



# “A TRAGIC MISUNDERSTANDING”

A reply to Mrs. Fatima Meer's critique of the the SPRO-CAS Social Commission report: *Towards Social Change*; and some observations on the approach to change in South Africa.

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From the point of view of anyone who sincerely desires a change toward a less unjust society in South Africa, the situation at present must appear very grave. There is little encouragement or even consolation to be found in most of the trends occurring among Whites and in White politics. No firm evidence is available to suggest that the ranks of those Whites who support even a qualified franchise for Blacks are becoming significantly enlarged. The slight changes in race relations which have occurred have been mere tokens very largely, and thus far improvements in the occupational position of Blacks have not afforded them any greater power or influence. These discouraging features exist despite the fact that spokesmen for Blacks, the English-language press and White liberals have persisted doggedly in their eloquent pleas and demands for a "change of heart" among Whites. Racial injustice in South Africa has been forcefully condemned time and again by the most prestigious local and international bodies and individuals. Very broadly, the effect of all this appears to have been to force the rulers of South Africa into formulating more subtle and sometimes more plausible justifications for present policies, but very little else. While we may be determined to persist in our public stand for racial justice, I doubt whether many of us are optimistic about the prospect for significant changes in the meaningfully near future, if things continue as they are.

Precisely for these reasons it seems critically necessary for everyone sincerely desiring change in South Africa to make an open-minded appraisal of all serious attempts to formulate more effective strategies for change, and of the analyses on which such strategies might be based. It would seem that Mrs. Meer has not given the SPRO-CAS Report, *Towards Social Change* its due in this regard.

Reactions like those of Mrs. Meer are not unexpected. In some ways the report deviates significantly from what has almost become a tradition of liberal thinking and protest in South Africa. Such new features, however, stemmed from the determination of the Commissioners to find a basis for

constructive and practical strategies for change, and were not guided by undue caution or by any intention to compromise. Mrs. Meer's critique deserves careful attention because, in some ways, it is probably fairly typical of the reactions of some others. In order to understand Mrs. Meer's obvious hostility to the report, one has to look carefully at the assumptions on which her critique is based.

## MORAL TERMS

Firstly, one of Mrs. Meer's assumptions appears to be that the actions of Whites in South Africa have to be understood in moral terms and that any report which does not have the

clear ring of moral condemnation of White motives interwoven with the analysis makes of the authors "apologists", persons seeking to vindicate White guilt and White responsibility for the existing 'immoral', 'un-Christian' South African Society" (Mrs. Meer p.5 2nd Column). The members of the Social Commission undertook the work primarily because they abhor and detest the injustice and immorality of the situation in South Africa. While this was their guiding motive, they considered it necessary, as social scientists, to retain objectivity in their analysis of the situation. The members of the Commission considered that a dispassionate analysis would best serve their motives, which, I am sure, are identical with those of Mrs. Meer. The renowned American political scientist, Seymour Martin Lipset, writing with Earl Raab, in a definitive analysis of extremist right-wing racialist movements in America, arrives at the following penetrating conclusion – "The critical ranks in extremist movements are not composed of evil-structured types called 'extremists', but rather of ordinary people caught in certain kinds of stress" (*The Politics of Unreason*, Heinemann, 1971, p. 484). Our conclusion in regard to White South Africans, while not exactly similar in content, is similar in moral tone. Would Mrs. Meer have wished us to sacrifice what was at least an attempt at an honest analysis of what we clearly proclaimed to be an immoral situation in order to overstate our moral credentials? As Mrs. Meer concedes, the report provides a full documentation of the objective facts of inequality and injustice in the South African situation.

A second and related assumption which appears from the critique, is that the first and fundamental task of the Social Commission was to state the ideals of justice and proclaim the nature of a just society – in Mrs. Meer's own words, to "propose change . . ." There were times when all the members of the Social Commission probably wished that they could dispense with their task so lightly.

It requires no great insight to realise that Blacks in South Africa need the vote. Universal franchise would transform South African society. So, probably, would trade-union rights for Africans. It would have taken the Social Commission no more than one or two brief meetings to agree at least that Blacks should have elected representatives in parliament, and that such representation should be proportionate to the numbers represented in all groups. Once having stated this, the Social Commission would have achieved no more (or less) than to state a fact which many people know but which very few accept. Speaking for myself, if I had felt that stating the ideal of Universal franchise would encourage more than an insignificant number of Whites to change their intentions, I would have pressed for its being given greater prominence in the report. As it stands, the report states quite clearly that a universal franchise for Blacks could probably be effective in safeguarding justice in South Africa (p. 48). The gist of the discussion in the report is that Universal Franchise would be an *essential* but possibly not a sufficient condition for the safeguarding of justice in South Africa.

If this was not given greater prominence it was only because merely stating it would not have been central to the purpose of the Social Commission. The Commission was aware of the problem that Whites are unlikely, of themselves, to concede franchise and Trade Union rights to Africans and other Blacks. Furthermore, Blacks for a variety of reasons external to themselves, are in no position to press effectively for these rights. The Commission saw its purpose as being to analyse precisely this "impasse", as a basis for strategies to help overcome these problems. It was felt that it was at this level that the Social Commission could provide most useful insights.

## UNIVERSAL FRANCHISE

In the context of South Africa, the granting of Universal Franchise will mark a significant victory for justice. It is not the means whereby this victory will be gained. In view of the repressive and intolerant political climate, franchise reforms will probably only be won when Blacks are able to bargain effectively with Whites for a share of legal and material privilege. Our task lies in working for the pre-conditions of this type of influence and bargaining power. To state the undoubtedly important goal of an unqualified Universal Franchise was, for our purposes, in the nature of a side issue.

