REITH LECTURES 1965: World of Peoples

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Lecture 1: Racism

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As things are no one would argue that there is no antipathy between races. What I want to do here is to analyse some of the attitudes which contribute to this antipathy. It can range from being ill at ease in strange company to open hostility and persecution of others because they differ from us. It is referred to variously as race-prejudice, colour-prejudice, colour-bar, racialism, and racism. I personally prefer the term racism. It seems to me a good clear description of the antipathy and of the dangers it holds for us. The name was first given to a racial doctrine which began at the end of the nineteenth century. According to it, a man’s worth was determined by the race to which he belonged. In due course the notions which make up this doctrine served as the basis of Nazism: a good enough reason for making an examination of ‘racism’ the starting point for a study of the problems of a world of peoples.

It is normal for us to feel more at ease in the company of the people we know: with our own sort, with our own people. What we really mean by the expression ‘our own people’ is the people who are known to us, whom we can understand easily and with whom we can get along without much difficulty: in short, people with whom we have a common background and a basically similar outlook. These people need not be just members of our family or immediate relations; but we sometimes express the idea of ‘our own people’ by describing them as our kith and kin, and emphasize our close ties with them in such sayings as ‘blood is thicker than water’. The mention of blood brings us to a meaning of the expression ‘our own people’ which has special relevance to these talks. It suggests a link between the ability to get along together and racial affinity. But being able to get along with others does not depend solely on relationships of blood and race. There is a whole range of cultural and social factors which can be as effective as kindred relations in bringing and keeping people together.

As individuals we all tend to be loyal to the groups to which we belong, be it our family, school, neighbourhood, office or factory. We tend to refer to people who belong to our group as ‘us’ and to others who are outside as ‘them’.

In its positive form, group loyalty or ‘team spirit’ is an essential component in nation-building, and we of the newer nations are anxious to strengthen it within our own societies. It is a tremendously powerful emotional motor. But a motor will propel you only where you want to go; this particular one has been put to some devilish uses in our time, none more so than during the Nazi regime in Germany, when it was the motive and driving force for collective hostility against a whole people, the Jews.

Loyalties and hostilities among social groups often come to be regarded as unalterable and instinctive, and we tend to develop a belief in the superiority of the group to which we belong and the inferiority of other groups. When differences can be
identified by so easy a criterion as skin colour, such beliefs can assume ugly and
dangerous potentialities. It is sometimes claimed that aversion to skin colour is
inherent, innate or instinctive. There are no facts to substantiate this claim. The
nearest we can get to a reasonable explanation for it is that our likes and dislikes
become imprinted on our minds so early in our lives that we tend to consider them
part of our nature. But it is true that strangeness and unfamiliarity do frighten and
momentarily repel. The typical reactions of white people to Africans are fully
reciprocated by Africans when they first encounter white people. They are apt to
mistake them for ghosts or for pale, sickly individuals.

Four hundred years ago a traveller in Mozambique described the reactions of Africans
to white skin like this: ‘They take great pride, thinking there are no fairer people than
they in all the world, so that when they see any white people, that wear apparel on
their bodies, they laugh and mocke at them, thinking us to be monsters and ugly
people; they think and verily persuade themselves that they are the right colour of
men and that we have a false and counterfeit colour’. And yet it has been seriously
suggested that the colour black as such has a special psychological significance for all
races.

No. We like or dislike people or objects because we have learnt to, or because we
have cultivated agreeable or disagreeable attitudes towards them. In most other
instances we may be completely indifferent to the existence of other groups. For
instance, contact with a remote Eskimo, if he is not involved economically or
politically or socially in our lives, does not arouse any emotional reaction in us,
except perhaps a distant human curiosity about his way of life. In general, the
assumption that there is a race repulsion instinct has not been supported by
psychological studies. We all know that children adopt the attitudes that prevail in
their homes and communities. What we do not so often realize is that children are not
unique in this. Adults are influenced by the traditions of their community and the
examples of others.

