

# BEYOND THE ABYSS – Race and Social Structure in a future South Africa

A lecture given at the University of Durban/Westville.

Many years ago, when I was teaching a first year class I defined Anthropology as “rethinking categories and rethinking relationships” – and I would not change that definition now.

Classifying things, and defining the relationships between them is, according to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the primary or original cultural and intellectual activity of man. In the second account of creation YHWH (translated as “the Lord God” in the King James and New English Bibles) makes Man, Adam, out of the dust and breathes life into him. He then makes the animals and brings them to Adam to name them, to impose man’s categories upon the natural fauna and hence his intellectual and even physical domination over them. It is a powerful myth, re-enacted every time a scientist discovers something new and names it (often after a patron, or himself) so incorporating it into the cultural order. There it may rest as knowledge for its own sake – or it may be further domesticated and used in the service of man.

The bible is a great chronicle of man’s efforts to rethink his categories and relationships, told in the context of one particular people, and from their point of view. The story of Noah and the survivors of the great flood provides a basis for a new set of categories. There is one pair of each species – except man, of whom there are three pairs. This puts man into a peculiar position – a nice ambiguity of classification. Are we one species, or three? Or three races in one species? The chronicle moves swiftly to turn category into hierarchy – Canaan, son of Ham, is made the hewer of wood and drawer of water to his brethren. The Canaanites are categorised as racially inferior to the Israelites who are descendants of Shem, and the Israelites henceforward claim divine sanction for their conquest of Canaan and for the subjugation of its autochthonous people. The myth was re-enacted once more in 1948 and in the subsequent wars which have punctuated the history of modern Israel.

The classification of the Israelites in relation to their neighbours is spelled out in the genealogies and adventures of the patriarchs and their neighbours. By marrying his half-sister, Abraham finds the closest possible approximation to a nice Jewish girl in a situation where he, as apical ancestor, is, by definition, the only Jew. The neighbours of the Jews are categorised as the offspring of father-daughter incest, while other people in the region are eliminated for even less desirable practices.

And so it goes on, the cultural heritage of myth and history, accounts of the past whose historical truth is virtually irrelevant compared with the contemporary meanings attributed to those accounts, the cultural heritage is built up and mankind is classified, relationships defined and hierarchies validated.

Revolutionaries produced new classifications constructed on new bases, or more often on the reinterpretation of old ones. Thus St. Paul declared that the key ethnic division from the Jewish perspective – between Jew and Greek, and the basic class division – between slave and free – were irrelevant, and that henceforward the basis for human classification was to be a religious affiliation which would transcend the former divisions. Paul’s view was not easily accepted by many of his Christian Jewish friends – the heritage of centuries built up from myths, scriptures, food taboos, infant mutilation and the experiences of ethnic captivity was not to be lightly set aside, even though the Son of God returned from the dead to instruct his followers to evangelise the world and break down the ancient classification.

The Christian ideal set out by Paul worked quite well as long as the Christians were an oppressed minority, glad of any allies in adversity even if they did talk or dress or look a bit odd. But with political power and influence came new classifications, new relationships, new hierarchies. Pagans and those ambiguous “people of the Book” (the Jews and Muslims) were made into distinctive and alien categories, to be conquered and if possible, converted (if not, killed). The categories “orthodoxy” and “heresy” defined enemies within the gates who had to be identified and destroyed. That process, astonishingly, continues to the present day. In Sudan, Lebanon and Israel people define themselves largely in terms of religious affiliation and in the Persian Gulf the most destructive war since Viet Nam is being fought for mainly religious reasons. In Northern Ireland, for all the efforts of the I.R.A. to make their campaign into a class war or a war of national liberation, religion is the bedrock of the antagonists’ affiliations. American radicals may be deceived by the I.R.A. Marxist rhetoric, but Stalin was not. When the I.R.A. sought his help in 1925 he enquired of their delegate how many bishops they had killed – and sent them on their way with no more than a dictator’s blessing.

