

The Relevance of contemporary radical thought¹

The object of this paper is to discuss the relevance of 'contemporary radical thought' to the South African situation. The phrase 'contemporary radical thought' includes the ideologies of various issue-oriented movements such as 'Student Power', 'Black Power' and 'Women's Liberation' groups and also refers to recent developments in Marxist theory and in Christian thought. In political terms it finds expression in a number of parties situated well to the left of the orthodox Communist parties in the political spectrum.

Although among all these groups, currents and movements there are wide divergences as to tactics, there is an underlying unity of approach concerning immediate objectives and details of analysis. This lies in a common rejection of these patterns of human relations imposed upon people by the exigencies of modern capitalist societies. For example, the difference between the Black Power movement in the United States and previous Civil Rights movements does not consist only in a change of tactics and a greater willingness to use violence. A change in goals is also involved.

The desire is no longer to be accepted into white middle-class society, as though this were the peak of human attainment. The way in which whites treat blacks is seen as having [73] its roots in the way that whites treat one another; therefore what is aimed at now is the construction of a new kind of society with a different value-systems and a different culture, a better culture. In particular, this involves a rejection of the whites' assumption that they have the right to select the criteria of 'acceptability', 'responsibility', 'civilisation', or even beauty. Similarly, the Women's Liberation movement is not based merely on the idea that women are economically exploited by men, through getting lower wages at work, and not sharing properly in controlling the home budget. It is also argued that in the present system the whole nature of the woman-man relationship is vitiated by stereotyped role-play patterns which destroy the spontaneity of relationships.

¹ *The Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid South Africa* (SPRO-CAS) General Editor: Peter Randall. *Directions of Change in South African Politics* - Occasional Publication No. 3. Johannesburg 1971.

While this is more damaging to the woman, it nevertheless damages the man also.

I shall briefly sketch the theoretical basis for this critique which is based on a particular analysis of the nature of human beings. Ethical concepts such as 'justice' and 'equality' refer to a desired type of relationship between individuals. This relationship is desired because of what it does to each individual in the relationship. That is, we believe that it is good for individuals to be treated justly and equally. Equality and justice are means towards the end of individual happiness. The significance of this is that the content which we give to such norms depends on the way in which we believe individuals achieve happiness, or fulfil themselves. I shall refer to a particular idea of fulfilment as a 'human model'.

If we advocate equality as a norm governing relations between people, we are not requiring identical treatment for all individuals in all situations. We mean that differences in treatment must be based on relevant differences in the nature or situation of the individuals concerned. In determining relevance, one factor which must be taken into account is this question of human models. The type of society one aims at depends on one's human model. If one sees human fulfilment in terms of a high level of consumption the sort of society one aims at will be very different from that which will be sought if one saw fulfilment as lying in achieving *sartori*, or loving God, or communicating with one's fellows, or developing one's intellect, or serving the glory of one's nation. Central to any ideology is a human model. It is crucial to realise this, for often in political arguments the disputants fail to realise that they are operating with different human models, and so that they are giving different meanings to key terms.

If one accepts that different ideologies depend on different human models, then the problem arises of what criteria one [74] could possibly use in comparing various models. There are two possible approaches to this problem. The first is to say that an individual is fulfilled when his needs are satisfied, and so that it is necessary to find out what the needs of a human are in order to discover which model is correct. This approach suggests that there is an objective, empirically determinable answer to the question. However, such an answer assumes that there is a fixed and constant set of drives and needs: 'human nature'. Whether approaching the problem from an existentialist or from a Marxist viewpoint, contemporary radical thinkers are unanimous in rejecting the concept 'human nature'.

