

Review

Kanya, Adam (2000) *The Colour of Business: managing diversity in South Africa*. Basel: P Schlettwein Publishing

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A large number of publications dealing with restructuring the workplace within a democratic South Africa have appeared during the 1990s, and continue to appear on a regular basis. They cover the field from books on 'how to ... (implement the Employment Equity Act, achieve a larger market share, manage diversity, and benefit from African cultural traditions in the quest for profits)', to a few more theoretically-informed articles discussing issues such as diversity in the workplace, affirmative action and workplace participation. The majority of these publications, pot-boilers of the first degree, emanate from the publisher Knowledge Resources (see Maré 2001 for a review of some of this literature). Recently from this stable, released with media fanfare, is Phinda Madi's (2000) (South African Airways sponsored) *Leadership Lessons from Emperor Shaka Zulu the Great*.

It, therefore, came as a surprise to find a much more thorough and serious book, from a totally unknown, at least to this South African reader, publisher (P Schlettwein in Basel, Switzerland) sent for review. Kanya Adam's (2000) *The Colour of Business: managing diversity in South Africa* is based on her PhD thesis completed at Oxford University (supervised by Stanley Trapido). Examining 'the politics of redress in South Africa's private sector, in the area of senior management, and the implication of race based affirmative action for a society in the throes of national reconciliation' (2000:xi), Adam tackles many of the philosophical, economic and political, usually unstated, underpinnings of affirmative action policies and the arguments for such forms of redress. She specifically confronts the possible effects of affirmative action policies on a sample of beneficiaries, the class and race implications of the policy as it is being implemented in South Africa, employer motivation

for implementing affirmative action (located in 'economic considerations rather than moral concerns about past neglect'), and draws on comparative studies to clarify the similarities and differences of the South African case with some other countries. An additional point she investigates, examined through one of the case studies she undertook, is whether affirmative action carries stigmatisation for beneficiaries – a factor refuted by the specific group she studied.

Despite a rather hyperbolic introductory claim that 'racial affirmative action policies ... have emerged as one of the most controversial and divisive issues in post-apartheid South Africa' (2000:1), Adam seriously deals with the issues that inform, or that need to be taken into account, in the implementation of affirmative action. The 'managing diversity' in her title is confusing, and may have come from a desire of the publisher to draw in a wider readership through this device. Even if unintentionally, the link between diversity management and race-based affirmative action does appeal to the common sense connection that exists between race and cultural diversity, so that 'diversity management' is perceived as an equivalent to 'race relations'. This is not to say that Adam holds such a view.

The legal requirements for implementation of affirmative action in the South African workplace are contained in the Employment Equity Act (EEA). This Act existed as a Bill at the time that Adam was completing her doctorate and the book, but its activation would not change her conclusions and suggestions. In fact it would probably strengthen her case to see how the implementation of the Act is taking place. The EEA gives effect to the Constitutional exception to the rule prohibiting a range of discriminations – allowing for discrimination, also on the basis of 'race', if 'it is established that the discrimination is fair'. Here lies the crux of Adam's concerns and argument.

A central focus in Adam's discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of affirmative action is that of liberalism and the tension between the recognition of individual and group claims and rights and obligations. While Adam discusses liberalism as though unproblematically relevant to the South African situation, this is certainly not so. A constitutional commitment to the nation state, to the individual citizen and his or her democratic and private property rights, and a state policy commitment to global capitalism, could certainly be described as liberal (or even neo-liberal in its implementation, as some argue). However, as a term in local political rhetoric 'liberalism' (in its gross use) has been equated with white privilege, racism

and with the style of oppositional politics of the Democratic Party (later the Democratic Alliance).

The point that Kanya Adam makes is that of the importance and implications of a distinction between individual as against social group as the primary or over-riding unit of planning and policy implementation. Adam distinguishes between 'traditional economic liberalism' and 'social liberalism'. The former privileges the rational individual (consumer, producer and citizen), while the latter allows for group rights and claims by social groups for cultural, economic and political recognition as groups. There would be few supporters of liberalism in the world today who would argue seriously for a liberalism that denies an interventionist role for the state to address massive social inequalities, such as those that affect women, the aged and most people in rural areas. However, there continue to be strong arguments raised against special support and programmes for groups that are defined around ethnicity and race. The votes against affirmative action in the United States (in states such as California), and the contentious issue of the rights of French-speakers in Canadian Quebec are cases in point.

But acknowledging special rights for social groups raises its own set of problems – which groups, for what special treatment, for how long, to raise just a few questions. In the case of social liberalism Adam appropriately refers to Charles Taylor's (1994) important essay on 'The politics of recognition'. The focus, on group and specifically race groups, in the local context, allows Adam to make the point early on in the book that 'it would seem that in the South African debate most so-called progressive forces agree on race rather than class as the criterion for affirmative action. This position is adopted despite the formal commitment to non-racialism' (2000:7), which would seem to include policy formulation and execution.

Adam usefully draws on comparisons to deepen her discussion of affirmative action. However, it is in arguing for a class- rather than race-based policy of redress that she brings us back to her central argument against the ease with which a race-based policy was accepted as the common sense response to the gross inequalities of the past.

This in turn, should, but extremely infrequently does, raise the question of what is being redressed. How is the past understood, and how does this understanding shape present and future policy? Reading literature on affirmative action over the past 12 years or so brings home graphically how the understanding of the nature of South African society, and hence the future direction towards a new society, has changed. With a clear focus from

some writers on the inequalities generated by racial *capitalism*, the demands made on affirmative action policies were to decrease those inequalities in a specific way. A danger was perceived that such policies, if misdirected, could simply create a new class of beneficiaries (in this case with black skins), without changing the system that generated those inequalities.

