

## Race doesn't exist

'Race' as a biological entity doesn't exist — that's a vital theoretical foundation for any non-racial project. That doesn't mean racial beliefs and prejudices are not real. They are socially real, especially if they are linked to economic and other power interests, as happened in SA with apartheid. So I don't question the social reality of 'race'.

Religion is a good analogy. Many of us might reject the existence of God, but the belief in God is so real that globally huge structures rest on it — economic, material structures. Racism is of the same order of things.

But the mere ability to question the scientific basis of racism isn't enough. It becomes clear that 'race' is a type of social construct; that racialisation of nations has to do with economic and class struggles. It also becomes clear that it can change.

Once the discussion reaches that point, then we can talk about what we do about things like language ... I'm giving you the trajectory of my own development. You suddenly begin to realise that if people can communicate with one another then a lot of the barriers, beliefs and prejudices fall away. Beyond that you realise that if kids are educated together, if certain economic and social conditions are created, you can dampen the effects of racial prejudice.

It's a long-term struggle. We see from places like the US or India, where affirmative action and anti-caste policies have been introduced, that prejudice doesn't disappear overnight. We're talking about a centuries-long process.



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*nationalism and African nationalism. Which strikes me as another attempt to find a route around the nation-building imperative ...*

NA: In the sense that it takes *the nation* or nations as givens, as existing forever. Of course, both of them are historians and they *do* know that nations come into being and they go out of being. But somehow they freeze the moment and say these nations are there forever and must be accommodated. It's only when you step outside the stream of history that you can think like that.

When you do, then what Gilliom and company are saying is fundamentally false. Nation-building is an inescapable process in our context. Radicals have to put themselves behind it and define its content — we have to say, for instance, that being South African means you must know three languages in the future.

That's defining the content. But if you say that in SA you have two or more nations, each of them speaking a different language, you're operating in completely different parameters.

*HM: Let's separate the building blocks of a nation-building project. It's been suggested that it has two central elements: consciousness-building and institution-building. The former would revolve principally around the idea of non-racialism; the latter around institutions of the state and civil society that are widely regarded as legitimate. Are these sufficient elements?*

NA: That reduces nation-building to a set of sociological propositions. We need to start from the fact that a radical perspective of nation-building cannot be divorced from class interests. The leading class should determine the parameters — Marx makes the point in the Communist Manifesto that the proletariat must become the leading class in the nation before we can build socialism. Or to shift into a Gramscian metaphor, the working class must become hegemonic; it is that hegemonic class which will set the terms on which the nation is built.

Of course, the discourse of nationhood is non-class, it doesn't belong to the working class or the bourgeoisie or any other class. But at the same time, the way in which that consciousness is

the people — not just at the geographical and juridical level, but also at the cultural and political level.

Therefore, in SA that project is a progressive one, though it's not necessarily anti-capitalist. In fact, capital is now swinging around to promote the nation-building project.

So it is important that its definition be given class content. And that is where all those things that constitute the content of a nation-building programme (like language policy) need to be informed by a class perspective.

*HM: [The political philosopher] Johan Degenaar says the priority is not to build a nation but to build a just society ... to build democracy. He counterposes democracy-building and nation-building. Do you find that a false tension?*

NA: Completely false. Now that the Broederbond project of separate nationhood has obviously failed, a lot of people are becoming afraid of nation-building — quite correctly, in the sense of "once bitten, twice shy"; they don't want to be involved in another chauvinistic and nationalistic project. And, clearly, if nation-building goes with national chauvinism, then it is something everybody must reject.

But it doesn't have to be chauvinistic. If we look at the history of nationalism worldwide, it is only under quite clearly definable conditions that nationalism — let's rather speak of nation-building — becomes nationalistic and chauvinistic. It's not at all inevitable.

The second point is that, in so far as the nation-building project is going to go hand-in-hand with a redistribution of wealth and rights, people who have been privileged by the bourgeois project in SA are scared. They are trying to pre-empt a development that might reduce to equality people who have enjoyed privilege up to now. So a radical nation-building project is, in fact, a threat to the "haves" in SA.

What Degenaar and co. are saying is that if you don't go for the nation-building project, then we must go for the ethnic project, the Inkathas and the Volkstasters and the rest.

*HM: Others like Herman Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer try to couch the South African reality as a bi-nationalist one, a struggle between Afrikaner*