**Strangeness That Does Not Repel**

Strangeness and unfamiliarity may temporarily frighten and repel, but they do not
necessarily elicit hostile reactions or lasting hostility. There are many instances in
which complete strangeness has done just the opposite. Amerindians visiting Europe
soon after the discovery of America were described as ‘a source of great interest to
scientists; the portraits of many of them were painted by famous artists; kings and
queens received them as fellow sovereigns, showering them with gifts of money,
jewels, and clothing while entertaining them in royal style’.

If repulsion is not instinctive, and strangeness is not the cause of antagonism, then
why and how does racial antagonism arise? Prejudice is such an emotional thing that
it is not easy to find rational explanations for it. All the same, one can sometimes see
causes. It is found that some people will attribute undesirable characteristics to groups
with whom they have little or no contact. Their hostility is based on hearsay or on
isolated experience.

It is sometimes claimed that race antipathy stems out of the same order of cultural
differences. But surely if this were the only basis of hostility it would disappear once
the member of the alien race has been culturally assimilated. Cultural assimilation is possible when the groups coming together have developed relatively similar backgrounds. The West Indian from Martinique or any of the French islands can be more easily assimilated in France than an African who is still attached to tribal society. In the same way, a British West Indian who speaks English stands a better chance in England than a non-English-speaking Pakistani. But racist thinking, which attaches importance to obvious and striking differences such as colour, makes social assimilation difficult, even for those who have achieved cultural assimilation. No matter how assimilated a Negro may be, he is a Negro first and everything else later: even in France, where the claim is that the culture of a man is more important than his skin-colour.

One of the more ludicrous manifestations of ‘race-thinking’ is also one of the most familiar. Have we not all been guilty at one time or another of saying, ‘I really can’t tell one Chinese from another’, ‘one Negro from another’, ‘one white man from another’? There surely is a time when the sheer difference between a black face and a white face, between a yellow face and a black face, is so overwhelming that it prevents us from looking more closely. But it is a stage that we grow out of, or should grow out of, if we have the capacity to interest ourselves in human beings. The truth is that too many of us fall into the easy and lazy habit of going no further than the recognition of the obvious difference.

**Seeing Only Blocs of People**

Those who base their antipathy on hearsay or spontaneous resentment cannot see individuals with their individual qualities, they see only blocs of people. Each member of the bloc is expected to behave in a predictable way. He is thus deprived not only of his individuality but also of his free will; he is reduced to the level of a robot.

This kind of thinking involves what are, in fact, vague figures. It has been described as ‘race thinking’. People who think this way are already in danger of attaching particular values to stereotypes. They are becoming racists. They have no difficulty in describing Negroes, en bloc, as dirty, childish, irresponsible, immoral, and lazy; or Jews as too successful, avaricious, and clannish; although their knowledge of Negroes and Jews may be superficial or non-existent. In Britain we hear set characteristics ascribed to the Irish, the Poles, the Scots, and the Welsh.

In the same way we tend to attribute characters to nations and proceed to judge individual nationals by them. The danger here is that there are enough superficial similarities among peoples who share the same way of life to blur the differences among them. A Swede or Norwegian brought up or educated in England can be more of a type of Englishman than many born Englishmen. Yet we think we can distinguish nationalities by dress, speech, gestures, and mannerisms. Where do we draw the line between features of this sort and racial characteristics?

Inconsistencies in race-thinking often pass unnoticed. Those who describe the Negro as lazy and irresponsible seem to have no difficulty in referring to him at the same time as a model of hard work: we all know the expression ‘working like a nigger’. There is even the story of a politician of a southern State in America who, in spite of
the views he held about Negroes, had this to say of a young Negro he decided to employ: ‘He’s a responsible boy. I know all about him, and he will help me with my diet, give me my injections, open my mail, and be my amanuensis. He will be a comfort to me’. Jews are accused of diehard capitalism and rabid communism; of being clannish and of being too easily assimilated into their adopted societies.

**Sweeping Generalizations**

It may be helpful to review the characteristics of racism: in racism we draw no distinction between the individual and the group to which he belongs. We cease to see the postman, the bus-conductor, the doctor, the shopkeeper, the office or factory colleague who is known to us. We forget the personal or human relations we may have had with him; they simply fade out of our minds. We are ready to attribute group characteristics to him. He becomes a typical black, or white, or yellow man—an easy target for race attacks. We proceed to form or accept theories about him. Once one gets into the race-thinking mood and the individual is forgotten, it is surprising how many sweeping generalizations can be remembered.

