

## **REITH LECTURES 1979: The African Condition**

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### **Lecture 2: The Cross of Humiliation**

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Surely the most exasperating humiliation of all is when you are not sure whether you are, in fact, being humiliated. If I pass through customs in Europe and I'm stopped when none of the white passengers is, can I be sure that this is simply the luck of the draw on that particular day? Or was the customs man influenced in his choice by the fact that I was not white? I am prepared to concede that very often in such situations race is not a relevant factor. But I bitterly resent having to wonder whether the one per cent charge of racial prejudice was in fact there. It is not necessarily the fault of the customs officer; it is the product of the history of my people.

I have often wondered whether a Jew, when singled out by customs officers at Heathrow Airport for a search, ever suffers the same nagging doubt as to why he was chosen. If a Jew does not, it is one more illustration of the basic paradox I want to consider in this lecture—that Africans are not necessarily the most brutalised of peoples, but they are almost certainly the most humiliated in modern history. My own modest moments of doubt about my dignity as a human being have deep historical roots, going back to the slave trade and beyond. The blacks remain the worst victims of contempt; though not necessarily the worst casualties of brutality.

In this instance I am using brutalisation in the sense of massive physical victimisation. I am not of course saying that Africans have not been physically victimised, but have only been socially and psychologically humiliated. What I am saying is that, in terms of sheer physical suffering, there are other candidates for the title of ultimate martyrdom. The Jews, for example.

Africans had been hunted once in order to be sold into slavery. The slave trade dehumanised its victims but it did not devalue them. On the contrary, a commercial price was put on each victim. The men and women lost their human dignity but they acquired a market value. The Jews, on the other hand, were hunted down by the Nazis in order to be murdered. In that sense they were not only dehumanised; they were also totally devalued.

The blacks exported to the Americas were destined to help build a new civilisation; the Jews destroyed under the Nazis were condemned as imperfections of the old civilisation. Men, women and children died in those ghastly monuments of European racism at its most brutal. And blacks were not the victims of that ultimate excess in racism. In short, suffering defined in terms of physical victimisation is not unique to the black experience, and has indeed found its worst manifestation outside the black world.

But brutality is one thing; humiliation is another. Humiliation takes the form of social and psychological degradation. It can sometimes take the form of being equated with

goods and chattels — retaining value indeed, but like the value of pigs on a farm, or cattle on a ranch.

I want to talk about three interrelated systems of humiliation: the slave trade; European colonisation of Africa; and continuing racial discrimination wherever black people live with white people. As far as slavery is concerned, the question arises as to why it was Africa that was raided for slaves instead of other parts of the world. Why was it, for example, that in the Americas the white man didn't use more systematically the local defeated Indian populations as slave labour instead of importing blacks from thousands of miles away? In reality, there were efforts to use Indians as slave labour, especially in Spanish America, but they were largely unsuccessful.

But why pick on black Africans? Why didn't the Europeans raid North Africa for Arab and Berber slaves, or go all the way to India? One reason was simply geographical. The slaves were needed for the Caribbean or North or South America, and West Africa was much nearer than the Indian subcontinent.

Then there was the racial distance between the white slavers and the black slaves. The very terminology that Europeans use to refer to their complexion as white and to that of Africans as black emphasised the extremities of the spectrum of pigmentation, the polar opposites of colour and race. It was easier for the Europeans therefore to dehumanise those who were farthest from them in culture and complexion—and proceed to enslave them. Africans were also easier to capture simply because of their military weakness. Their combat culture of spears and bows and arrows was no match for firearms.

In the earlier phases of the development of capitalism, slavery was an asset. But in the late 18th and certainly in the course of the 19th century, capitalism was actually becoming hostile to slavery. The leading abolitionists were the leading capitalist powers, Britain among them. And in the United States the North was more developed in capitalist terms than the Southern states. It was the North that was abolitionist and the South which defended the slave system.

Why was advanced capitalism so hostile to slavery and ready to save Africa from its continuation?

The more advanced capitalism had reached a stage where slave labour was less efficient than wage labour. A slave was often bought for life, whereas a wage worker was often hired for a week. An ailing worker could be fired and replaced at next to no cost; whereas the worst time to sell a slave is when he is ailing. Owning slaves included some responsibility for non-productive members of the slave's family, including little children and very old people. But workers could be hired at a minimum salary with little consideration of whether that was enough to keep the worker's family alive.

Then there was the pace of urbanisation in the metropolitan countries themselves and the large pool of cheap labour which was created as a result. One did not have to brave the seas or the diseases of West Africa to get cheap labour. It was available not far from Manchester or Philadelphia.

But at the same time as she was becoming the leading abolitionist nation in history Britain was also building the biggest empire in history. British capitalism was by the 19th century hostile to slavery, but it was simultaneously becoming much more favourable to imperialism. In Africa, the British flag was flying before long from the Niger delta in the west to the source of the Nile in East Africa—and from Cairo in the north to the Cape of Good Hope in the south. Another form of humiliation—colonialism—was under way.

