me end by talking about my experiences, given that I have remained in the trade union movement. I think that there are some very exciting things happening in the union movement now. A couple of years ago one often heard people say 'everybody has left the union movement, all the leaders have left, they have gone to government and they've gone to business', but the truth of the matter is that this is just nonsense. An enormous number of people did leave the trade union movement, but I think that often what people were saying was that a large number of white men had left the trade union movement. I know that this is probably a very controversial thing but I think that there was a lot of anxiety, both in the union movement and outside, that the departure of white men would deprive the movement of a strong intellectual tradition.

Of course with the changes post-1994, there were ups and downs in the trade union movement and in COSATU. But I think what's exciting about the movement now is that there is an organic leadership and intellectualism growing; there are a lot of young black people who are making a political choice to join the trade union movement when they have many other options available to them. Also, there are a lot of shop stewards around in the movement who have been around for 20 years and who remain steadfast and committed to the labour movement. I think all this creates a new face, and the condition for long-term sustainability in the union movement, which is an attribute that we need to celebrate.

My recollection of the period within both FOSATU and COSATU is that there was something of an un-discussed tension around ethnic dominance of one sort or another. Historically, I think that revolved around Zulu identity and Xhosa identity. I don't feel able in two words to really describe that tension: it has to be surfaced in some way and we need to understand it. And I think the same goes for race: that while there was obviously an intense debate about the philosophy of the trade union movement, where we were going and what our objectives were in terms of transformation, when it came down to relationships of colour, that issue wasn't discussed and I think still remains largely un-discussed. I don't have a blueprint for a way forward within the trade union movement as to how it could be constructively discussed. You can find a lot of reflections on the theory and the philosophy but not on the internal dynamic. And finally it may not seem linked but I think one of the interesting things of this period is of course the fact that management no longer has an exclusively white face; it also has a black face and that introduces a completely new dimension into the day-to-day relationship angle of things.

Neville Alexander:

I'm very pleased that we can have this discussion this evening. I think the organisers must be commended on the decision to have not only this conference but this particular debate because, in my view, much of what we are living through today is the result of decisions that were made during the anti-apartheid struggle, in some cases more remotely, in other cases a little closer.

I'm going to speak very briefly about my own understanding and about my own experience in regard to the way in which we handled the question of race during the struggle. The first aspect that I want to look at is the

conceptualisation of the struggle in general but specifically the aspect of 'race'. I think it would be fair to say that until the late 1960s the hegemonic paradigm was the liberal paradigm – what I call the four nations or four 'races' paradigm – in which racial ideology was seen as dysfunctional to capitalism. The classic statement is Pierre van den Berghe's work where he makes the point that even though classes may exist (as they do by definition in any capitalist society), 'race' is the salient causal factor in regard to the way in which domination and oppression are constructed. I would say that probably all of us – I'm speaking now of somebody over 60 – grew up in this multi-racial habitus and saw South Africa as consisting of these four so-called 'races'. That paradigm began to be questioned in the mid to late 1960s and we had various structural Marxian analyses that tended to go to the opposite extreme and to become class-reductionist.

In my view, the very early Communist Party of South Africa as well as the Unity Movement were the classical examples of this particular paradigm and the way in which it was lived in practice – one in which racial consciousness was seen as a false consciousness and that the only pertinent factor, the only relevant factor, was in fact class. This is given expression, as we know, in what I call the ideology of non-racialism, and I want to say again something I said yesterday: that we should challenge the historiography that gives the impression that non-racialism was the ideology and the practice of the African National Congress before I would say 1990. It's not true. It's simply not true. The African National Congress is essentially a multi-racial organisation, not a non-racial organisation in the sense in which this was understood at the time. It is true that the rhetoric of non-racialism was alive in the Communist Party as it was in the Unity Movement. But it is simply wrong to say this was a feature of the ANC, it's simply not true.

The next point I want to make is that in regard to non-racialism and the way we understood this in real life, I would say it was a strategic objective, a goal that had to be fought for, rather than something that people lived out in reality – certainly at the level of the masses this was not the case. In the circles in which we as activists moved, we did in fact live an authentically non-racial existence; there was absolutely no consciousness of 'race' as somehow a divisive factor whatsoever. So, as far as the Unity Movement is concerned, I think I can say without fear of contradiction that non-racialism basically meant that we wanted to attain the kind of homogeneity that you had in a European nation-state, before the recent migrant invasions of Europe from the South.