No section of any community is wholly immune against racism. It is wrong to assume that unfounded beliefs in race are confined to the uneducated masses. Sometimes, in fact often, they are more discerning than scholars who are wrapped up in obscure theories. The highly speculative game of race-theorizing in which some historians and philologists indulge can be fascinating; but it is a game which prepares the mind for group-hostility and nations for conflicts and wars. People who have been friendly and peaceful neighbours and co-workers can suddenly turn into enemies, joining in hostile attacks on their recent friends or standing by while others attack them. Racism is a hysterical phenomenon.

Fortunately, though, in every community the majority of the people accept popular views and current behaviour patterns, their attitudes are not fixed. On the other hand, there are people who hold so rigidly to false generalizations that even psychotherapy may not succeed in curing them. These are pathological cases and must be recognized as such. They are people who for various reasons feel their positions threatened, and who harbour feelings of insecurity and anxiety. To sum up, we may accept the view that ‘The cause of prejudice is in the subject, not the object of prejudice. It is an irrational, pathological phenomenon, rising from the individual’s own inadequacies, and resulting in displaced aggression’.

But it is neither safe nor reasonable to dismiss such people as the ‘lunatic fringe’, because constant repetition of their false views tends to make an impression on innocent minds. The kind of rumours which are reported to have circulated freely in Smethwick during last year’s election campaign give an indication of how much public opinion and behaviour can be influenced by unfounded allegations during a period of race hysteria.

Presenting facts in the hope of removing prejudices is a form of social therapy. But, as with most mentally ill people, success in refuting one false notion only makes room for another. Take the familiar allegation that one particular racial group is more prone to tuberculosis or some other social disease. Health statistics may disprove this. But if they do, the statistical evidence will be ignored, or the figures will be challenged. If
statistical evidence supports the allegation, racists will ignore the fact that any group living in similar conditions would be prone to the same disease. The expression ‘a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still’ aptly describes the mentality and behaviour of racists. That is why I am inclined to agree with those who argue that it cannot be uprooted point by point. It is sometimes necessary to enact laws against racism as a first step towards breaking a vicious circle. Experience imposed may help to speed up the process of persuasion. How often has it not been said: ‘Until I met some of them’, or ‘travelled with some of them’, or ‘my child started inviting some of them to our home, I didn’t know they could be so nice! Legislation can at least create the conditions for such meetings.

The mistake is often made of describing a racial situation either as a Negro problem or a White problem. All racial groups in a situation are involved, in different ways. Recently the American magazine Ebony has come out with an issue on the ‘White Problem in America’. It is an idea which fits in with contemporary ways of looking at the race question. But I feel it is wrong. There is both a Negro question and a White question.

Racism has its corollaries as well: there is what may be called ‘counter-racism’, where the group which has been stigmatized as inferior reacts, humanly enough one might say, by stigmatizing other groups as inferior. This is as extreme a denial of the truth about human life as the denial of equality which gave birth to it. And then there is the phenomenon—I suppose it could be described as ‘inverse racism’—in which some members of a dominant group are moved by an exaggerated sense of guilt to offer themselves as scapegoats for their own groups. The answer to racism is neither abject submission nor counter-hostility.

I think it may be helpful to consider what we should expect in a healthy racial situation. Let us remember that members of other racial groups, whatever they are, are not potential angels; they are ordinary human beings with all the weaknesses of men. They seek an opportunity to lead their lives in peace and in harmony with their neighbours. As we do not normally make friends with every member of our own ethnic group, or even like them, so we should not expect to like all strangers indiscriminately. It is honest and healthy to allow for our personal likes and dislikes, without giving offence. It is not good to give special and privileged treatment to members of minority groups. All they ask for and should be given is their rights as human beings. To treat a person better than normal because of his race or colour is a form of discrimination, as much as treating him worse.

