COLOUR BARRIER Black Africa Redux

by

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A remark by Nelson Mandela at the time of the political deadlock over Iraq in the UN seemed out of character, too peremptory by half. He claimed that the United States President could not work with the UN because it was headed by Kofi Annan, a black man. In reading some of the notes I've made over the years about the extraordinary Nelson Mandela, I wondered if the surprise was entirely justified. Do tell me what you think. I begin with the Charlene Hunter-Galt interview of Nelson Mandela on PBS on the occasion of his release from Victor Verster Prison in 1990.

When asked how he handled his stay in prison Mr. Mandela asserted that he, along with fellow ANC cadres like Walter Sisulu and Dennis Goldberg, "insisted the authorities (i.e. their warders) stick to the regulations." I recall thinking how odd the comment sounded against the perceived background. Regulations? In the early sixties, in an ostensibly brutal, Nazi Fascist regime? Regulations? Yes, regulations. Despite Ms. Hunter-Galt's repeated invitation to spell out a list of atrocities, Mr. Mandela mentioned only the warders' sly manipulation of the regulations — seeing, for instance, that cells were sometimes 'coincidentally' watered down before routine body searches, the clothes, item by item then chucked on the soaked floors. But Mr. Mandela did not despair, in part because of his regard for, and belief in, South African prison regulations — a bit of historic evidence that tells one something about South African whites, in relation to the treatment of political outcasts in say Amin's Uganda or Mengistu's Ethiopia, where appeals to regulations were not uppermost in prisoners' minds.

There were of course sadistic racist Afrikaners and British whites in Africa who were charged with custodial abuse (as there were sadistic ethnocentric Brits who introduced whole Afrikaans' populations to the world's first modern concentration camps during the Boer War); yet in South Africa there also were regulations, in the Sixties, that blacks the stature of Nelson Mandela knew about in detail, and could over time stoically aver to and win respect. The unbidden fact is that astute terrorists like Mandela would have been summarily executed in many African states. In the heyday of the former Soviet Union — as a backer of the ANC — he would have vanished ages ago.

But comparative realities did not overly preoccupy the critics of South Africa at the time who saw its sin of apartheid as unparalleled (more about race-and-ethnic discrimination in a moment). The deference shown the victims of apartheid was at times fastidious. Michael Enright, on the CBC's historic As It Happens was even embarrassed to ask Dennis Goldberg about communist influence in the ANC. Indeed, it was almost an 'aside'. "What about the communist factor? 'Cause people ask the question." (Not because the question had pivotal, topical importance.) With polite condescension Mr. Goldberg replied, "Of course," then simply stressed the common cause against apartheid while saying nothing about current sympathies within the ANC, which Mr. Enright did not pursue.

As modern evils go, apartheid, the system of white rule in South Africa inspired unrivalled hatred. The late Prime Minster P.W. Botha was compared to Adolf Hitler. The Reverend Jesse Jackson said that Botha was "worse than Hitler". A sensitive and popular Canadian writer, the rarely avuncular Eric Nicol, put both Mr. Botha and Caligula in Hell, then had Caligula, in a moment of moral pique, tell Botha off. As inventively cruel as any of the roman Emperors, the willful Caligula was given thumbs up to the intransigent P.W.

The characterizations are grim indeed. Swift vengeful justice has éclat; protracted gritty change makes one see red. The demise of apartheid also presaged the very short moral attention span of Western liberals. The internecine warfare in black Africa got and gets little attention. And — at the time — barely a nod was given to the destabilizing tactics in North Korea, the incipient resurgence of the Khmer Rouge, and the endemic Arab-Persian infighting (which would blossom into the Iran-Iraq war). The Vietnamese Boat People got momentarily back in the news only when the reputedly callous Maggie Thatcher decided Britain could not accommodate a larger ethnic population. I suspect we never read much about the plight of the Burundis, for instance, because it was easier physically and ideologically to slip into places like South Africa or El Salvador. North American journalists are human, pressed by deadlines, infrequently heroic (despite the cant) — not unlike the rest of us. Far easier to cover a story in a relatively safe place that can be couched in strict moralistic terms — as it was in South Africa — where one might complaisantly downplay the economic dilemma posed by exclusive black rule. (Vide especially Zimbabwe today.)

