

“Us” and “Them”

A Study of Race Prejudice

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THE essential quality that distinguishes prejudice from reason is that it is a judgment not based on actual experience. This judgment can be about people (or groups of people), or it can be about things; and it can be either favourable or unfavourable. Prejudice becomes a social problem when it is a matter of unfavourable attitudes towards individuals or groups—in other words, race prejudice of a negative kind, or “hate” prejudice. Since “love” prejudice is fairly rare, and its operation is not socially disruptive, it will be ignored in this discussion.

Few people are entirely free of prejudice. Examine your own conscience and you will probably find at least traces of prejudiced attitudes towards at least some groups of people.

Professor Gordon Allport, the distinguished American psychologist who is perhaps best known for his work on prejudice, has pointed out that prejudice is an *attitude of mind*. As long as it remains nothing but an attitude it need concern us little; but attitudes invariably find expression in *behaviour*, and it is prejudiced behaviour that works its poison in the body politic.

Anti-locution

Though few people keep their antipathies to themselves, the way in which they act out their prejudices can vary widely. Three employers may be equally prejudiced against Jews. One expresses his dislike in private conversation with his cronies, but hires Jews in his business, has a number of Jewish associates, and makes no difference between Jews and non-Jews as regards salary, promotion, and the like. He expresses his prejudice solely in what Allport calls *anti-locution*—he has nasty things to say about Jews, usually in private, but goes no further than this. The second employer, while he does no active harm to Jews in any way, tries as far as possible to have nothing to do with them—often at considerable inconvenience to himself. Such people practise *avoidance*. The third employer goes a step

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further, refuses to employ Jews in his business, tries to keep Jews out of his business or professional associations, and inserts clauses in the title deeds of his real estate developments precluding Jews from owning property there—in short, he practises *discrimination*.

Anti-locution and avoidance are at worst devices whereby one keeps *oneself* away from disliked individuals or groups. The prejudiced person accommodates himself (by withdrawal) to the disliked group. Discrimination puts the boot on the other foot—it ensures that they keep away from you.

In most countries where race prejudice operates, it does so on an individual basis. South Africa is almost unique in embodying discrimination in the legal code. This distinction between legal and customary discrimination may seem a fine one to the American Jew who finds that he cannot take a holiday in a certain resort because none of the hotels will accept Jews—the old film “Gentlemen’s Agreement” illustrates this graphically; or to the West African student in London who finds one landlady after another saying she is sorry but the last room has just been taken, and she just forgot to remove the “Room to Let” sign from the window. The difference lies in the fact that there *are* American resort hotels that accept Jews as guests, and London landladies that do take Coloured students. There is no law there that prevents *any* hotel or *any* landlady from accepting certain classes of people.

The expression of prejudice can even involve violence. The Notting Hill riots show how, under conditions of heightened emotion, prejudice can lead to physical attack. In 1947 I saw a Johannesburg mob beat up an elderly African man for bumping into a White youth on a day newspapers had carried the story of a particularly brutal rape by a “Native” of a White woman in a southern suburbs park, and race-feeling was running high. Seldom, however, does race prejudice express itself in the ultimate of extermination—though lynchings

RACE PREJUDICE—Continued

of Negroes in the Southern States exemplify this, and so do the attempts by the Nazis to exterminate the Jews, and of the Turks to do likewise with the Armenians.

Why is prejudice so common? The answer is to be found in the fact that most people prefer to associate only with others who are much the same as they are. Everywhere one finds people living, working and playing in relatively homogeneous clusters. Mostly this is a matter of convenience—with plenty of similar people to choose from, why should we subject ourselves to the difficulties of accommodating to people with different languages, food-habits, educational levels, or class-status? Most of the business of life can go on more easily if we associate only with our own kind, and by and large we do precisely this. "Foreigners" are a strain.

In a society like our own, we inevitably come into contact with a vast range of human differences. Within the White group alone, we have not only class and educational differences, but also language and religious ones. We may work alongside people with different skin-pigmentation, different languages, and often a very different total way of life; but the people who are our friends, the people we visit, invite to our homes, play with and mate with are, with very few exceptions, people who are like us in a large number of important respects.

Chinese Look Alike

As we tend to associate only with people very similar to ourselves, we naturally have little experience of people markedly dissimilar to ourselves. What happens then is that we build up a "stereotype" of what these "foreigners" are like—and "foreigners" in this context applies to the multitude of human groupings that we ourselves do not belong to. While we notice the small differences that mark us out one from another *within* our own group, we are more concerned with the way that people *outside* our group *resemble* each other, and we tend to regard them as being all much the same. We distinguish small differences in facial features and so recognize our friends; but we "can't tell one Chinese from another—they all look alike". The Chinese, of course, similarly complain that all Westerners look alike.