In my student days just before the last war, when race problems were discussed in Britain, it was always in connection with the United States, South Africa, East Africa, and other remote parts of the world. There was unanimous and public condemnation of the race theories and practices associated with the Nazi regime in Germany. Now we read that the Ku Klux Klan cross has been burned here, something that people who think they know and understand Britain find hard to imagine.

A Changed Picture
It is clear from the British press that problems arising out of race relations have taken on new proportions in recent years. Up to the outbreak of the Second World War
coloured communities were to be found mainly in the principal ports. The few other coloured people to be found in Britain were mainly students or entertainers or holiday visitors. Since 1945 the increased inflow of immigrant workers from different parts of the Commonwealth has radically changed the picture. Journalists, in their search for the round figure and the telling phrase, have coined the expression the ‘dark million’ for immigrants from Asian, African, and Caribbean countries. No one seems to realize that this is not the largest body of immigrants in Britain. Irish, Poles, Italians, and other Europeans have been coming in considerable numbers for many years. In addition, there is a steady influx from what are called ‘the white Dominions’.

The reactions of individual Britons to people of different races have taken various forms: curiosity and wonderment at obvious differences; pleasure in the exotic; indifference, resentment, and occasional hostility; a proper, but cold formality, acceptance and genuine friendliness. The official British attitude has always been against race discrimination. At the Imperial Conference in 1921 Sir Winston Churchill said: ‘Race, colour or creed should not be a barrier to any man of worth’. Questions are often asked in parliament about alleged incidents of discrimination, and in 1943 the late Oliver Stanley, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, observed in reply to one of these that it was ‘legally difficult to prevent a certain number of ill-mannered and ignorant people allowing ill manners and ignorance to get the better of them’.

I once collaborated with Sir Allan Burns, a former Governor of the Gold Coast, and author of a study on colour prejudice, in preparing a little pamphlet for travellers to West Africa from Britain and to Britain from West Africa. I mention this only because in the pamphlet our assumption was that although our travellers would be going to new communities with customs which differed significantly from their own, all that was needed to bridge the gap was the application of common sense. It is an assumption that recent developments have badly shaken, to say the least.

A number of attempts have been made to measure the extent of race and colour prejudice in Britain and to study phases of its incidence. Such studies are necessary to enable the people of Britain to know the extent of their involvement in a world-wide problem. Perhaps the best way to look at race prejudice is to regard it as an epidemic and to issue periodic warnings so that those who have not been affected can seek means of inoculating themselves against it.

Britain is the centre of an inter-racial Commonwealth. It is also one of the important world centres which until recently could boast of freedom from prejudice. Britain, like any other country, has a sovereign right to decide who may or may not enter her territory. British statesmen have been aware of Britain’s inter-racial role in Commonwealth and world affairs, and to some extent the recent controversy in Britain about immigration has recognized it as an international problem and not just a national one. But it seems to me that problems of migration and the treatment of settlers, which are now within the exclusive jurisdiction of individual countries, will eventually have to be examined collectively in a world organization. Migration policies in the Pacific and south-east Asia, the security of minority settlers in the newly independent states, the migration of workers into highly industrialized countries and the way that automation may effect their future—all these issues pose problems which can easily inflame race feelings.
In a world with practically no distances between countries, such issues cannot be ignored. ‘All real living is meeting’, a contemporary philosopher has said. In spite of the ideological barriers that man with perverse determination has erected in our time, we do live in an age of meeting. The television, the camera, and the fixed-orbit satellite are perhaps the advanced symbols of this fact. But seeing our neighbour - and everybody now is our neighbour - is not knowing our neighbour. Just as the brain interprets the messages of the optic nerve, we too must be equipped to interpret the messages about other peoples.

Racism has been described as a pathological state of mind, as a form of irrationalism and as an epidemic. These descriptions do suggest that there is a healthy state to be attained and preserved in a world of peoples. We have to use all the resources at our disposal and the skills we can command, consciously enrich our living by making the meeting of peoples an open-hearted endeavour to understand and appreciate each other. To go no further, the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps should impress on us how urgent it is for all of us to learn habits of understanding and tolerance.