

Power over—power shared

ALAN BOESAK

Dr Boesak is a member of the staff of the University of the Western Cape. This is an extract from his address to the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Labour Party of South Africa

IT is no longer possible, nor wise, to ignore or try to avoid the fact that black consciousness and black power have come to stay — at least for the foreseeable future, and I am convinced that history shall reveal their decisive influence on South African politics.

Politics in South Africa have reached a decisive moment. The country and its politicians are forced to face a new reality in which the old slogans and old policies are unmasked as impotent and inadequate, and new policies, if they do not take cognisance of Black aspirations, are rejected as fraudulent and irrelevant.

The word 'power' is a contaminated word in our society. Lord Acton's dictum: 'All power corrupts, and all absolute power corrupts absolutely' is still largely determinative for the understanding of power in western society. This is partly due to the fact that in western society 'power' is always acknowledged by the seriousness of the threat, the amount of money or the destructiveness of the violence it constitutes or represents. While not disclaiming the element of truth in all of this, we must not succumb to the temptation of denouncing power as such and thereby, leaving it to the devil.

Power can never exist on its own. It has to do with people, with concrete relations in the world. It has to do with persons who can, and ought to respond, to one another.

Many people see power as the ability to force one's will on others, or the ability to confine others to a certain pattern of behaviour. These definitions take as point of departure a concept of *power-over-others*, which is essentially an estranged power. Over against that is *power shared with others*, which means that power is not an alienated force, but a service to others. To me, this is genuine power.

Power-over-others manifests itself in three areas: first there is ideological power, which is the power to impose one's ideas on others. That is the kind of power we see in the SABC, for instance. Then there is remunerative power — the power of the economy, being able to manipulate others because they are financially dependent on you. Then there is punitive power: the power to destroy, force, violence, the 'power' of the gun.

For me, power is the concentration of ability. The ability to be, to control, to participate in control, to create. To lead (ie to rule) is another kind of service than to follow, but the difference is not in domination or force, for both are service, both are reciprocal, control and authority.

Power must be understood as an inward and outward reality. For power as power-over-others to work, some kind of basic submissiveness to the power-wielder is necessary. Whenever this submissiveness is present, it means that there is a certain alienation with regard to oneself.

The basis of this power-over-others relation is dependency. But it is still a *relation*. If one substituted the element of dependency with the ability to create one's own resources, or with the creative use of the resources one has, the power-over pattern is broken. If you can think for yourself, half the battle is won. This means that the one 'in power' is as much dependent on you as you are on him. If you can make creative use of this situation you can break the power-over pattern.

Likewise, if one has the power to substitute the fear for the violence of the power-wielder with courage and determination rooted in self-determination and self-respect, this power-over relation no longer exists.

This self-identification is the inner reality of power. It is there that real power begins. It is the courage to be human, the courage and determination to affirm one's human dignity. And this is essential for every normal human being. But this courage to be must inevitably lead to the rejection of structures that make human life impossible. It seeks to transform these structures to accommodate its search for human fulfilment and wholeness. These two sides cannot be divorced. Although self-identification is the indispensable pre-condition for human freedom, it cannot survive without the other: the practical, action-orientated manifestation of this realization.

To share power and to share in power is to be fully human. It means to be able to *be*, to live in accordance with one's Godgiven purpose. To be denied this means to be degraded to the level of sub-humanity.

Sharing in power enables human beings to become the subject of their own humanity — to assume responsibility, to act and in acting to

realize their own humanity and that of others, Now when you've said all this, and you believe it, and you act accordingly, and you are black, then you've got Black Power.

Power is service to others, and in serving justice, power is at its very best. It is the ability to realize one's humanity as much as God has affirmed it in liberating people to be truly human, in making the world not a chaos, but a place to live in. Realizing this in our South African context is the exacting, but sublime task of Black Power.

Black Power is the answer to the white power structure, the answer to racism, degradation, humiliation, exploitation and alienation. It is the discovery that there is no innocent way of going through life. It is learning to discern what matters.

Black Power realizes that the race problem is essentially a white problem. But at the same time it is also a black problem: the strongest ally of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.

White power is not extraordinary or unusual and it has nothing of the mythological divinity or sacred sanction some whites claim for it, most whites believing and all whites enjoying the fruits of. Whenever a number of persons within a society have enjoyed for a considerable period of time certain opportunities for getting wealth, for exercising power and authority, and for successfully claiming prestige and social deference, there is a strong tendency for these people to feel that these benefits are theirs *by right*.

Now if this happens within a society where a special significance is attached to the colour of one's skin and where colour of skin also generally designates the rich and the poor, the privileged and the under-privileged, racism becomes a reality. It is *vis-a-vis* this reality that we should understand the concept of Black Power.

For black South Africans, the white power structure is manifested in apartheid. Whatever grandiloquent ideal this ideology may represent for some white people, for blacks it means bad housing, being underpaid, pass laws, influx control, migrant labour, group areas, resettlement, inequality before the law, fear, intimidation, white bosses and black informers, condescension and paternalism; in a word, black powerlessness.

The white power structure represents full control by whites over the instruments of power and over the major resources of the country. It represents an unending spiral of violence inherent to the apartheid system. We must realize that although apartheid has developed into a most formidable system, it has no mystical power of its own. It was designed, carefully planned, and is being executed ruthlessly by people — white people. Therefore it can be changed by people committed to gaining freedom for all who live in this country.

In this regard the issue of violence comes up. Although the last word is not spoken about this subject, I want to say this: one must be careful not to romanticise violence, and those in power must remember that it cannot be the 'solution' to every problem that arises as a result of the policies they themselves so blindly pursue. I do not believe that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. It would be wise to remember that violence, once unleashed, acquires an autonomy of its own of which the inseparable twin is escalation.

Whereas I do not deny that a situation may arise where retaliatory violence is forced upon people and no other avenue is left open to them, I do so with a clear hesitancy, knowing full well that it will probably prove a poor solution and that violence as such is never 'justified'. While saying this we must recognise that South Africa is a violent society, with violent laws defended by violence. As long as we have apartheid, we will have violence.

I believe that black solidarity and black humanity are the creative preconditions for a genuine future for all of us. Black divisiveness only perpetuates the system and obvious inability of whites to bring about meaningful change. It is through black determination and the willingness to suffer that blacks have shown whites just how iniquitous the South African way of life is. This does not mean that we will have no relation at all. It does mean, however, that for the first time we will have a meaningful relationship.

For we live in this country, black and white, and ultimately we belong together. And we must learn, as Martin Luther King has said 'to live together as brothers, or we shall perish together as fools.'

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