

BEYOND EURO/AFROCENTRICISM

I enter the debate on Euro/Afrocentricism with some trepidation. I worry that a public debate involving 'black intellectuals' may confirm the stereotype that the field of intellectual interest by such intellectuals is indeed narrow. After all, is it not expected of them that they should complain about 'eurocentricism' and proclaim 'afrocentricism'? Even more, space is created for them in a major newspaper so that such 'voices can be heard'. Then right on cue, the 'black intellectual' enters the stage to perform.

'Black intellectuals', whatever that means, do not need to be validated in this manner. Not today. However, that such a scenario of validation may replay itself suggests that the current socio-cultural environment in our country still does not affirm black people in an intuitive way. In this situation, where participation may represent either opportunity or entrapment, it is only prudent not to lower one's guard.

I am impressed by Dr Mandla Seleokane's sobering rationality on this debate (SI: September 21, 1997). I agree with him that much still has to be spelt out not only about 'afrocentricism' but also 'eurocentricism'. These labels are thrown about as if all of us know what they mean. But Dr Seleokane, most probably unintentionally, falls victim to easy categorisation of the kind that led to concerns I have already expressed above.

I was amazed by Dr Seleokane's statement that 'professors Njabulo Ndebele and William Makgoba argue that South African media is eurocentric'. Now, Professor Makgoba has certainly said so: but I have not. I have in the past commented on the extent of European influence on our society. However, my conclusions, in a strenuous effort to avoid simplification, have always been preceded by an attempt at as comprehensive an argument as possible. Like Dr Seleokane, I do have an intuitive support for charges against eurocentricism, but I would have to work a little harder to arrive at the encapsulating label.

I am an old enemy of slogans and unearned labels. Although they can be valuable instruments of mobilisation, I am against them when in a supposedly earnest debate by intellectuals, I sense that they are becoming a serious obstacle to thought. The labels 'eurocentricism' and 'afrocentricism' have indeed become a serious obstacle to thought.

Now, any student of cultural history will realise that in many histories of conquest, elements of the culture of a conquering, dominant and oppressive minority, will tend to continue to exert influence on the behaviour of the conquered long after the conqueror has been expelled. That is why in some hot tropical countries judges and lawyers still wear heavy wigs and robes long after the British have left. They may even claim and defend the inherited traditions. Why do such phenomena occur, and why are we likely to exhibit similar behaviour? I suspect the charge of eurocentricism here may be too simplistic.

Certainly, during the act of resistance, one of the tools of struggle, will have been a call to return to roots. But once the conqueror has been removed, the only roots to talk about become the need for social and economic well-being. The call for the return to mythical roots ceases to be a compelling factor of mobilisation in the face of the sheer weight of existing socio-cultural realities which demand to be addressed on their own terms. That is why, after independence the call for black roots has less effect than the provision of water and sanitation, electricity, telephones, houses, clinics, transport, schools, and jobs.

The overwhelming presence of blacks in government, in senior posts in the public and private sectors, on television, becomes more a psychological reinforcement of the legitimacy of a new dispensation than a sufficient cause of its success. It is not sufficient that the new government is black; it must also deliver. Success in delivery should in turn enhance the

To turn to the issue 'black intellectuals', I have a serious problem with being identified as a 'black intellectual' in an overwhelmingly black country. But the historic dominance of white culture which makes this characterisation possible is cracking, and until it is significantly reduced, the phenomenon of the 'black intellectual' will continue to exist, presupposing that the rest of the intellectuals are white and dominant, and, being the norm, do not require description. We remain with a state of affairs that still requires to be assailed. But the methods of combat become critical.

In this situation, the 'black intellectual', instead of complaining that the physics text book is eurocentric because it does not mention the boomerang's contribution to physics, or that the chemistry textbook is silent about the poison on the Khoikhoi arrow, he/she must just sit down and write the new textbook. The new research, the new textbook have the same socio-cultural value as the supply of water, houses, and other essential services: all a new set of powerful legitimising social symbols. That is how hegemony is established: in addition to the use of slogans.

I am surprised that although Dr Seleoane rightly states that the imposition of foreign values is not a uniquely African experience, he does not recognise the transitional phase we are in. Surely the imaging of contemporary South Africa in the media is still largely based on questionable epistemological assumptions. Surely those assumptions have been found to be inadequate, not only by 'black intellectuals' but by any intellectual who not only recognises that we are in a transitional phase, but also searches for new ways of seeing our environment. A major epistemological shift is underway. Surely, we will be groping and debating and researching until a dominant paradigm emerges and becomes a new intellectual attractor, drawing to itself the greatest number of creative minds!

This process will be greatly assisted by the emergence of a new self-sustaining society. An essential condition for that society to be achieved is the requirement for more and more skilled black people. Human resources development becomes everything. That is why the debates on the allocation of funding to education, and specifically to higher education should not be reduced to technicist budgetary juggling. Higher education, many have argued, is more than a cost, line item in a budget, it is a long-term strategic investment. For as long as we do not have a critical mass of black intellectuals (and they don't get developed over night), who have been nurtured in the experience of historic deprivation and the achievement of freedom, we will be talking about the phenomenon of 'black intellectuals' who may continue to engage in long and fruitless arguments about eurocentricism and afrocentricism.

The responsibilities of historically disadvantaged higher education institutions in this regard are enormous. Where the argument for transformation was once an energising feature of campus life, on some campuses it has degenerated into what someone has called transformania: the call for transformation without a concrete description of what should be transformed, what it should be transformed into, how it should be transformed, what indicators and criteria can be used to measure transformation, and what are the roles and responsibilities of parties involved in transformation once the instruments of transformation are in place? Without any answers to these questions, transformation degenerates into a label without content and is of no use to anyone. These institutions must get down to some work in the context of seeking answers to these questions.

In the end, the debate around euro/afrocentricism is really a debate about the politics of race. The issue is not that the media is eurocentric but whether or not the methods and means of reflecting the contemporary South African situation are part of a residual structure of racism. This approach enables us to identify and focus on specifics and then to deal with them concertedly. For example, if South Africa is dominated by a eurocentric tradition, it is

highly likely that this tradition has assumed a South African character. This character is highly likely to have been shaped in part by the black response to white racism. So, the manifestation of racism in South Africa may be different from its manifestation in another country. Not to recognise this is to deny agency to black South Africans in shaping white attitudes to them. The resulting shape of South African racism will not necessarily be eurocentric, whatever that means.

It has been suggested that we may need to establish a commission on race. Perhaps. But what is the Human Rights Commission doing? Would such an issue not be part of their mandate which may perhaps require greater accentuation? Certainly, we should not establish a commission on the media. Such a body would not be able to recommend legislation or controls on how the human mind receives social and conceptual data and processes them into a journalistic report. We cannot tell journalists how and what to write about in their reports; we can only respond to their writings. If they want to continue to sell copy and strike a cord in their readers, they will take note of what we say. If not, their newspapers will simply disappear. Black readers and consumers, I suspect, are growing in numbers all the time and will continue to make some demands.

So whereto eurocentricism and afrocentricism? I suggest that we substitute the full reality of national development for the simplifications of labels. The former enhances intellectual development; the latter kills it.

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