So it was very much a function of the modernisation project, and so very much an urban Eurocentric aspiration. In fact the pejorative term that we used for people who thought like this – and even the masculine term is important – is that they were black Englishmen. Non-racialism meant that you had to become or be a black Englishman. And that is why I insist on saying that in fact what we did was to de-Africanise our understanding of the liberation struggle. The Eurocentric aspiration was in fact the most salient. So far from being simply a positive value, I want to stress this point, in retrospect, non-racialism actually had a negative aspect to it, namely that it de-Africanised the consciousness of political activists in the liberation movement.

Then the third position that needs to be mentioned is the Black Consciousness position. Rather than go into a lengthy discussion, I just want to quote from an article by Harry Nengwenkhulu that was published in 1986, although I think it was written much earlier. Very briefly he says that

race discrimination, prejudice, ideology in South Africa are ... not mere passive elements whose existence is determined mechanically and automatically by the economic structure. They are social phenomena with 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 an expression of false consciousness and a phenomenon of the economic base. Economic domination is thus also accompanied by racial domination and so on and so forth.

In other words there is an attempt by what I would call the black consciousness movement to be more nuanced, in seeing more of a connection between race and class. On the other hand, in actual practice, and even in his article, he [Nengwenkhulu] arrives at a position that for all practical purposes we can ignore race because racial consciousness can act through class solidarity and can divide the working class, for example, into a fanatically separate black working class and a white working class. So for all practical purposes you are dealing with race, not with class.

Of course I find this extremely problematic and it has always been my personal critique of the black consciousness left movement. Only recently, as a result of post-structuralist critiques of Marxism (actually philosophical developments), we have come to understand that 'race' is a social construct etc. I don't need to go there, we are talking about multiple causality and so

on. What I would like to say is that for the future I think this debate is continuing, and I think that all attempts at premature closure are really ill-advised. This is a discussion that must continue and we have to accept that despite the post-modernist critique, the big picture is essential. Even if no master narratives are acceptable in the orthodox sense of the term, the big picture is essential if the study of details is going to make any sense. The big picture has to be amended in an empirical way without us falling into the empiricist trap.

In my view the biggest mistake that the entire liberation movement made subject to very little correction was that we ignored the cultural revolution. There was no attempt made to understand the cultural revolution. I speak particularly of somebody who is interested in language. If you take the Western Cape, there was no attempt by Afrikaans- and English-speaking activists seriously to learn African languages. African language-speaking comrades had to learn English and/or Afrikaans because they had to earn a living but there was no attempt to learn an African language so that communication with the working-class people in the locations would become possible as a matter of course for all activists, not only for those who spoke an African language as their own language.

I think we made a very serious mistake and now we're paying a very serious price for that today. In my view, we have to initiate support and accelerate structural change and redistribution of resources in this country if we're going to tackle the issue of racial prejudice and of racial ideology. We have to, and there is no other way of moving in regard to this issue. And a number of people at this conference have made this point.

Secondly we have to undertake anti-racism education, especially in the schools and the primary schools, which includes the learning of one another's language in a very serious and systematic way. And, thirdly, we have to push the cultural revolution, especially among those who are labelled white, Coloured and Indian. And in that connection I want to end up with a comment on the African Renaissance. I think the terminology of the African Renaissance is very unfortunate personally, but I do feel that the thrust of that particular concept needs to be thought through very carefully because I believe there is something there on which we can base our strategies for the immediate future. If you want to get beyond racial prejudice it is going to be extremely important to get out of the confines of South Africa in particular.

Raymond Suttner:

I want to cover similar ground to Neville and obviously I will join issue with some questions. But I think he's raised some of the issues that I also want to deal with. In looking at the past, what sort of legacy has the practice of anti-apartheid left us in building a new South Africa? I'm going to concentrate mainly on the ANC and its allies, not because I believe they have the monopoly on the concept or practice of non-racialism, but because that is what I know best.

