

Race, Caste and Class in South Africa

This contribution by A. Sivanandan, editor of *Race and Class*, a journal published by the Institute of Race Relations in London, England is intended to stimulate discussion on the Azapo policy that race is a class determinant. Sivanandan takes issue with Dr Neville Alexander who considers it a "scientific fact that 'race' is a non-entity". (*National Situation* at 31; *Nation and Ethnicity* at 20).

I have certain grave misgivings about the analysis of race, class and caste proffered by Dr Neville Alexander and published in the papers "Nation and Ethnicity in South Africa" (*Frank Talk* Volume 1 Number 1, February/March 1984 pages 19-23) and "The National Situation" (*Mobilise and Consolidate*, February 1983 pages 25-34). Alexander's discussion of course centres around Azania, but the questions he raised are not unrelated to the problems of other Third World countries. And it is for that reason — and in a spirit of enquiry and friendly discourse — that I take issue with him.

The crux of the matter lies in Alexander's discussion of "colour-caste" and the implications of his analysis for revolutionary practice. I will consider terminological and conceptual issues before proceeding to Alexander's central thesis.

RACE

1. Alexander seems to be saying that to accept the concept of race — however used (anthropologically, biologically or sociologically) — is to accept a racial classification of people, giving each (race) a weightage or, in the alternative, denying its weightage (and therefore a hierarchy of superiority) altogether. It follows from this that the assertion that race "A" is superior or inferior to race "B" is to be condemned because it assumes the existence of groups of human beings called "races". The assertion that "all races" are equal in their potential for development and the acquisition of skill is to be condemned for the same reason.

So that, for Alexander, it is as meaningless to say that some races are superior to others as it is to say that all races are equal. Hence there is no such thing as race.

But you cannot do away with racism by rejecting the concept of race.

2. Alexander denies the reality of race as a biological entity. Hence he denies the existence of racial groups. For the limited purposes of a genetic science, however, he is prepared to describe such groups as 'breeding populations' — since 'such a description has no coherent political, economical or ideological significance'. (see No Sizwe *One Azania, One Nation*, London, Zed Press, 1979). But however you describe them — and however 'inherently' neutral the description — some 'breeding populations' do think of themselves as superior to

other 'breeding populations' and act out that belief to their own social, economic and political advantage. Changing the description does not change the practice — but the practice can taint the description till that ceases to be neutral (so that for racism we merely substitute 'breeding populationism'.)

In the final analysis, it is the practice that defines terminology, not terminology the practice. The meaning of the word is *not* the action it produces. If so, to destroy the word would be to destroy the act — and that is metaphysics. On the contrary, it is action which gives meaning to a word — it is in the act that the word is made flesh. In the beginning was the act, not the word. Thus 'black', which the practice of racism defined as a perjorative term, ceases to be perjorative when that practice is challenged. Black is as black does.

You cannot do away with racism by using a different terminology.

3. Similarly, the use of the term ethnicity to differentiate between human groups that 'for some natural, social or cultural reason come to constitute a (temporary) breeding population' is equally irrelevant. In fact, it is "dangerously misleading". For, in trying to remove the idea of group superiority while keeping the idea of group difference, ethnicity sidles into a culturalism which predicates separate but equal development, apartheid. It substitutes the vertical division of ethnicity for the horizontal division of class, political pluralism for class conflict, and freezes the class struggle.

4. The concept of national groups implies "a fragmentation of the population into potentially or actually antagonistic groupings", and thereby facilitates "the maintenance of hegemony by the ruling classes". And the concept of national minorities is essentially a European one and one that once again obscures the essential class nature of society.

5. But 'race' in its original sense of 'a group of persons or animals or plants connected by common descent or origin' (*Shorter Oxford*

Dictionary) is no less neutral a term than 'breeding populations'. And that there are differences between such groups is an observable fact. What is *material*, however, is neither the term nor the group differences it implies, but the differential power exercised by some groups over others by virtue of, and on the basis of, these differences — which in turn engenders the belief that such differences are material. **What gives race a bad name, in other words, is not the racial differences it implies or even the racial prejudice which springs from these differences, but the racist ideology that grades these differences in a hierarchy of power — in order to rationalise and justify exploitation. And in that sense it belongs to the period of capitalism.**

CASTE

6. Alexander's 'central thesis', however, is that 'colour-caste' best describes 'the officially classified population registration groups in South Africa' (*Nation and Ethnicity* page 22) — and that it is of 'pivotal political importance to characterise them as such' (No Sizwe). About the importance of correct analysis for correct political action I have no disagreement. But, for that very reason, I find the characterisation of South Africa's racial groups as colour-castes not only wrong, but misleading.

