

Over the past few years, the student scene in South Africa has reflected a significant shift away from idle rhetoric; however student action in South Africa remains disturbingly inchoate and of sub-optimal effect. This is frequently attributed to, and, 'tis a well-worn phrase "a lack of commitment" and its immediate consequence - a lack of organization energy.

Now we all know, in a loose sort of intuitive way, that the level of commitment amongst students is a problem. But it has become clear to me that there exists a logically, and practically, prior problem - and that is "commitment to what?" Before student leaders can undertake programmes of one sort or another to increase the level of commitment amongst their student bodies, they must be clear in their own minds about what they hope to achieve. In other words, the task that we face at this seminar is, above all, to work towards a more or less total consensus: firstly on what we mean by meaningful social change, and secondly, on the avenues we are going to use to promote this process of change.

Obviously, all of this is simply too much to derive from one paper at one seminar. It is probably too much for one seminar devoted exclusively to that task. All that I hope for from this paper then, is to contribute to a discussion geared towards a crystallisation of purpose and of method. I imagine that we would all agree that student action remains to a large extent bedevilled by what may be called "action for actions's sake", without any clear perception of its long-term setting, or for that matter, its short-term consequences. Too many choices have been made on an ad hoc basis, amidst a welter of ideological confusion.

THE GOAL

At this stage, I want to make a superficial statement about what kind of society we should be working towards. It is not original and I will not dwell on it - but it is obviously important that we indicate agreement or clarify disagreement. The envisaged society is based on total equality of opportunity, on equal distribution of wealth, on equal participation in governmental and executive process. In short, the state and judiciary will function to ensure personal freedom within a context of equality, and not, as at present, to preserve economic and political dominance of one group over another.

Two aspects of this are worth singling out. In the first place, the notion of equality of opportunity must be grounded on equality of resources. That is, one does not achieve "meaningful change" merely by liberalising the super structure of legislation, custom and current expenditure by the state. One has first to effect a reallocation of the constituent elements of the present imbalance of wealth. Only then does "equality of opportunity" cease to be a liberal myth.

Secondly we must not presume that our present vision of a democratic South Africa is necessarily the desirable one. Thus we must always guard against becoming reactionary agents of what may well prove to be an alien form of government - Westminster.

This is Africa. It must generate its own form. Our efforts must be correspondingly flexible.

THE WHITE GROUP - WHITE POWER

Probably the most salient point to emerge from this brief discussion of goals is, ironically, not what we are aiming at, but what we are trying to depart from. This, of course, is the fact of white power. The white group retains a virtual monopoly of political, economic and military power in South Africa. Whatever we may like to think, and whatever its potential may be, black power is not, at present, such a fact.

And so I state a fundamental premise; student action in South Africa cannot ignore either the fact of white power or its response to pressures for change.

It may well be that you will decide not to direct your efforts explicitly to that group; nevertheless you will have to recognise its presence. Furthermore, you must recognise that whatever you do, whatever projects undertaken, there will be some throw-back, some repercussions in the white group.

THE TOTALITY - BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND WHITE CONSCIOUSNESS

If challenged, the argument I would fall back on would be that of the totality. This is not a philosophical abstract but an essential tool for real political analysis. By totality I mean simply that all aspects of society, both structural and historical, are inter-related. Black consciousness, for instance, cannot meaningfully be viewed as an isolated or esoteric development. It is a response to a structure of white domination. It impinges on the white group; in turn its peculiar form is affected by the white response to it.

I hope that you will not dismiss all this as a quasi-intellectual brag. I am concerned to sketch in a very real and very basic orientation for a primary decision that we must make.

Do we work with black groups?

OR

Do we work with white groups?

I will consider each alternative in turn.

Firstly, do we work amongst blacks?

In answering this, we must distinguish immediately between what is ideologically desirable and what is in reality feasible.

Ideally, of course, the restoration to organised articulateness of the black people of South Africa, should be the sole province of the blacks themselves.

However, the present scale of repression by the state of blacks who embark on this, throws the question open as to whether or not other groups have a valid role to play.

I believe that our involvement is, at present, justifiable, if it is responsible and flexible. With its emphasis on promoting black self-reliance as a function of black initiative, it is also correctly motivated.

Secondly, do we work with whites?

Let me state immediately that I do not see the white community as a generative source for change. Whites are not voluntarily going to relinquish their artificially high standard of living. A new society in South Africa will be born only on the consolidated behest of the blacks.

Nonetheless, and I repeat an earlier remark, the white response to that behest is a crucial factor in regard to the nature of that new society and also, of course, in regard to the nature of transition phase. This is simply and crudely a question of power in politics. Two questions follow: firstly, what kind of white response do we want to see? Secondly, can we as white students play any substantial part in affecting that response?