It would require too large a detour to give their reasons for this with any rigour. Briefly, the fact of self-consciousness makes it possible for an individual to reflect on and reject his motives for any particular action. At the

THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY RADICAL THOUGHT

rick turner

THE OBJECT of this paper is to discuss the relevance of 'contemporary radical thought' to the South African situation. The phrase 'contemporary radical thought' includes the ideologies of various issue-oriented movements such as 'Student Power', 'Black Power' and 'Women's Liberation' groups, and also refers to recent developments in Marxist theory and in Christian thought. In political terms it finds expression in a number of parties situated well to the left of the orthodox Communist parties in the political spectrum.

Although among all these groups, currents and movements there are wide divergences as to tactics, there is an underlying unity of approach concerning immediate objectives and details of analysis. This lies in a common rejection of these patterns of human relations imposed upon people by the exigencies of modern capitalist societies. For example, the difference between the Black Power movement in the United States and previous Civil Rights movements does not consist only in a change of tactics and a greater willingness to use violence. A change in goals is also involved.

The desire is no longer to be accepted into white middle-class society, as though this were the peak of human attainment. The way in which whites treat blacks is seen as having

most elementary level, the statement ‘man needs food’ means ‘if an individual wants to stay alive, he must have food’. The translation brings out the fact that the initial statement contains an implicit normative judgement, or an implicit choice-statement. Individuals can decide not to stay alive, and then they don’t need food. Since nearly all people do in fact want to stay alive, the first statement is adequate for everyday use. In fact, in any given society, most people do seem to want roughly the same sort of things, and it is this uniformity which leads people to think in terms of ‘human nature’, as an explanatory hypothesis. If we are to reject it, we must replace it with a better explanation of the relative uniformity of human behaviour in any given society.

Once more, it is not possible to formulate such an explanation in detail. It is argued that people behave in terms of their culture and that a culture is largely a social product which is imposed on each individual by the socialising process to which he is subjected in his particular society. He is ‘taught’ a set of needs, and he acts in terms of these needs. This raises a number of problems, two of which are particularly relevant.

1. Once it is realised that a particular set of needs is merely the particular human model characteristic of that culture, one is faced with a value decision. Should one continue to accept this particular model? What criteria could be used in deciding between it and other possible models? These are very difficult problems in ethical theory. Here I shall not attempt to justify my own solution. I shall merely assume the validity of the Christian model, which I understand to be based on the concepts of freedom and love. Freedom means self-determination; [75] it means using one’s powers of reason to the full in order to understand oneself and one’s world, and in order to act in terms of this understanding. An individual remains unfree if he acts in terms of unexamined principles and socially-imposed norms.

The Christian principle of love implies that a certain type of relationship with other people is a way of achieving fulfilment. That is, community with other people is a good in itself, not a way of obtaining other goods. Love and freedom are interdependent. To love someone means to be open to him, to explore him, and this openness and exploration cannot occur where people are reacting to one another in terms of set, conventionally determined behaviour patterns. The development of reason and consciousness which underlies freedom can only occur in real interaction with other people, in community.

To repeat, love, freedom and reason are not means to an end. They constitute a way of life which is an end in itself, a mode of fulfilment.

2. Why is this particular set of needs imposed by this particular society? The structural functional school of sociology answers this question by pointing to the function which culture has in the overall social system. In order for the social structure to be maintained in existence, it is necessary for the individuals in the society to acquire the kind of behaviour pattern which is consistent with its continued existence, and the process of socialisation imposes this behaviour pattern. It has been pointed out by critics such as Easton (1) and Buckley (2) that the structural functional approach in terms of system maintenance introduces a conservative bias by assuming that it is necessary for the society to maintain its present structure, and so legitimising the culture which enables it to do so. Easton therefore introduces the concept of 'systems persistence'.

The distinction between systems persistence and systems maintenance makes it possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, the necessary prerequisites for the continued existence of some form of society, and, on the other hand, the much narrower set of necessary prerequisites for the continued existence of a given society with its given structure. One can then ask whether a given culture performs a 'maintenance' role or a 'persistence' role; whether it functions to maintain the given class, economic, and power structure, or whether it introduces the individual to an open-ended search for ways of living together with his fellows.