The argument that American blacks manage very nicely as mayors, technicians and scholars, ignores the fact that American blacks have for years been part of a modern Western civilization — both its abstracted education, acquisitive culture, upward mobility and utilitarian habit of thought — as James Baldwin has said with such (often bitter) poignancy. Moreover, in South Africa, a black resembling most American blacks is usually called 'coloured' (of mixed race). He is, more often than not, a BASP — a Brown Ango-Saxon Protestant. The taunting phrase "The white man looks right out of your face!" speaks poignantly to those Americans who have emigrated to Africa for atavistic reasons. The largely ignored Bantu leaders (who resisted apartheid but shunned

communism) were long resented by the ANC, and still face a struggle in a government and economy that champions equality above freedom.

The other slighted character of South Africa was (and largely is) the ferocity and routine persistence of tribal violence. Indeed, some anthropologists claim that our 'violence', as applied to African folkways, is an ethnocentric aspersion. But was it so realistic to insist that a strong tribe (which the Afrikaners manifestly were) unconditionally give itself over to a loose association of tribes historically habituated to skirmishing, a fact that does not go away by appeals to clemency, equanimity, and the UN charter? It is unlikely the older white South African will forget the terror Mugabe's ZANU warriors in (then) Rhodesia, openly assisted by the World Council of Churches, inflicted on supporters of the Ian Smith government — especially the 'strategic pilgrims', those targeted moderate blacks who had portions of their faces cut off. It makes lurid reading, yet the deeds were ritualistically inflicted. Writes Erik V. Kuehnelt-Leddihn: "In 1978 Mrs. Chikombe Madzvidza was forced to roast and then eat parts of her husband's face. The German Lutheran Emergency Committee collected funds to finance cosmetic operations on these victims of WCC-sponsored terrorism (the Lutheran Church of Lippe-Detmold thereupon left that global organization.)"

Independent Zimbabwe is now a one party, if not one-man, government, and it deals harshly with its outspoken opponents — with spectacular impunity. It is difficult to describe the ongoing strife between the Shona ZANA majority and the Ndebele ZAPU minority as other than a tribal and, *pari passu*, racist struggle. The few remaining Zimbabwean whites, once about 370,000, were in 2002 about 50,000 and 'possibly much less' (Wikipedia). The Afrikaner must still view with great vigilance the skirmishing between the Bantus and Indians around Durban, also between Bantu tribes like the Xhosas and Zulus. For tribal

skirmishing is ageless in Africa— but mention of it is not part of the modern ideologue's lexicon. Yet the Afrikaner was expected to equanimously and democratically accept his lot and fate in the ongoing melée, which preceded and may still outlive him. That is the way of equality and democracy, the Western moralists say — invariably while enjoying a long-standing system of defendant jurisprudence that is so chaste and refined that even the most barbarous of plaintiffs can anticipate parole. Thus, while the West was rebuking the mindset of the dour stern Afrikaner, it is instructive to remember that many blacks were at the time of the Afrikaner's demise disfranchised elsewhere in Africa. At the end of the eighties, in Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Seychelles, Somalia and Namibia, most blacks had no democratic say in their black government. The apartheid South African government imperiously moved its black people around, but it was hardly unique. The Ivory coast kicked out several thousand Beninese in the 1960s, Ghana, about half-a-million 'aliens' in 1969. In the Seventies Uganda banished its 40,000 plus Asians (many of whom are now contributing handsomely to Canada's economy and culture, including a former next door neighbour of mine), and Zambia resettled well over 100,000 'undesirables'. (These and the following figures come from the Oxford Encyclopaedia of World History, and Peter Calvocoressi's book Independent Africa and the World.) Ethiopia had relocated over many years several million people, and Nigeria expelled about a million, sometimes using tear gas to hurry the departure. If South Africa arbitrarily detained several thousand blacks without trial, many times that number (in the same time frame) faced imprisonment and 're-education' in Ethiopia, Zaire and Tanzania. Mozambique and Angola today still court tribal hegemonies. When you add to the above the

frequent use of torture, you have a practiced tradition that must have made the most verkrampte South African policeman a little envious.