The argument for using the caste concept is made on the basis that South Africa's racial system (my phrase) has the same characteristics as the caste system in India. These refer to such things as rituals, privileges, mode of life and group cohesion ('an integrative as opposed to a separarist dynamic'). And whether or not 'the origin of the caste system in India is related to the question of colour', the crucial difference is that in India it is 'legitimised by cultural-religious criteria', whereas in South Africa it is 'legitimised by so-called "racial" criteria'. But in both, caste relations are 'social relations based on private property carried over in amended form from the pre-capitalist colonial situation to the present capitalist period'. To 'distinguish it in its historical specificity', however, Alexander would characterise the caste system in South Africa as a

colour-caste system — in which 'the castes articulate with the fundamental class structure of the social formations . . .' (No Sizwe).

But, in the first place, these are analogies at the level of the superstructure, with a passing consideration for the 'historical specificity' that distinguishes the two systems. They relate to ideological, cultural characteristics adjusted to take in considerations of class and social formations, but they do not spring from an analysis of the specific social formations themselves — they are not historically specific. That specificity has to be sought not in this or that set of religious or racial criteria, but in the social formation and therefore the historical epoch from which those criteria spring. The social formation in which the Indian caste system prevailed is qualitatively different to the social formation in South Africa, and indeed to that of India today. Secondly, it is not enough to say that caste relations are 'social relations in private property carried over in amended form' from a pre-capitalist era to a capitalist one, without specifying at the same time that private property in the earlier period referred mainly to land, whereas in capitalist society it refers also to machinery, factories, equipment. And that alters the nature of their respective social relations fundamentally. Thirdly,

and most importantly, Alexander makes no reference to the *function* of caste. Caste relations in India grew organically out of caste functions of labour. They were relations of production predicated by the level of the productive forces but determined by Hindu ideology and polity. But as the productive forces rose and the relations of production changed accordingly, caste lost its original *function* — and, un-needed by capital, it was outlawed by the state. But because India, unlike South Africa, is a society of a thousand modes, caste still performs some function in the interstices of its pre-capitalist formation and caste relations in its culture. South Africa, however, has caste relations without ever having had a caste function. Such relations have not grown out of a pre-capitalist mode; nor are they relations of production stemming from the capitalist mode. They are, instead, social relations enforced by the state to demarcate racial groups with a view to differential exploitation within a capitalist system.

To put it differently, caste as an instrument of exploitation belongs to an earlier social formation — what Samir Amin calls the tributary mode — where the religio-political factor and not the economic was dominant and hence determined social relations. The Hindu religion, like all

pre-capitalist religions, encompassed all aspects of human life. Hindu ideology determined social relations from which the state could extract the maximum surplus: the caste system. It is in this sense that India's great Marxist scholar Kosambi in *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India* (London, 1965) defines caste as 'class at a lower level of the productive forces'.

CLASS

In the capitalist system, however, it is the economic factor which is dominant; it is that which determines social relations and, in the final analysis, the political and ideological superstructures. And how these are shaped and modified depends on how the economic system is made to yield maximum surplus value with minimum social dislocation and political discontent. Exploitation, in other words, is mediated through the state which ostensibly represents the interests of all classes.

Since European capitalism emerged with the conquest of the Black world, the exploitation of the peoples of these countries found justification in theories of white superiority. Such attitudes were already present in Catholicism, but, muted by the belief that the heathen could be saved, found no



The economic exploitation of the colonies went hand in hand with the development of racist social systems. This picture, of bales of cotton ready for shipment to Britain and Indian cotton workers with their colonial overseers, is typical of what was happening all over the world.



Calvin (left) and Darwin (right) . . . they shook hands over the chained body of the black at Union.

ideology of racial superiority and their institutionalisation in the state apparatus).

SOUTH AFRICA

But not in South Africa. Here, though the economy is based in the capitalist mode, the superstructure bears no organic relationship to it. It does not on the whole respond to the economic imperatives of the system. And that inflexibility in turn inhibits the base, holds it down, prevents it from pursuing its own dynamic. Hence, there is a basic contradiction between the superstructure and the base.