European imperial ambitions were of course varied. There was interest in new sources of raw materials; new potential markets for European goods, new outlets for European surplus population, regardless of the crisis of habitability in parts of Africa; new outlets for European capital to be invested in risky but excitingly challenging ventures; new potential sources of energy with all those waterfalls and subsequently with all that coal, uranium and oil; new souls to convert to Christianity—in short, new worlds to conquer.

The third form of humiliation is racism. Some years ago, when I was still teaching in Uganda, I was invited to lecture at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. I was then, and continue to be today, in favour of efforts made by African states to isolate South Africa diplomatically. The question which arose then was whether my visit to South Africa was to be regarded as a violation of the political boycott of that country, or simply as a contribution to the intellectual enlightenment of that racist society. Before making up my mind for certain whether to go I knew what my minimum conditions must be.

First, that I should be able to address racially-mixed audiences; secondly, that I should be free to say whatever I wanted; thirdly, that I should be free to take my wife with me. Now, I chose that last condition in order to test the South African system at its most sensitive. The one condition which seemed impossible to meet was precisely the one which, in most other civilised societies, would be regarded as a matter of course. The University of Cape Town had consulted its lawyers, and had been told categorically that it was out of the question for me to go with my English wife to South Africa without risking proceedings under the Immorality Laws and laws against miscegenation.

I related this incident in a lecture in London some years later. My topic was academic freedom in Africa. I argued that there were occasions when academic freedom in a particular society suffered because other freedoms did not exist. The freedom to mate across a racial line was, at first glance, unrelated to academic life. And yet the academic freedom of the University of Cape Town was compromised because the society as a whole had laws against mixed mating and mixed marriages.

My lecture was later published and, as a result, I received a letter from the Office of the Prime Minister of South Africa, stating that the laws in question did not apply to me. Subsequently, the Vice-Chancellor of the University was publicly reprimanded for misinforming a foreign scholar. In reality, the apparent attempt by the then Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, to assure me that the laws against mixed mating did not apply to me was presumably part of the strategy at the time to facilitate greater interaction between South Africans and Africans from elsewhere in the continent.

It was also a measure of the beginnings of liberalisation in the interracial laws. Since then, South Africa has moved closer to abolishing its anti-miscegenation laws. But does this mean that the racial system in South Africa is softening up? If so, why?

Part of the change relates to the wider world of capitalism. I mentioned earlier that Western industrial capitalism had, by the 19th century, become hostile to slavery, but at the same time it had become congenial to imperialism and colonisation.

Now, the system in South Africa is an amalgam of slavery and colonisation. Apartheid shares with slavery the assumption of hereditary caste roles, status-based partly on descent and partly on ascriptive rules of master and servant. Just as racism and contempt for black people were at the core of the slave trade, so once again are racism and contempt for black people at the core of apartheid.

But South Africa is also a case of settler colonialism as well as being a link in the wider economic imperialism of the West. We might therefore infer that apartheid, as slavery, is something which the Western powers would genuinely detest—just as they detested the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century. But apartheid, as imperialism, is something which Western powers identify with—just as they identified with empire-building in the 19th century.

The question today is whether the West can effectively work for the end of apartheid as a racial system without losing the economic benefits of white-dominated South Africa as an imperial system.

What are the Western powers to do in the face of this dilemma? They once managed to have their abolitionist cake and eat it too. Can they now continue to eat the fruit of white-dominated South Africa and at the same time disgorge the accompanying poison of apartheid?

So far, there have been two dominant views of the role of Western investment in South Africa. One is to the effect that Western investment helps to liberalise the régime and makes effective social transformation easier to attain. The other is that such investment consolidates the racist system.

The view that Western investment is liberalising rests partly on the West's own historical precedent. Increasing industrialisation in England gradually resulted in greater internal democratisation. There was a growth of the urban proletariat, a struggle for the rights of collective bargaining, an expansion of the franchise, first to the middle classes and then to the working classes, the emergence of new political parties, and the institutionalisation of the open society in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. If Western investment in South Africa has the same industrialising impact, should we not also expect it to have the same democratising effect?

A related line of reasoning is that the Western presence in South Africa, and the consciousness of the Western model, could stimulate a demonstration effect on South African society. The example of wages being raised in Western firms within the purview of South African society would gradually help to change the standards of that society upwards.

Again, there is the belief that Western influence on the government in Pretoria can only be as great as the West's economic importance to Pretoria. Any dismantling of Western investment structures in South Africa would severely undermine any liberalising influence that the West might have over the régime in power.

The opposing school of thought argues that with Western investment apartheid gets the *de facto* support of the immense economic power of international capitalism at large, and this in turn helps to give greater legitimacy to the racial system. Moreover, Western nations acquire a vested interest in the survival of the present régime. Some even believe that apartheid with stability is better than black majority rule at the risk of chaos.