The question remains: what are we trying to redress? In other words, what is the policy of 'affirmative action' about? And, in the local context and in the present conjuncture, the answer usually implies a specific version of what apartheid was essentially about. Was it an extreme reflection of 'internal colonialism' or 'colonialism of a special type'? A positive answer here would imply that affirmative action must be geared to place power, of various descriptions, in the hands of the indigenous/native, and colonised population. This, we could expect, would be reflected in an Africanist approach to the solution – not only were black Africans most oppressed in a hierarchy of discrimination, but this social group should have a prior claim to the wealth being generated within 'their' territory.

Was apartheid a system of racial (racist) domination, denying political and equal economic rights to a black population? Then the policy of redress would look much as it is being advanced in the new South Africa – a race-based BEA (with a necessary nod to women and the disabled), and a deliberate and well-publicised policy of black economic empowerment (one need not look much beyond the casino capitalism that is so ostentatiously presented, to see an example of this in action). This approach does not exclude the first mentioned, but the arguments would be different, and more weight would be attached to such 'designated groups', as women and the disabled. It is more likely that here affirmative action would be presented as a temporary measure, with success being achieved through the attainment of an undefined or constantly shifting goal.

Was apartheid a capitalist society, overlaid with a racist or racialised policy of social and economic discrimination and political domination which allowed extreme *exploitation*, as reflected in the artificial maintenance of the 'homelands' where partial reproduction of labour took place (the migrant labour system)? In this case, affirmative action, or any policy of redress would at the very least be aimed at alleviating the worst effects of a rampant capitalist system, strengthening the working class and ensuring that class does not form the basis for exclusion from the benefits that previously, and (potentially) still accrue on a class basis. Such an approach would immediately take into account the spatial dimension of class exploitation under apartheid

and deliberately, and especially, reward the rural population, where women formed the large majority of those locked into extreme poverty.

Adam is clear about her own conclusion. Affirmative action, as practised in South Africa, is race-based (eg 2000: xii, 1, 173, 180). It means that it is probable that those who stand to benefit most are those who already have power and who are in a position to make use of the opportunities that firms, for a variety of reasons, had pre-emptively been making available through affirmative action policies – even before the EEA. This is the first question mark over the form that redress has taken in South Africa. The measure of success in redress, towards a more equal society, cannot be overlaid with a race grid. While the form of inequality, but not the full structural picture, may relate directly to apartheid, this should not hide the capitalist past (and present). Nor should it hide the failure to achieve a more equal society. Levels of absolute poverty, the equal supply of services, literacy, employment, infant death, health services, and the effective tackling of the AIDS pandemic (whether caused by poverty, or as reflecting poverty through its distribution), are some measures for the success and/or failure of corrective action.

But there is another problem, to which Adam also draws attention. She notes at the end of the book that 'One of the greatest inherent risks of affirmative action lies in nurturing the same racial divide which underpinned apartheid' (2000:180). She makes it very clear that this is not an argument against redress, but against a specific form of taking corrective action, one that is located in recognition of specific group rights. This is problematic because, first, it reinforces race, and, second, it runs counter to the ANC's commitment to 'non-racialism'.

Adam brings the two elements of criticism together when she argues that 'Class would provide a more valid and legitimate criterion for achieving the same effect of greater equality' (2000:179). In an alternative approach 'socio-economic factors, such as household income, personal or family wealth, could be the decisive factor for preferential treatment. Just as people are differentially taxed in progressive taxation systems the world over, so they could be differentially treated when allocating scarce resources such as educational and employment opportunities, provided they have acquired more or less the same formal qualifications'. She is not naively arguing for equal opportunity policies, which would continue the vastly unequal life chances that exist in the country (2000:17-18).

In other words, there are three potential strings to the bow of Adam's argument – she does not treat each with the same detail and some of her

arguments are implied rather than developed. First, that affirmative action, in its mirroring of the apartheid race classification system, can serve to reinforce that same race-based perspective on the social world. It becomes very clear when we see how the EEA is to be implemented, and is being implemented. The Act, without ever defining race (in terms of the three racially designated – generically black, but hierarchically African, Indian and coloured – and one racially and sexually ‘non-designated’ group – white males) expects the division of the workforce into these categories. It then expects the implementation of the Act, through practices, such as recruitment and employment, which depend on the ‘recognition’ of races (and of sexes and disabilities). And, finally, it makes provision for the monitoring of the steps taken in terms of the Act by inspectors, who will also have to make value judgements on the correct race classification by those who are implementing the Act.

Second, an argument that she does not mention, is that institutions, and not just practices, serve to shape and confirm race discourse. Here the recent book by Melissa Nobles on race categories in census taking in the USA and Brazil is pertinent. Nobles notes that focusing on the ‘radical plasticity of race, mostly correctly’, however also risks ‘obscuring its concrete manifestations and the *institutional sites* of its constitution and maintenance’ (2000:12, emphases added). In South Africa, race is made, maintained and adapted. It is not desirable, or even possible or accurate, to simply allocate it to the past, no matter how clearly that past was racist and race-based. It serves as the basis for institutional practices and is ‘concretely manifested’ in the demands of the existing basis of corrective action.

Third, by focusing on race, rather than class, affirmative action does not directly tackle the essence of inequality, namely class exploitation. Race classification and perceptions, as well as racism, ‘served’ or justified exploitation through discrimination. Discrimination and exploitation are not the same processes, nor do they have the same consequences, although they are difficult to separate under certain circumstances.

Kanya Adam has left us with an argued position that demands a response rather than the obvious common sense confirmation of most of the existing contributions on affirmative action. While the book will certainly not be widely available in bookshops, hopefully this review has alerted a few readers to what is a serious contribution asking pertinent questions, questions that could form the basis of on-going debate.

References

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