Science, you might imagine, would put an end to all this pseudo-speciation, this elevation of trivial and often passing variations in man into the bases of a social order in defence of which men are willing, even eager, to kill and be killed. But science has not only set up its own classifications, it has also achieved its own mythological status – its authority based on “reality”, the most powerful myth of all in contemporary society.

Anthropologists, students of man in all his complexity, variety and glory, have been in the vanguard of the processes of re-thinking categories and relationships. Many have been beguiled by the myth of reality, separating out the biological or physical variations in man as being “real”, whilst seeing the social and cultural as ephemeral. Others have compounded the biological and the socio-cultural into what they call the “ethnos” – a

subtle blend of the trivial “reality” of biological variation to produce rigid bio-cultural boundaries between what they define as ethnic groups. From the 19th century evolutionists who rationalised colonial arrogance into the categories savage, barbarian and uncivilised; from the enthusiastic physical anthropologists who measured everything measurable in man from cephalic index to ear-wax texture; from the German and Afrikaner cultural scientists who devised the *ethnos* and the idea of the unassimilable people; to the so-called “scientific racists” like Jensen, Shockley and Eysenck on both sides of the Atlantic with their obsession about “intelligence”, the anthropological heritage is a scientific enterprise which we can only look back upon with a deep sense of shame. We can take no more pride in our academic ancestors’ efforts to rethink the categories of and relationships between man than we can take in our religious ancestors’ efforts to do the same. Those scholars and ideologues in our own generation who speak of “scientific socialism” and categorise man in terms of inevitably antagonistic classes are heirs to that tradition in human thought which observes the seamless spectrum; domesticates it, or brings it into the sphere of human discourse, by dividing it into exclusive categories; and then manipulates the categories into a moral and political hierarchy.

Southern Africa, which has possessed, over the past few hundred years, just about every category of person devised by theologians, anthropologists, politicians and sociologists, seems to have been chosen by an angry God as a testing ground for man’s most basic intellectual activity. The evolutionists can point to hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, horticulturalists, peasants, and industrial societies appearing in the correct order in the region. Physical anthropologists have had a field day trying to decide whether the tawny, click-speaking people of the Cape were of the same or a different “race” to the negroid Bantu-speaking people who followed them here – to say nothing of those spurious applied physical anthropologists who sit on the Race Classification Boards and pose such questions as, “Doctor, would you not say this man has the appearance of a Bantu?” to equally spurious experts. I will not comment on the traditional “test” of whether a victim of such officials was “Bantu” or “Coloured” – a pencil was thrust into his hair, if it fell out he was “Coloured” if it stayed in he was “Bantu”. That is one of the myths of Cape society. I have never met a person who claims to have witnessed or experienced the test himself, so it may never have happened. I did know, however, many young men who believed the story sufficiently to ensure that they kept their heads virtually shaven. The aficionados of the *ethnos* have also had their day – nine ethno-national collectivities of Bantu-speakers, each with its own *ethnos*, seven sub-classes of “Coloured” of which only one is Indian (I am surprised that since the “Cape Malays” and “Griquas” have received the recognition of Proclamation 123 of 1967, being Gujarati or Tamil has remained a matter for consenting adults and private). And the nonsense of the Jensens and the Bakers continue to boost our racist folk cultures.

But enough of this – it must be all too familiar to you, even if you have not had the experience of being a permanently temporary foreign native nor appeared in any capacity at a hearing of a race classification case. My topic refers not to the past, but to the future, and here am I, using up half my time on the past. I make no apology, for it is through understanding more fully what we have taken for granted

in the past, that we prepare for the future and possibly even save ourselves from repeating the errors of the past.

I have argued thus far that the exercise of classifying things naming and domesticating our experience of the natural and social world is as ancient as culture itself, and that the categories which man creates tend to become “reality” to him rather than a matter for debate in or out of academe. I have also argued that the step from differentiation to moral and political hierarchy is an easy one to take, as well as an appealing one.