So what I want to examine is how did the ANC and its allies relate to race, in or out of inverted commas, and non-racialism? Did it do justice to the complexity of this concept? Did it leave a positive legacy to a new democratic South Africa? And I want to say that the way I tackle this will differ from Neville, that is, I would place less emphasis on the conceptual status of race and more emphasis on the practical implications of relating to race.

Organising had to take race categories into account, even though the idea of race was unscientific. How the Congress Alliance related to race varied over time and over different conditions that people encountered. I argue that it was not always adequate. In general, I argue that the way this part of the liberation movement related to racial designations was an attempt to relate organisationally to the lived realities, the existential experiences of South African people. Maybe in doing this, the Congress Alliance abandoned so-called ethnic organisations like Indian congresses too late or too early. We can debate that. But I want to argue that it was a legitimate mode of organisation. And you cannot designate an organisation as not being non-racial by virtue of being organised on that basis. I would argue that it may be that at times the most appropriate form of organisation for realizing non-racialism in the long run is to organise on the basis of specific communities.

Now conditions sometimes dictated so-called racially based organisations. For example, I worked underground in the 1970s. I was given specific instructions to have no contact with black people; it would have endangered what I was doing. What it really meant is that for years I was trying to promote non-racialism but there was no nod of agreement from the black people around me. It was only some 13 or 14 years after my first recruitment that I worked with black people. I never had the opportunity to sing *Nkosi sikelel' i-Afrika* so I didn't know if I was getting it right or getting it wrong. So conditions of the time often dictated that we had to

organise ourselves on a racial basis. If you were working secretly, if the members of this panel were an underground unit, if they walked down the street, none of us would have been stopped and asked for our passes. If one of us were an African and that person was asked for a pass, and we were seen together, it would have actually endangered the existence of that unit. So you tended in MK, for example, to have mainly African units, mainly Indian units etc etc.

Now I want to say in self-criticism of the liberation movement, the part that I belonged to, that the concept of non-racialism (this relates partly to some points that Neville made, which I agree with) was inadequately problematised. There was a tendency to read non-racialism to mean the dissolution of all identities other than a common South African identity. On the cover of Julie Frederikse's book *The Unbreakable Thread*, there is a quotation attributed to Nelson Mandela which says there are no blacks, no whites, there are just South Africans. And in the same book Fr Albert Nolan, for whom I have great respect, both of them, also say something like race doesn't matter, you know, black/white makes no difference. And I think in these sorts of conceptualisations, this unproblematic notion of non-racialism, we prepared ourselves for a situation where inadequate attention was paid to the distinct identities of the various components of the South African population.

In that context we might ask whether for example the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and Natal Indian Congress (NIC) were dissolved prematurely rather than too late. And another thing I want to say is that I agree for different reasons with Neville about non-racialism within the ANC. I would say that the problem is not necessarily a question of ideology. The problem is a question of how rooted it is in the practice of the organisation, when some 95 per cent probably of the organisation has never worked with a member of another 'racial group'. They have no experience of the problems that arise given the different experiences of black and white South Africans, so the rootedness of non-racialism is more at the level of programme than practice, beyond the levels of leadership and leading activists.

Another thing which I think is important to look at in that period of building people's power [is that] our concept of people's power was primarily of African people, organising street committees, you didn't have street committees in the Indian areas, or white areas, you did have in some Coloured areas as far as I am aware. So this has an impact. If the concept

of people's power was identified in practice with African people, in daily experience it has an impact on the way in which we understand non-racialism today. So what I want to say is that non-racialism has been part of a doctrine of the ANC and its allies for a very long time, but I agree with Neville that we can't say that it's as settled and irreversible as many of us have espoused in the past. We need to look very carefully at how strong those foundations are because it's not irreversible.

Devan Pillay:

All of us who were activists in the 1970s were attracted initially to the black consciousness tradition. And what was so attractive about it as opposed to Africanism and the four nations concept as we understood it, and before we were introduced to non-racialism and the class-based understanding of the SACP, was that it brought together Indians, Coloureds and Africans as black people. So it gave us a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, that we really belonged to the struggle – and I think a lot of Indian and Coloured people felt the same way – against apartheid. I would argue that the historically 'white' English-speaking universities offered one of the few spaces in society where you could have non-racial interaction, besides the church and the workplace – but in the workplace under very peculiar circumstances, given the racial division of labour. But the university space was one of real non-racial interaction and the development of a class-based understanding of the struggle.