Thirdly, Western investment, to the extent to which it increases South Africa's prosperity, enhances the vested interest of local whites in the system as it now stands, and discourages pressure for liberal reform. Western investment also increases the régime's capacity to co-opt a minority of Africans into relatively privileged positions and distribute enough benefits to the wider population to delay a radicalisation of the masses.

Finally, Western investment, by needing stability, helps to encourage the régime to maintain its structure of repression as a method of assuring that stability.

Where do I stand? I agree that Western investment has helped to consolidate the régime, but I also agree that Western investment may indeed liberalise the system. I go farther and argue that the two processes together will, in time, create a revolutionary situation in South Africa. Revolutions in history have tended to occur not when people are at their lowest, but precisely when matters are beginning to improve. Revolutionary situations often occur when progress is being made, but not fast enough to overtake expectations.

This theory is partly neo-Marxist, though I am not myself a Marxist. My proposition is that making South Africa's economic system more modern helps to increase its incompatibility with racism, and therefore helps to dig the grave of apartheid itself. The economic substructure is thus able to change more rapidly than the racial superstructure. Just as capitalism developed earlier to such a level that it could no longer tolerate slavery, so capitalism in South Africa is bound, quite shortly, to develop to a level where it can no longer tolerate institutionalised segregation. I am not necessarily against the withdrawal from South Africa of Western investment. I am simply insisting that we should distinguish between expressive policies and instrumental policies.

Expressive policies seek to declare a moral or political position, regardless of whether the declaration affects the situation. Instrumental policies seek either to induce change or to prevent it. If to boycott South Africa is to express a moral position, it does not really matter whether the boycott causes change or not. There are times when we simply have to stand up and be counted—regardless of the consequences. From the days when I was an undergraduate, I have meticulously avoided buying anything South African. But I have never thought my own little act would bring apartheid crumbling to the ground. Mine has been a boycott designed to express a moral position rather than to induce change. But if we are judging Western investment in

instrumental, rather than expressive, terms then we have to estimate its precise consequences before we decide whether or not it should be withdrawn. Instrumentally, Western investment will help create conditions for a revolutionary situation in South Africa before the end of the century.

Let me now summarise the argument. By increasing the prosperity of South Africa Western investment is contributing to the growth of the first really large and significant black proletarian class in Africa. By the demonstration effect of their own firms and wages Western investors raise the expectations of workers elsewhere in South Africa, and contribute towards the growth of militant economic consciousness. By putting pressure on the South African régime to make liberal concessions, and increase the liberties of its citizens, Western governments and investors help the opponents of the régime in South Africa to know one another and organise better for additional pressures in the future. But, ultimately, the white-dominated régime will not give up power simply through the liberalising process. They will never reach a stage when they would peacefully accept, for example, the principle of one man, one vote.

It follows, therefore, that the ultimate solution is a violent revolution in South Africa. And my own conviction is that conditions of violent revolution in a racially segregated society can best be created when new economic classes drawn from the oppressed are demanding new rewards, and there is sufficient freedom in the society to enable revolutionaries to recruit and organise for the final confrontation with the system of injustice. The concept of race will not vanish after South Africa is liberated. Race as a concept of biological differentiation is a permanent fact of life; but racism as a concept of social gradation is a finite historical phenomenon, whose end may be in sight, though not necessarily in our own lifetime.

Why am I so confident that this might well be the last century with any significant racial problems? In order to answer that, let me distinguish between two forms of human solidarity. One kind is based on a biological relationship among the members of the group. The relationship may amount to an extended family, or a clan, or a tribe—or, indeed, a race. The biological relationship could be real, in the sense that the group is descended from some joint ancestors, or it could be presumed by the members of the group. The second kind of solidarity is based on an economic relationship, again real or presumed. The clearest case of this kind of solidarity comes out of class consciousness. The workers who feel united because they see themselves in a shared economic predicament, or employers drawn together out of a sense of shared economic survival, are part of the phenomenon of economic solidarity. The history of the world so far suggests a decline in the power of biological solidarity, and a rise in the influence of economic forms of unity. Thus, such biological foundations of unity as the broad, extended family as the clan and the tribe, have certainly either declined drastically in the Northern Hemisphere or are strongly on the defensive.

The question now is whether the fate of these other forms of biological solidarity will so befall racism and race consciousness as the last political bulwarks of the mythology of kith and kin.

My own conviction is that racism will go the way of tribalism—and gradually make its exit from human experience, except on a very modest scale.

In Europe, tribalism was almost the first to go among these forms of biological alignment. Racism may well be the last to go. In Africa, on the other hand, racism is likely to end first, following the liberation of Southern Africa. But tribalism may last much longer; though, ultimately, also doomed to extinction in the generation which will follow.

The consensus now emerging within the world system on issues of race is sometimes merely rhetorical, but nevertheless part of the reality of the contemporary world. In future, people will quarrel over incomes, jobs and commodities. They will quarrel less and less over race and tribe.