What are the implications of these arguments for a post-apartheid South Africa? I would suggest three elements – **continuity, flexibility, inevitability.**

First, we are not going to escape readily from the shackles of our cultural heritages. I recall Tom Mboya, the Kenyan Nationalist, suggesting in 1961 that if the Indians in Kenya really wanted to be a part of the new nation, they should encourage their sons and daughters to marry black Kenyans. This produced a retort in a Nairobi newspaper – that if the Singhs are not going to allow their daughters to marry the Patels, it was hardly likely that they would accept the Kamaus and the Ocholas as in-laws! We are the heirs of long traditions which tell us who we are – and who we are not – and that heritage is not going to be lost, no matter how traumatic the transfers of power may be. There are today in Poland small congregations of Jews, still worshipping in the traditional way – neither the holocaust nor the forty years of communist re-education has stamped out or converted those obstinate adherents of Judaism. Nearer home, each year I see one or two of my students wearing cheesecutter caps, and I know at once that they too have been conforming to a cultural imperative which has defied nearly two centuries of concerted opposition. The Xhosa have been told that circumcision and seclusion in the bush are bad for their young men. Missionaries said it was pagan; doctors said it was unhealthy; educators said it disrupted schooling, employers that it disrupted work and cost a lot of money. Confirmation, matriculation, graduation were offered by the cultural imperialists in exchange – and many Xhosa took them, in addition, but not at the expense of their own assertion, through the great ritual, that to be a man one must be properly initiated. So, the first implication of what I have said is that there will be continuity of values and forms of cultural expression. Ideological evangelism, even when it is hammered home with rifle butts, and converts are rewarded with cushy jobs and fat salaries, will not eliminate people’s sense of who they are, nor their obstinate determination to pursue what they believe to be right for them.

Secondly, and this may seem to contradict what I have just said, the history of man to date, indeed, the history of all successful animal species, is one of adaptation and flexibility. Our perceptions of the world around us, the categories which we use to divide up our universe of people, and the relationships which we define between those categories, are fixed only for a season, not for eternity. Those who are unable to adapt their categories and review their relationships in the light of changing circumstances are doomed to join the wrecks of extinct cultures and species which serve as landmarks in time.

In the area where I live, a lot of copies of a poster appeared during the weeks just before the white election this year. It said “REMEMBER RHODESIA – VOTE H.N.P.”

It captured the essence of what I am trying to say today in one astonishing **non sequitur**. Anyone who has followed the history of what is now Zimbabwe must surely know that in the long run, the majority will overthrow an exclusive minority regime, and that the longer the minority resists, the poorer the prognosis for reconciliation between the new rulers and their former masters. De Gaulle, that ultimate Nationalist, recognised the fact that others could be as passionate and determined in their nationalism as he was – and dismantled the French empire in a single decade with hardly a shot fired in anger south of the Sahara. The result was an association of Francophone states with enduring ties with their metropolitan power. The post-independence history of Zimbabwe underlines the point still further – those who have sought their security through constitutional safeguards of minority ethnic status have been disillusioned, embittered and fled, while those who have committed themselves to the development of the country have found much that is worth living for. Remember Rhodesia indeed – not least for the speed with which socialist rhetoric was replaced by material pragmatism. And Zimbabwe is far from unique. In 1961 I drove the elderly mother of a white missionary across the Rift Valley in Kenya. She told me, “As long as they don’t let Kenyatta out, we shall be all right”. Four years later I found myself doing the same trip in the opposite direction – again with an elderly lady as a passenger, “As long as Kenyatta stays in power”, she said, “we shall be all right”. Both elderly ladies were wrong of course – but they illustrate how flexibility of perception enables people to live in the present and postpone their fears to an uncertain future. So, recognise that while the old cultural myths, and old bases of ethnic identity, the old hopes and fears will continue to haunt the future as they have the past, those myths, that identity, those hopes and fears can be re-interpreted, can be adapted creatively to new circumstances. Creative adaptation, or flexibility, will be demanded of us all in the years ahead. We **have** to evaluate – but we should be conscious of what we are doing.