Where that contradiction is located, however, is in that part of the superstructure which relates to the black working class — and black people generally. In effect, there are two superstructures (to the same economic base) — one for the whites and another for the blacks. The white superstructure, so to speak, accords with the economic imperatives — and is modified with changes in the level of productive forces and of class struggle. It exhibits all the trappings of capitalist democracy (including a labour movement that represents the interests of the white working class) and of capitalist culture (except when it comes to mixing with the blacks). For the blacks, however, there is no franchise, no representation, no rights, no liberties, no economic or social mobility, no labour movement that cannot be put down with the awesome power of the state — no nothing. The 'black superstructure', in other words, is at odds with the capitalist economy, sets the economy at odds with itself, and inhibits its free development — so that only changes in that superstructure, in racism, can release the economy into its own dynamic. **South Africa, therefore, is an exceptional capitalist social formation.**

In the second place, South Africa's racist ideology, compared to that of other capitalist societies, has not changed over the years. Instead, it has gathered to itself the traits, features, beliefs, superstitions, habits and customs of both pre-capitalist and capitalist social formations. Its caste features bear an uncanny resemblance to the Hindu caste system of medieval India, though we know them to be inspired by Calvinism, the religion of capital. It combines, in Ken Jordaan's exact phrase, 'the Afrikaners' fundamentalist racialism with the instrumentalist racism of British imperialism'. ('Iberian and Anglo-Saxon Racism,' *Race & Class* Vol 20, No 4, Spring 1979). It finds authority in religion and in science both at once — in the doctrines of the Dutch Reformed

ideological justification in scripture. The forces that unleashed the bourgeois revolution, however, were also the forces that swept aside the religious inhibitions that stood in the way of the new class and installed instead a new set of beliefs that sought virtue in profit and profit in exploitation. 'Material success was at once the sign and reward of ethical superiority' and riches were 'the portion of the Godly than of the wicked' (R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London 1975) — and each man's station in life was fixed by heavenly design and unalterable. You were rich because you were good, you were good because you were rich — and poverty was what the poor had brought upon themselves. But to fulfil one's 'calling' was virtue enough.

In such a scheme of things, the bourgeoisie were the elect of God, the working class destined to labour and the children of Ham condemned to eternal servitude — 'a servant of servants . . . unto his brethren'. Each man was locked into his class and his race, with the whites on top and the blacks below. And between the two there could be no social mixing, for that would be to disrupt the race-class base on which exploitation was founded. To prevent such mixing, however, recourse was had to Old Testament notions of purity and pollution. Social or caste barriers, in other words, were not erected to preserve racial purity; rather, racial purity was 'erected' to preserve social, and therefore economic, barriers. The reasons for the racial divide, that is, were economic, but the form their expression took was social.

Thus, the racism of early capitalism was set in caste-like features — not

ordained by religion, as in Hinduism, but inspired by it, not determining the extraction of surplus but responding to it. The Calvinist diaspora, 'the seed-bed of capitalistic economy', (Gothein) would sow too the seeds of racism, but how they took root and grew would depend on the ground on which they fell.

In general, however, as capitalism advanced and became more 'secular', racism began to lose its religious premise and, with it, its caste features and sought validity instead in 'scientific' thought and reason — reaching its nineteenth-century apogee in Eugenics and Social Darwinism. Not fortuitously, this was also the period of colonial-capitalist expansion. But at the same time, with every advance in the level of the productive forces and, therefore, in the capitalist mode — from mercantile to industrial to finance and monopoly capital — racist ideology was modified to accord with the economic imperative. Slavery is abolished when wage-labour (and slave rebellion) makes it uneconomical; racism in the colonies becomes outmoded with the advent of neo-colonialism and is consigned to the metropole with the importation of colonial labour. And within the metropolises themselves, the contours and content of racism are changed and modified to accommodate the economic demands (class) and political resistance (race) of black people. *Racialism* may yet remain as a cultural artefact of an earlier epoch, but *racism* recedes in order that capital might survive. (Racialism refers to attitudes, behaviour, 'race relations'; racism is the systematisation of these into an explicit



The whites on top and the blacks below. This picture shows officers (always white men) and lascars (black seamen) on HMS Hardinge during Lord Curzon's tour of the Persian Gulf, 1903. Black crews were taken on, whenever required, from all over Britain's Empire. They were paid much less than white crews.



SETTLER REGIME IN CRISIS . . . OPERATION PALMIET