Yet punctilious Western standards were applied without stint. Gwynne Dyer referred to Nelson Mandela's "moral stature" while dismissing former Prime Minister Botha as a "rat" — at the time when the ANC, Mr. Mandela's organization, was still committed to ferociously eliminating servants and sympathizers of the Pretoria regime — both black and white. Is the atavistic black African leader to be forgiven his excesses simply because he did as his kin have done for centuries — according to his history, culture, and current tribal needs? While the Afrikaner, precisely because he was 'white', had to abide by the rules of democratic, urbane Westerners?

The fact that one's tribal identity is often as ingrained as skin pigment is largely overlooked by Western journalists and commentators who see only colour as the social impediment. If the Afrikaner had been brown, looked more like a Somali than a Bantu, yet retained his innate chauvinism and severe work ethic, it is doubtful there would have been a fuss at all. He might even be giving speeches at the UN denouncing US imperialism. He would surely be just another tribal member, and could do pretty much as he wished, much as some black African presidents-for-life did until very recently.

Similarly, the term neo-colonialism is often deployed as a form of moral coercion. Neo-colonialism customarily means dependence on capitalist countries — an unholy dependence that can be partly exorcised by securing more aid! The European colonialists undeniably left in great, and often irresponsible haste — witness the summary departure of the Belgians from the Belgian Congo (now Zaire). Except in India, European colonials generally neglected things like communications and the civil service. Yet neo-colonialism also exists in Africa in ways that are not flattering to Africans. After WW II, the

borders and institutions of the colonial powers were taken over by the presiding elites, who gave their populations little improvement. Even the once respected Julius Nyererre, a popular leader in Tanganyika and then Tanzania, remained dependent on extra-African relief. (Most of the newly independent African states were given over to the Marxist promise of industrialization to the detriment of agriculture.) And in many cases the rule of the neo-colonial rulers proved to be disastrous and far bloodier. Uganda and the Central African Republic are cases in point.

In his book Modern Times, British historian Paul Johnson's account of Idi Amin reads like something horror film maker David Cronenberg might have concocted. And yet, even while much of this horror was known, the Organization of African Unity (Nelson Mandela's organization, remember) elected Amin as its president, and all but three chiefs of state attended the summit conference Amin chaired in Kampala. When he arrived at the UN, he was given a standing ovation by the General Assembly, applauded throughout his stay, and the following day the UN secretary-general and the president of the General Assembly gave a public dinner in his honour. I dare say the dour and invidious Mr. Botha took note at the time. Mr. Dyer's 'rat'.

The sagas of Jean-Bedel Bokassa in the Central African Republic and Francisco Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea are as chilling as Amin's. (And totally forgotten today.) Black Africa has frequently perplexed European ideologues, for reasons which today's ideologues seem bent on revising, or simply ignoring.

But the question lingers: why was South Africa so rebuked — to the exclusion of say the Soviet Union, where ethnic discrimination in its higher echelons was at least as institutionalized as anything advanced in South Africa; in India, where remnants of a caste system still frustrate changes in attitudes as invincibly as any article of South African supremacy; to South and Central America, where a lighter skinned

'white' minority is often as exploitive of its Indian populations as any white farmer was in South Africa; to virtually any place in Africa itself where bitter tribal warfare and genocide often proceed hand in glove? Ask a Biafran or an Eritrean. Ask a Burundian where 20,000 (a conservative estimate) of his population were slaughtered in the mid eighties — a Sharpsville Massacre many many times over. The recent modern era is at least as bad. Again and again we run against the priority of the tribe, usually exacerbated by totem beliefs. Western industrialists have fomented some of the mischief, but Africans themselves share some of the blame. How cogent then is the argument that pigment alone was the main blight to harmony in South Africa? Cannot colour be a blind as well as a distinction? If Haile Mariam Mengistu's tribal folk (instigators of the Red Terror 1977-1988) had been light skinned people, might they also not be cast among the vermin?