Let me give you three examples which may be familiar to you. When used to describe people, what does the term “Black” mean? Does it mean people categorised by physical anthropologists as Negroid; or Bantu-speaking people; or people who are classified under the Population Registration Act as Black; or all people who are not classified as “white” under the same Act? I am pretty sure that if I had asked some years ago that question, I would have received a different range of answers from the one that I would get from you today. In our lifetime, crucial ideological categories have changed – creative adaptation if you like (but meaningful only when it goes far beyond political rhetoric). It is not enough to emulate the driver of the school bus in Plains Georgia who announced to his waiting passengers, “Now listen y’all, our Mr Carter is now President of the U.S.A. and he’s said there ain’t no different coloured folk no more. You ain’t white and you ain’t black no more”. His audience looked bemusedly at themselves and him, but he battled on. “You ain’t white and you ain’t black, you, you’re all green. O.K. Now get on the bus – light greens at the front, dark green at the back”.

A second example. When I listen to speakers at student mass meetings today, I hear them suggesting, or claiming, that they identify themselves as workers, pitted against the bosses in the university administration and

Senate. Sometimes they even persuade some of the black employees of the university that they are united in their struggle against the bosses in admin. The students in Paris in 1968 tried the same re-interpretation of their class position to promote a worker-student revolutionary alliance. Organised labour was little more impressed by their rhetoric than Stalin was with the I.R.A. and the students retired with sore heads to review their correct analyses of their situation. Flexibility and adaptation, yes – dilettantism and contradiction, no. If you want to identify in that sense with the workers, don’t live off the taxes they pay or the profits your sponsors or parents have extracted from them. Discover the real bases of your common interests which transcend the categories of Marxist rhetoric – that is creative adaptation, rethinking the categories and rethinking the relationships.

A third example. I hear, like a shrill trumpet from across the sea where Mrs Thatcher struts, and echoed in government statements here, claims about the free market economy, about privatisation and such, as the means whereby our economy will grow and happiness be spread across the land. But I see the growth of monopolies in business; a still growing army of civil servants, matched by their variously uniformed brethren; and, according to the Free Market Foundation, over five hundred different pieces of legislation inhibiting free enterprise and trade in this country. And I read of more bureaucrats directing their energies at what they call “promoting the informal sector” – a concept which would be quite meaningless if we had a free economy, since what “formal” and “informal” really mean are “legal and protected” and “illegal and harassed”. If we are going to cry “Freedom and Democracy” and seek to bring about Isaiah’s vision of the new Jerusalem where men live in their own houses and reap what they have sowed, then we have to decode the myths and rhetoric of the free marketeers and capitalists with no less vigour than we decode the myths and rhetoric of colour and class.

Of the third element, inevitability, history and anthropology have much to teach us, and I have referred to it in various ways already. The title of this lecture implies the inevitability of a great divide between what we are experiencing now and what our future will be.

The inevitabilities turn on such hard variables as numbers of people, resources with which they can work to generate wealth, and the unwillingness of the majority to accept second or third class status indefinitely. Constitutional packages, however elegantly wrapped, are ultimately about access to scarce resources, and “protection of minorities” (however one cares to define majorities or minorities) means that some people are being given rights of access which are being denied to others. However hard we may try to create our classifications of people and to impose our interpretation of differences upon them, the common elements which embrace all people will ultimately dominate. Those basic needs which have been outlined by scholars from Malinowski to Maslow are not colour coded in the long run, even if they are culturally evaluated.

I have not said much about race and social structure as such – so let me conclude with some thoughts on those concepts and the relationship between them.