1. WHAT KIND

In the first response base hold sway, and cling to the. This is the unpredictable favourable to

In the second developments I want to in mean? Let just as black identification consciousness the oppressor

It means to and prejudice necessity of

White consciousness mean in South out of elite situation is

White consciousness white and the rejection of rejection in integration. It reflects protest, but

What do we term it is of parity, knowledge of a completely is a rather

In the short initiative necessity as far as present

It is important white consciousness with black. The latter exploitative a more subtle

We have real party politics of the so-called consciousness white group arena condition solidarity.

rts explicitly
presence.
ver projects
ns in the white

1. WHAT KIND OF RESPONSE?

In the first place, we are faced with two basic possibilities: a response based on unreason; here fear, suspicion, ignorance and prejudice hold sway, and the result will more than likely be a primitive attempt to cling to the Traditional Way Of Life through the medium of violence. This is the politics of naked confrontation. Its outcome is unpredictable; given the present balance of forces it is unlikely to be favourable to the creation of a humane social order.

nat of the
ential tool
at all
er-related.
iewed as an
tructure of
its peculiar

In the second place; a response based on reason. Here the possible developments are rather more complex and sophisticated. As a yard-stick I want to introduce the notion of White Consciousness. What does this mean? Let me answer it like this. Just as black consciousness refers to a multi-level process of identification of the self, (the black self), as the oppressed, so white consciousness refers to a multi-level process of self-identification as the oppressor.

actual brag.
itation for

It means to know what whiteness is, to know the origins of inequality and prejudice; it means to know the need for change and to know the necessity of black unity and solidarity as a means to change.

White consciousness is the realisation of what 'whiteness' has come to mean in South Africa. Whiteness is in fact the unconscious living out of elitism, consumerism and an unquestioning acceptance that the situation is as it is because it ought to be so.

that is

White consciousness goes beyond the initial identification of oneself as white and therefore part of the oppressor group. It embodies the rejection of the symbols of whiteness, and the translation of that rejection into meaningful action. White consciousness means the integration of an ideological standpoint with a way of life. As such it reflects a crucial departure from white liberalism, which idly mouths protest, but continues to live out the material fruits of exploitation.

ness of the
the blacks

What do we hope to achieve through white consciousness? In the long term it is to create a just social order through the fusion, on a basis of parity, of black consciousness and white consciousness, where knowledge of a past self is negated, (a positive process), to produce a completely open society free from domination and exploitation. But this is a rather distant prospect.

icks who
it other

lf it is
lack self-
ctly motivated.

In the short term, white consciousness means the realisation that the initiative for change lies in black hands. The role of whites is of necessity a secondary and supportive one, enabling and facilitating as far as possible the promotion of black organisation. This amounts to a transfer of resources - informational and financial - which are at present largely a white monopoly.

ty as a
oing to
w society
of the

It is important at this stage to make a crucial distinction - between white consciousness and liberalism. The former is geared, in conjunction with black consciousness, towards a radical restructuring of society. The latter seeks to eliminate only the harshest edges of oppression and exploitation, but preserves the hard core of inequality. It is in fact a more subtle form of white domination and repression.

nse to that
ew society
hase. This
questions
see?
in affecting

We have ready examples of a "liberal" orientation of this kind in the party political fabric in South Africa, and more recently in the emergence of the so-called era of "verligtheid". It can be argued that white consciousness should aim at the generation of "enlightenment" amongst the white group, which in turn would engender a flexibility in the political arena conducive to the uninhibited and unrestricted growth of black solidarity.

If this argument is accepted, the immediate implication is that white students should work within the white group to promote this type of flexibility. However there is a very real danger implicit in this argument. It is that this type of flexibility is likely to produce minor concessions. The effect of these could be to lull blacks into a false impression that real change is occurring or imminent. This would result in an increasingly difficult task for black organisers, and it could result in a dilution of the thrust for change, primarily because the main issues will become confused and better disguised.

Real change does not lie in the creation of a relatively privileged black bourgeoisie, functioning as a buffer-zone between the true elites (whites), and truly dispossessed, (the majority of blacks). We must recognise clearly that this possibility is latent in a partial liberalising of the white power structure.

To sum up this section: the kind of response that is desirable from whites is that of fully articulated and implemented white consciousness. What is not desirable is that a number of liberals, who retain a vested interest in the status quo, should pop up here and there - to win minor and confusing concessions from a government apparently resolved not to relinquish power.

We must now consider the second part of the question; do we work with whites? That is, can we as white students conscientize whites to the level of a radical commitment to change?

Clearly, the majority of whites are not accessible to such a programme. The average suburban property-owner will simply not be persuaded that he should work towards sharing the wealth he presently monopolises. It seems then that we must take an unequivocal stand not to undertake blanket 'awareness campaigns' amongst the white public in general. If we cannot produce radicals then we must not opt for second best and hope to produce a pocketful of irrelevant liberals. The argument "Any enlightenment is better than none" may sound appealing; it is however flawed. 'Enlightenment' all too often is no more than a euphemism for 'Modernised Domination'. The perils of this I have sketched out above.

But there is another important factor. It relates to our own resources for the mounting of 'awareness promoting' programs. These are scarcely abundant. We must ensure that, if employed at all, they achieve maximum effect. It is our responsibility therefore to seek out and select groups on whom such programs can be expected to have a truly radicalising effect. These groups will obviously consist of those whites who for one reason or another are not bound, through vested interest, into the status quo. I can think of not better a starting point than the student group itself.

To conclude: I have offered this paper with the aim of providing the beginnings of a framework for assessing proposals for action in the white group. At all times we must be absolutely clear about what we hope to achieve, why we hope to achieve it, and precisely how we intend to do so.

Above all else, our criterion must be long term effectiveness in relation to real change in South Africa, and not a short term personal and moral satisfaction.

KAREL TIP

1st December, 1973.