Or could it be that the North American TV audience is so jaded it can intuitively smell blood, and those who cater to its viewing whim seek it out wherever it is least injurious to film? Did the disgust we felt at watching the South African sjambok in action (the style of billy club used by riot police) not also flatter homegrown resentment and impatience? Aren't North America's cherished dilemmas — from pornography to licentious behaviour — it's 'loveable' rogue preoccupations? Isn't Western hypocrisy, as the aphorism says, the tribute vice pays to virtue?

According to the late John Hutchinson, what the non-black South Africans feared most after black majority rule was "a swift shutdown of the international conscience, an easy transition from indignation to bemusement at brutality, boredom with constitutional government and due process, tolerance for body burning and genocide, and, as always, Western satisfaction with duty partly completed."

Bishop Desmond Tutu once threatened to remove himself and his

family from South Africa if the fratricide continued — the murder of blacks by blacks, Indians by blacks, and blacks by coloureds. He also said that Western leaders were racists, and all those who oppose sanctions were racists — including, presumably, Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Alan Paton, the author of Cry, the Beloved Country, neither of whom endorsed sanctions. Though he urged other black African states to improve their human rights records, he claimed there was no racial discrimination in black Africa, only human rights violations. One of the grand casuistries, if the one is somehow more heinous and reprehensible than the other. And not exactly true, given the physical variation and tribal exclusivity of many peoples in Africa.

At the time, many people were asking — again — what was the honourable Western role in Africa, and to what extent should Western governments resolutely see it through?

A historic case in point: Peter Gzowski's program, Morningside, on February 13, 1987, aired a letter from a person living in Burkina Faso (before 1984 the Republic of Upper Volta). The writer, Maya Lightbody, described an unpleasant means used to make a style of interlaced matting. The artisans had to work in a hole below ground where the humidity was suitable to make pliable the grass materials used. Ms. Lightbody found this hole appalling, and set about to improve matters. If her tribal folk once accepted their 'burden', the reader inferred from the letter that that day was gone forever: the weavers of Burkina Faso had apparently accepted Ms. Lightbody's disgust and assurance of the hole's wretchedness, though an acceptable alternate means of preparing the grass was not spelled out.

I had more than a twinge of sympathy for Nelson Mandela when I heard that letter. He must resent as much as any African — black Western sanctimony and revisionism. Although I did not for a moment doubt Ms. Lightbody was an exceptionally decent, caring and dedicated

individual, I did think her attitude that of a utilitarian apostle, who can indulge in patronage. For instance, wasn't the white South African presumption that the South African black was a primitive who lived and died in a simple hovel — in a veritable hole? It is just possible the Afrikaner would be doing much the same thing had he lived all his generations elsewhere in Africa where geography usually has the final, impervious say: progress may or may not be that inalienable.

Of course only a misanthrope might readily imagine the clock being turned back to permit the African black reassume traditional ways, especially when so many of the present African leaders themselves were educated in pleasant oases like The London School of Economics. Though in parts of Africa even today — like the more parched areas of the Sudan and Ethiopia — you cannot go 'back' much further without resurrecting a time when no one stalked the land. The history of progress is exceedingly sketchy in parts of Eritrea or Somalia, as it is in many of Africa's more demanding geographies (even without modern afflictions like AIDS).

But the ominous question won't go away: To what extent is the rest of the world responsible for any single country's internal political skirmishing or natural hardships? For better or worse, the traditional, 'primitive' person still in thrall to a largely xenophobic, orthodox, non secular culture, is ever patronized and condescended to by today's caring humanists and economic opportunists. In light of the fact the many attempts in the sixties of America's flower children to return to the land, to live the pure innocent communal life, were mostly embarrassing failures. Inclusive comfort seems here to stay. And it's infectious. Science and technology have given us unequaled power and seemingly boundless impertinence.

And part of that impertinence is to assume that brotherhood (i.e. kindness, generosity) can be somehow culture-less and ubiquitous. Those

enamoured with the comforts and security of Western welfare statism, but not necessarily the effort needed to sustain it, such as working longer when living longer, seem ever afflicted with a myopic view of history. It is that presumption of universal brotherhood which singles out Nelson Mandela for high praise (unlike say Armando Valladares — who spent an analogous period in Castro's prisons without later preferment or celebrity), and the stolid Afrikaner for ready contempt. May I submit that a more perfect protocol for intransigent resentment is hard to imagine.