How the spectrum of human variety is to be divided up and ordered is a matter which will not be determined by scientists but by politicians and ideologues. You may see

two colours in your human rainbow (black and white); or three (black, white, brown) or four, or seventeen. All those classifications reflect something, all have some sort of meaning to some people – although how anyone could cheerfully define **himself** as “Other Coloured” is beyond my imagination! But how the significance of each category is perceived and translated into political factions and political rights – indeed, whether each is given any political significance at all, is a crucial issue. It is an issue that will dominate politics as long as some people endeavour to protect or advance their interests by appeal to ethnicity. It will only subside when people realise its artificiality and find alternative principles of cohesion around which to organise in order to pursue their interests – when, as Mboya put it, the Patels and the Singhs are sufficiently at ease to marry the Khumalos and the van der Merwes – and vice versa.

At university we should be engaged in trying to distinguish between rhetoric and reality, between what people say and what people do – and how those dyads relate to each other. In the new society, beyond the abyss all the skills mastered in this area of decoding rhetoric and assessing reality will be needed quite as much as they are here today. When politicians speak of the dictatorship of the proletariat we should ask ourselves (or better them if we dare) whether they are part of the dictatorship or part of the proletariat. When they speak of fair shares for all, ask how **their** income compares with the national per capita income, and what **they** will give up so that all may start equal. We should be experienced at

asking the questions by now, as members of this strange society of ours. (You heard what happened when Advocate Lombard, the public prosecutor for Stinkwater went to the Holiday Inn in Maseru? He met a local who was dressed in a smart white uniform with lots of gold braid. “You a commissioner?” asked Lombard. “Certainly not”, replied the officer, “I’m a ...”. “Don’t play the fool with me”, said Lombard, “Lesotho is land locked – you haven’t got a Navy”. “What department did you say you worked for?” asked the Sotho Admiral “Ministry of Justice”, said Lombard. “Then we do have something in common”, replied the Admiral, “Our Navy, your justice”). In short, the faces on the TV will change, the rhetoric will change, but until what the mass of us perceive as reality changes, the ethnic and social landscape will remain familiar to us. Those of us who learn – by our studies of history and culture, and by our close observation of the world about us – how categories and relationships can be re-interpreted, and how they are manipulated in the names of ideology and reality, should be well equipped to survive and even prosper in a modest sort of way, through our own creative adaptation. Do not believe the doctors who tell you that rigidity sets in only a few hours after death – that is bio-logic. Rigidity of thinking in an age of revolution is the cause, not the consequence of cultural extinction. And maybe at least the younger generation are getting the message – anthropology is the fastest growing social science at Rhodes University, a fact which not only gives me pleasure but also hope for us all beyond the abyss. □

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## A reply to Christopher Merrett on “That Election”.

It is true that there is no statistical evidence to support the contention that people who might normally have been expected to vote for the PFP in May stayed away from the polls because of the “irrelevant circus” campaign. Nevertheless it is the conviction of people who worked in the election that they did, and it is certainly their view that many former and potential workers did nothing to help them this time.

As to the question whether the PFP was worth voting for on May 6th (or should all white voters energies be going into extra-parliamentary work) my own view is that, whatever reservations anyone might have had about some of its policies or its campaign, it was.

The crucial dividing line in white South African politics seems to me to be whether one rejects apartheid and

commits oneself to a non-racial future or not. For many white voters support for the PFP has been their affirmation of that commitment. Most of these people are not political “activists” or ever likely to be, and we are deluding ourselves if we think that they are. They are therefore highly unlikely to attach themselves to the “extra-parliamentary democratic movement”. But, unless they are persuaded otherwise by the Right or the Left, they will not resist the coming of a non-racial society and will accept it with reasonably good grace when it does come.

This is a bonus for the future and not an irrelevance. It should be helped to happen, something which the “irrelevant circus” campaign did not do.

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