The basic process operating in the production of stereotypes is of this "all Chinese look alike" variety. We believe, for instance, that *all* Africans are lazy, happy-go-lucky, and not very bright; or that *all* Jews are shady in business dealings; or *all* Afrikaners are thick-witted peasants. The fallacy should be glaringly apparent—it is an instance of over-generalization: no single attribute, and even less a

complex set of attributes, can ever entirely distinguish one non-homogeneous group from another.

In matters of skin-colour, the statement "Africans have darker skins than Europeans" will be true in perhaps 99% of instances; but *some* Europeans (e.g., some Southern Italians) have skins darker than *some* Africans.

The truth is that most relatively complex human attributes are distributed in much the same way in every group, be it racial, religious, or linguistic. The difference in skin-colour *does* differentiate a Negro from a White with a high degree of accuracy; but it defies everything we know about the distribution of more complex traits in a given population to assert, for instance, that "Europeans are all more intelligent than Africans," or "Jews are all less honest than Gentiles." There are honest Jews, and dishonest Gentiles, highly-intelligent Negroes and White morons.

The way stereotypes arise is an interesting study. Since every group in a community tends to keep itself largely to itself, group-members will, on the whole, have little contact with members of other groups. Where contact occurs it will be limited to a very few individuals in the strange group, sometimes to only one or two; or the contact will be partial, as in the master-servant relationship (which usually provides misleading information since each party is operating in a rôle-defined situation). On the basis of this very limited contact, the behaviour of one or two members of the strange group is *generalised* to every member of the strange group.

Contact with the strange group may even be non-existent. How many of us have had any direct contact with Russians, or Turks? Yet most of us have at least lurking notions that apply to "*the* Russians" or "*the* Turks." Such stereotypes are not based on even limited contact with the other groups, but are learned, taken over uncritically, as part of the generalised attitude towards these groups that holds within our own group.

Stereotypes

There is some evidence to suggest that stereotypes of this kind are weakening in our culture—many people feel that they cannot generalise about groups (like Russians) with whom they have had no contact at all. Some feel too that *all* generalisations about groups of people are necessary invalid. But most of us cling to some measure of stereotyped thinking, particularly about groups that are clearly and visibly distinguished.

For visible differences (like skin colour) imply real differences. The underlying logic appears to be: if these people are different in *one* respect (e.g., skin colour), they must be different in *all* respects. Such



CARTOON QUIP

"They say they'll
have to get a
ruling from
Pretoria."

—Cape Times.

clear differences are few. Most people in South Africa claim to be able to distinguish a Coloured person from a White on sight; most can tell an English-speaking from an Afrikaans-speaking at first hearing. Many claim to be able to tell a Jew from a non-Jew, by cast of feature. Though not one of these discriminations is necessarily entirely accurate, as set out here they represent a scale of diminishing reliability of the clues upon which they are based. For instance, language-group discriminations are based either on the language spoken, or more commonly on the speaker's accent when speaking one's own language. There are many White South Africans who speak the other language perfectly, and in their cases the discrimination would break down. Similarly with Jews: there undoubtedly is a certain cast of features, or perhaps an habitual type of facial expression, that distinguishes some Jews from most of the non-Jewish population. Yet even people who claim to be able to "tell a Jew a mile off" cannot distinguish with any degree of accuracy between a Jew, a Syrian, an Armenian, and many Spaniards and Portuguese, since the so-called "Jewish face" is a certain type of "Mediterranean face," and can even be seen on old Roman coins.

Stereotypes are inevitable parts of our thinking, and need have no serious results. They are products of the category-making function of the mind that enables us, for instance, to recognise a table as such despite the many variations in shape and size of individual tables, and to distinguish a table from a chair. They become serious when they become linked with *hostility*.

Why is it so nearly universal to find that every human group has hostile feelings towards every other human group? Part of the answer is that we all

like best the familiar, and mistrust anything strange. This applies not only to strange people, but also to strange objects—see how wary a small child is of any new food. In part, too, there is the expectation that any thing or person unknown is potentially dangerous—any stranger might prove to be an enemy. Animals react to other animals in the same sort of way.

Thus it is that groups of people who are markedly different in appearance or customs from ourselves tend always to be regarded with some mistrust. But it is a far cry from mistrust to prejudice.

A number of very different theories have been advanced to account for the existence of prejudice.