A third assumption in the critique, and one that is distressingly prevalent in South African thinking on the race issue, is that race discrimination somehow explains itself. In Mrs. Meer's words the South African situation is to be understood mainly in terms of a "peculiar race prejudice" (p. 6 Column 2). Not only is the word "peculiar" so general as to be meaningless, but the implication of this is that the problem of the South African Whites is primarily that of a deviant and prejudiced average personality structure. This is a most inadequate explanation since there is no particular reason why Whites in South Africa should be abnormal people "by nature" – unless, of course, one moves to the ultimate futility of offering a racist explanation.

## OBVIOUS CONCLUSION

These considerations, and others, led the Commission to the rather obvious conclusion that factors in the social structure of our society and in group processes give racial differences the particular connotation which they have in South Africa (and most places elsewhere, for that matter). The Commission's findings do not by any means represent a final statement on the nature of South African society. A great deal of careful analysis yet remains to be done, particularly in the area of values and concepts of identity among Whites. However, the report does analyse and present two very important factors which, operating in conjunction with perceptions of racial and cultural differences, relate to the inter-group tensions and discrimination against Blacks in South Africa. One factor is that of White fears of loss of identity and loss of status if Blacks were to achieve power. The other factor is stated in two alternative ways – a process of *class-conflict*, on the one hand, or as a process typical of the *pluralism* found in exploitative colonial societies, on the other. Essentially, what we set out to show in the analysis, was that the patterns of race discrimination in South Africa accord well with and are constantly and in myriad ways reinforced by the material interests of Whites and their leaders. Whites have an obvious interest in maintaining their abnormally high levels of material wealth and can only do so by means of the systematic exploitation of Black labour and by the repressive control of Black political and labour organisation. Class is seen as a *process* which necessitates the maintenance of colour-discrimination, including the discriminatory treatment of members of the Black middle status groups.

Mrs. Meer's difficulties with our class model are of her own making, I'm afraid. She does not see class conflict as a process interwoven with other processes, which can change in form and nuance. She sees it more statically as referring to two distinct social groups and then encounters the obvious difficulty of not knowing where to put the well-educated and more prosperous Blacks. She also appears to confuse class and social status or social prestige, despite the fact that the distinction is clearly stated in the report. When she says that social class is "respectable" in the eyes of most people she is referring to the gradations of prestige or status

honour found in all societies. An explanation of South African society in these terms possibly would be white-washing the system. This could hardly be true of an explanation in terms of the process of marked class exploitation, of which people all over the Western world have very recent and bitter memories.

#### **BLACKS' RESPONSE**

In parenthesis, let me add a personal comment to the effect that it is entirely appropriate that Blacks should respond to *their own* situation in South Africa in racial terms, since a rigid pattern of caste-like colour distinctions has been the outcome of the various processes which maintain inequality in the society. As a basis for action the Black actors' definition of the situation as they experience it, is valid. Therefore, Black consciousness movements can be a totally authentic expression of a shared awareness of racial discrimination. A rationale for such movements based purely on race differences would not, however, suffice as an explanation of the *total* situation in South Africa.

Many other points made by Mrs. Meer are debatable, but one in particular deserves close scrutiny. She asserts that the members of the Social Commission concluded that Blacks are incapable of participating in a common democracy (p. 7 Final Paragraph). This is either a tragic misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation. The Social Commission makes it quite clear that the Blacks are atomised and ill-organised, relative to the requirements of the situation, precisely because of the repressive political climate and because of other factors relating, not to their "nature" as Blacks, but to the social, political and economic circumstances under which they are forced to live. Mrs. Meer concedes this by stating (p. 6, 1st Column) that ". . . . . Blacks have never had the organisational strength in the past, and are not likely to muster one in the foreseeable future to overthrow White power". It is the potential organisational strength of Blacks which the Social Commission identifies as one of the crucial factors for change in South Africa. The attention given to the present lack of coherence and organisation

among Blacks is aimed at providing a basis for a consideration of ways and means of improving the situation. Speaking personally, how anyone could put a racist interpretation on this analysis is beyond me.

#### **CHANGING ATTITUDES**

**Mrs. Meer's comment about the impossibility of organised bargaining by Blacks in the foreseeable future amounts to a statement of utter despair. She appears to place all her hope in the possibility of changing White attitudes. Here she has much in common with many other opponents of the present system. While Mrs. Meer's views might very well be different, there is a great deal of thinking which would have it that activities for change should mainly consist of trenchant, morally-based protests aimed at making Whites feel so guilty as to change their evil ways. This approach might have paid dividends in other societies where Whites had less to lose, but in many ways is a waste of talent in South Africa.**

The Social Commission report as a whole certainly does not overlook action aimed at Whites and their attitudes. To a very large extent the analysis in Chapter 1 of the report is focused on providing the insights which are necessary as a basis for practical action among Whites which stands some chance of succeeding. Also, flowing from the analysis in the first chapter, a later section of the report concentrates to a large extent on those areas of White-controlled activity where changes can occur which are likely to result in an improvement in the morale of Blacks and which may open opportunities for organised action among Blacks.

Its focus is an analysis, not so much of the goals for a just society, but of factors relevant to social change in South Africa, as a basis for strategic practical action. I would hope that others will read the report carefully and without prejudice. □

DURBAN 5/5/72