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South Africa: The Re-Education of the Nation

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OPINION

The statement by Afrikaner author, Anneli Botes, that one group that she still does not see as 'black people', reveals a deeper malaise that continues to permeate the post-apartheid psyche among certain sectors of South African society,' writes Tim Murithi.

The statement by Afrikaner author, Anneli Botes, that one group that she still does not see as 'black people', reveals a deeper malaise that continues to permeate the post-apartheid psyche among certain sectors of our society. To dismiss these views as the isolated marginal views of a 'few' misguided individuals, would be the loss of an opportunity to critically engage with the wider issue of how to overcome the in-built and internalized prejudices that the apartheid regime carefully cultivated over decades.

Is it necessary for us to begin a dialogue on how South African society can re-educate and wean itself away from the distorted, and still entrenched, conceptual framework at the core of a carefully devised programme of institutionalised racism which was long sanctioned by the judicial and law enforcement system for 46 years (1948 to 1994) - and a half centuries (1652 to 1994) depending on your historical point of departure.

Botes was reported to have said that in her 'daily life there's no one else that I feel threatened by except black people. If a courier comes to my door and he's white, Coloured or Indian, I'd have no problem inviting him in for a glass of water. But I would feel threatened by a black man' (Author stands by racist comments, Mail and Guardian, 2 December 2010). She further added that she would never appoint a black gardener. In her view the 'fast-track crime' in South Africa is black. To categorise 'all' black people in this manner is clearly and unjust to the masses of so-called black people who are getting on with their lives by working diligently to build a new South Africa.

Botes and her husband are planning to move to England as soon as he goes on permatourism. Paradoxically, Botes will discover that black people are everywhere in England, including the House of Lords where a black man is a Conservative peer of the realm. How would we cope if the Queen invited her to tea and she came across this black Lord? But this is digression.

The fact that Botes claimed that she had received 1,000 emails supporting her comments is the more important issue that needs to be addressed. Given Botes' predilection to truth-telling perhaps there is a basis for believing this claim and concluding that her views are much more widespread than society is prepared to accept. But should we really be surprised by this?

Apartheid was one of the most devious mind-altering systems ever devised by a group of human beings to subjugate, subordinate, marginalise and exclude another group of people. At the core of this brutal psychic experiment was race socialisation. So-called white people were systematically taught how to be racists through race socialisation. The objective of race socialisation in the apartheid construct was to programme superior self-pride among white people, to entrench white supremacy and to falsely inflate their sense of self-worth. On the opposite side of the coin was a systematic programme by apartheid to malign the so-called black people.

black people by casting them as sub-human, primitive, lazy, promiscuous, untrustworthy, violent, with a propensity towards crime.

This apartheid construct sought to impose black inferiority as an acceptable worldview which would then make their segregation in dilapidated townships and shanty towns (the social ills that this generated including ironically criminality) an acceptable thing for an apartheid government to do to 'them'. This system sought to foster a lack of self-worth and constrained black peoples opportunities for self-expression and creativity.

Apartheid's mind-altering deviousness was in fostering race identities based on one's perception that she or he shares a common heritage with a particular racial group, so-called 'whites', and not with others such as so-called 'blacks'. These sentiments are widespread and very much alive in today's South Africa, given the evidence for example from the IJR Reconciliation Barometer which shows that while there has been some of racial integration, there is still a long way to go for the country's citizens to genuinely interact with each other. Apartheid instilled a racial prism into all those who it came in contact with, and may have a lasting effect on their offspring.

Botes is merely articulating what the apartheid framework had intended for her feelings and express about black people and their propensity to criminality. She was subjected to apartheid's mind-altering system and has not been able to emancipate herself from its distorted views. So we should not be surprised by her pronouncements, they are mere echoes of apartheid. These sentiments are also much more deeply engrained in the minds of a significant number of South Africans who lived under apartheid, as well as those who have experienced its legacy and who have continued to hold onto these distorted worldviews.

To assume that the elections of 1994 and the subsequent call to reconciliation would heal these distorted minds, is to fail to understand the psychological damage that was wrought by the apartheid system. Individuals who hold these views will not heal the way they view their fellow human beings, unless they make a concerted effort to do so. Similarly, individuals who continue to sustain an inferiority complex also have to engage in a process of re-education and self-healing. This is easier said than done.

South African's who consider themselves highly educated and literate may also be held on to these views due to their racial socialisation. Many would argue that they have overcome the effects of apartheid and that they get along with all race groups. They pretend that there are no race groups only one human race. Unfortunately, there are those that are too intellectually smug to have even considered interrogating how their current core beliefs were shaped by apartheid. In the last 17 years, others have not bothered to critically question how the racial socialisation programmes altered their perception of reality and instilled an insidious racial prism into their psyches. There the racial prism remains as the ghost of apartheid wrings its hands in merriment at how it has subjugated the minds and souls of those who were exposed to it.

This is why the re-education of SA, 17 years after so-called liberation, is vital. The full attributes of freedom might be evident and embodied in the country's Constitution, but the psychological chains of apartheid's racial prism still imprison and detain a substantial number of those who live in South Africa. The physical, emotional and mental imbalances created by the legacy of apartheid are still with us and will be with us for several decades to come.

The psycho-cognitive effects of apartheid can only be healed by a systematic programme of re-education complimented with an orientation to forgiving oneself, one's community and one's country for what was perpetuated on the victims of history. Re-education however cannot be forced or coerced, it has to be entered into voluntarily.

While some of these debates have been confined to the lecture halls of academia and seminar rooms of think tanks, it is now time to have a full-blown national dialogue at which all citizens in SA can effectively re-educate and 're-programme' themselves about the essential humanity of all people, despite the bad things that certain people do.

On the question of how to deal with the malignancy of racism in South Africa, one of the best responses clearly has to be a concerted effort to re-educate all those affected. In particular, in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Clearly, the first line of engagement is at the level of primary, secondary and tertiary education. It is vital to prevent future generations of South Africans from internalising and endorsing the views of their parents. We cannot assume that children and the youth will not adopt certain views, particularly when for the first few formative years of their lives they are exposed to race socialisation.

The second line of engagement is at the local neighbourhood and community level. Progressive individuals can invite their neighbours to engage with these issues and necessary bring in a professional counsellor to assist them with working through some of these issues. The third line of engagement has to be at the work place, in government unions, the private sector, civil society organisations and ecumenical groups. To a certain extent these organisations may already have begun the process of such a re-education albeit under the guise of terms such as 'transformation', 'diversity training' or racial dialogue. Government and business recognise that the legacy of apartheid is still evident in the place in terms of race relations.

Ultimately, terms such as 'white', 'black', 'race' have to be eliminated because there is only one human race. However, given 46 years of deeply debilitating institutionalised racism, these terms will not be eliminated from the discourse among South Africa's citizens. The racial prism will continue to determine how the majority of SA's citizens view each other for quite some time to come, perhaps for the next 46 years. It will continue to be evident in discourses about violent crime, social segregation, civil unrest and the misplaced sense of entitlement across all sections of the country.

The racial prism will also compel individuals like Botes, and those who share her view, to continue to articulate a racial paranoia which will ultimately do more harm than good in the building of a new South Africa. In the absence of a concerted national effort to effect re-education and healing the distorted views of the past, there will continue to be serious political imbalances, eruptions and disruptions in the country, in the same way that a body reacts to an infection or inflammation. The aspiration to achieve so-called 'non-racialism', however, is not a pipe dream and can be achieved but only if there is a concerted and wide-spread effort by individuals to re-educate themselves to transcend apartheid's racial prism.

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