The *historical view* emphasises that every ethnic conflict that exists today has had a long history. Professor MacCrone in his book "Race Attitudes in South Africa" details the history of race relations in this country, and shows that in the early days of settlement there was very little race feeling. The Nineteenth Century saw the growth throughout the Western world of theories of race, of concepts of "superior" and "inferior" races, and economic historians have pointed out that it is no accident that the "superior" races were those White, Protestant peoples who were engaged in ruthless exploitation of the peoples of Africa and Asia, whom they described as "inferior." This theory holds that some palliative was needed for the guilt engendered in the oppressor races, and they comforted themselves by building an intellectual superstructure which would allow them to think that it was justifiable to underpay African or Asian workers, since they are a lower form of life. Phrases like "Niggers ain't got no feelings" and "Coolies live on the smell of an oil rag" gained currency then. "The White Man's Burden," and Kipling's condescending attitude towards "Natives" belong here. Some writers hold that *class* difference, the exploiter-exploited relationship, is the basis of all prejudice, and that everything else is a verbal smoke-screen designed to obscure this issue. Certainly there would seem to be a good deal of truth in this theory as applied to colour policies in South Africa.

Frustration

However, this theory does not account for many instances where groups are exploited without being the object of prejudice (e.g., many immigrant groups in the United States), nor for the existence of prejudice (as against Jews) where economic oppression does not exist.

Other theories emphasise the fact that *frustration*, which engenders hostility and aggression, lies at the base of prejudice. Economic insecurity, threats and dangers of all kind, produce frustration, and the

RACE PREJUDICE—Continued

resultant hostility is liable to be discharged into race prejudice. This accounts for the fact that it is the lowest-paid and most marginal White workers who are usually the most bitter racialists—they can displace their economic frustrations on to non-Whites. Job reservation protects many Whites here from direct competition with non-Whites for work, and probably also insulates the non-Whites from some of the directly personal hostility. In American industrial cities when work is scarce, race-prejudice arising from these sources has been known to explode into violence against Negroes.

Another set of theories discounts historical traditions, for it points out that the child growing up in any particular society is largely ignorant of the historical reasons for prejudice, whatever they may be. Instead, every individual, and especially every child, has a strong need to be accepted by his group and so *conforms* to the customs and beliefs of that group. Children growing up in any society absorb, sponge-like, many beliefs and values without ever really being aware that they are doing so. And beliefs that are held because they have been absorbed in this way are highly unamenable to rational consideration: they are part and parcel of the "givens" of that society, and become an integral part of the personality of the individual.

Thus the Polish child may grow up with a prejudice against Russians, even though he had never experienced Russian pogroms himself and might well

be entirely ignorant of the Russian record in pre-1920 Poland. The South African child "absorbs" race attitudes, almost as it were from the atmosphere.

This need to conform explains also why English immigrants so frequently adopt South African race attitudes within a few years. To some extent, too, it illumines the findings that persons who move upwards in the social scale are frequently more prejudiced—being newly-arrived in a higher social class, they often over-conform, and while our stereotype of the vulgar *nouveau-riche* is sometimes correct, more commonly they go to exaggerated lengths to avoid advertising their humbler origins. Prejudiced attitudes towards non-Whites, Jews, Communists, etc., are over-accepted, and form part of a protective colouring. This, of course, applies where the higher-status groups in a community are marked by well-defined prejudices. In some communities the process works in reverse, and if the socially dominant group is unprejudiced, newcomers (whether immigrants or social climbers) conform to the pattern of non-prejudice.

Each of these theories accounts for some elements of prejudice and affords insight into certain aspects. None accounts for all, nor does any account for the fact that though all these processes operate on every one of us, not every individual is equally prejudiced. What is left out of account is the personal factor, the individual differences between the prejudiced and the unprejudiced in the same society. This topic, the personality of the bigot, will be discussed in a second article.

"I am frightened as I write . . ."

AN African whom the Black Sash has tried to assist, who is well known to the Sash, but whose name is withheld for obvious reasons, expressed his feeling in these words:

"I went through a painful experience when I was arrested without cause, handcuffed and sent to another town. Now we have nowhere to live and we sleep in the bushes and it is the Municipality that has done this. It is better to die than live in this manner and under such conditions. I am frightened as I write this and keep looking about to see if no policeman is coming.

"The rulers must know that we are all God's children; but we are thrown into prison with our wives and children. I do not know where the Municipal Authorities here come from, but one thing I know is, that to them a Black man is no better than a wild beast to be chased about and flung into a police van.

"I saw the way these raids are carried out only this Tuesday—the police barging into people's

houses, looking into every corner, even under the beds—looking for supposed 'illegal entrants' into the area. How would you (White people) feel if you were forced to leave your children behind? And yet you force us to leave our children—orphans while we still live.

"The Government advised us to legalise our unions and we did. We even called our ministers of religion and swore in their presence according to the Bible that 'until death us do part' when we regularised our unions, and yet in the name of that same God to whom we made these promises, the Government officials separate husband from wife and children.

"The Government will have to take another course, for the Blacks cannot continue to accept such treatment till the end of the world. Only recently four women were arrested in my town and each was fined £4 and thereby the Government collected £16 from these poor people—people who had committed no crime."