AZASO was a very curious combination of black consciousness and the non-racial congress tradition, so we organised separately yet we worked closely with NUSAS as a white organisation. We refused to amalgamate because we didn't see it as being appropriate during the 1980s.

Another profound influence was the emergence of class-based non-racialism in the trade union movement in the 1970s and particularly the 1980s. That also impacted on our experience of building non-racialism through the congress tradition in the Eastern Cape and later in the Western Cape, which I think was different to other parts of the country. So we didn't really have to grapple with what we thought was a very distasteful idea of organising as the Natal Indian Congress or the Transvaal Indian Congress.

I became active in the UDF, and the UDF in the Western Cape given the gradual erosion of Group Areas separation, especially among students living around the universities in Cape Town where we could live together, African, Indian, Coloured, white. We organised through the UDF according to the non-racial ideal that we wanted to build.

Neville Alexander:

All of us were misled, including Raymond and Devan and everybody else here, by the relative uniformity of consciousness among the political elite. The working class was divided, deeply divided in fact. We tried to mobilise through education – you know I used to go as a young boy to the single-sex hostels to teach people how to read and write Xhosa and English, so I know what we tried to do – but what I am trying to say is that I think in our actual practice we under-estimated the extent to which those divisions were real; we were misled by our own convictions.

The last point I want to make is that the whole question of racial prejudice is one that is going to take not just decades but centuries to vanish. I don't think we should have any illusions about these things and it's a holistic programme of action. You've got to deal with the economic structures of our society, with the distributive structures, and you've got to deal with the super-structural elements through education and all the rest of it.

Non-racialism is not multi-coloured. A completely so-called black audience can be non-racial; it's a way of behaviour and frame of mind, so I don't think we should get the wrong idea; when we talk about non-racial we are not talking about a mixture of African, Coloured, Indian and white. I think it would be a major mistake if we work on that particular supposition.

Raymond Suttner:

I'd like to raise the point about the culture of the liberation movement and what impact the cultures of the liberation movement will have on the trajectory of democracy in South Africa. I find it a very important question and I don't think the answers are easy. The ANC likes to say of the 1976 generation that came out of the country in their thousands, that the majority chose the ANC. Now I think that needs to be interrogated much further. Many of those youngsters said they had no politics in the sense that they had no idea of the history of a struggle against apartheid before themselves. So when these people came out of the country, we need to ask whether they didn't choose the organisation with the resources for their survival.

The ANC was in a better position to provide, through its alliance with the Soviet Union. Many people went to former socialist countries, other people went to Scandinavian countries and the universities of western Europe, and got other schooling. So when you came out of the country, you certainly had a better chance of surviving in the ANC. I then want to ask a

more difficult question: If these people came out with, as they put it, no politics in their head, what sort of politics did they learn in the ANC? Now we like to say inside the country we had a big culture of debate in the 1980s; leaders would be criticised from the ground. Maybe it was uneven but it may generally be true. What I want to ask is – given the conditions under which the ANC in exile had to operate (very difficult situations and the primacy given in practice to military struggle) – was there a democratic culture or a culture of hierarchy? And when you speak to many people, the answer seems to be the latter. And the training of these people in Soviet Marxism also encouraged a culture of orthodoxy – ‘this is the line’.

But, in fact, I would say more important than the type of Marxism they learnt, there may have been patronage networks and this needs to be investigated. If some people through the Communist Party and MK went to study in the Soviet Union, how did people get to western European universities? I wonder whether it wasn't a question of attaching yourself to certain personalities. Was it a process of patronage? I don't have the answer but I wonder to what extent some people came out all of this completely non-political, came out in order to survive, went to the strongest organisation in order to better their advantages, in a word, attached themselves to people who could provide means of subsistence as well as educational advancement.

But along with this came certain strategies. Let us say that there was a strategy common to Marxist-Leninism and national liberation movements whereby you had to seize the state. Once the nationalist movement seized the state, it took power in the name of the people as a whole, everything else would look after itself. Now the paradox in South Africa is that the Communist Party has done a critique of some of these concepts of state transition but those who left the party I think still carry a lot of those ideas in their heads, and they may have a rather big impact on practice in the developments in South Africa.