This distinction can be used to illuminate Marcuse's distinction between 'repression' and 'surplus repression' 3. (or vice-versa, if you are more familiar with Marcuse than with Easton). Using his own version of Freudian psychology, Marcuse accepts that social living requires a certain amount of repression of libidinal drives, since both the material situation and the necessity of working in collaboration with other people makes a certain amount of abnegation inevitable. In order to prevent frustration and conflict every time this occurs it is desirable that the socialisation process should impose a certain amount of repression. The less gratification possible in a given social situation, the more repression is necessary. Marcuse argues that in any given social situation one can distinguish between the optimum distribution of possibilities of gratification available with the best utilisation of the social and productive forces, and the actual distribution, which is a function of the way in which the society actually uses its resources, which is in turn a function of social organisation, and in particular of class structure. There may be a surplus of internalised repression required for the maintenance of the particular class structure. *That is, in order to produce people who will accept the type of life which the society can*

offer them, it may be necessary to impose upon them a highly limiting set of 'needs'.

The 'Old Left' criticised capitalism largely on the grounds that it leads to an unfair distribution of wealth and an inefficient use of productive resources. On the whole it accepted the capitalist human model of fulfilment through the consumption and possession of material goods. The 'New Left' agrees with the initial criticism, but argues, further, that the human model imposed in capitalist society is a function of the needs of the capitalist system, and that it involves the destruction of important human potentialities. Galbraith makes similar points, using a different 'language game', in *The New Industrial State*. For example, he shows how the concept of 'consumer sovereignty' no longer applies, since ways have been devised of controlling aggregate demand through advertising techniques in order to satisfy the need of the industrial system for a stable expanding market. He writes,

But, as we have sufficiently seen, the system, if it accommodates to man's wants, also and increasingly accommodates men to its needs. And it must. This latter accommodation is no trivial exercise in salesmanship. It is deeply organic. High technology and heavy capital use cannot be subordinated to the ebb and flow of market demand. They require planning; it is the essence of planning that public behaviour be made predictable, that it be subject to control. And from this control flow further important consequences. It ensures that men and numerous women will work with undiminished effort however great their supply of goods. And it helps ensure that [77] the society will measure its accomplishment by its annual increase in production ... The management to which we are subject is not onerous. It works not on the body but on the mind. It first wins acquiescence or belief; action is in response to this mental conditioning, and is thus devoid of any sense of compulsion. It is not that we are required to have a newly configured automobile or a novel reverse-action laxative; it is because we believe that we must have them. It is open to anyone who can resist belief to contract out of this control. But we are no less managed because we are not physically compelled. On the contrary, though this is poorly understood, physical compulsion would have a far lower order of efficiency.

4. In a situation where productivity has reached a level at which rapidly increasing leisure possibilities open up, an ethic of consumption and need creation is imposed because the economy in its present form needs increasing demand, without there being any attempt to consider whether people need it.

The capitalist human model includes the following three elements:

(a) Fulfilment through possession and consumption of material goods ... what C. B. Macpherson calls 'possessive individualism'.

(b) A tendency to compartmentalise life into a work sphere and a 'living' sphere, with work being seen as an unfortunate necessity, rather than an area of possible fulfilment. (This is because the work situation in such a society is not designed to be an area of fulfilment. It is designed to increase productivity, which is not necessarily the same thing).

(c) The idea that exploitation is the natural relationship between people. In a capitalist enterprise the employee is essentially a 'means of production', who may be oiled to make him work better, as other pieces of machinery are, but who becomes redundant if he plays no role in the profit-making process. Human relationships become instrumental, rather than areas for finding fulfilment.

The use of personnel management techniques may make the worker more comfortable, but it does not change the nature of the basic relationship. Rather, it is a process of refining the system of controls imposed on the worker, of persuading him to co-operate willingly in his own exploitation. For example, giving the worker a token number of shares in the firm may make him feel that he has a greater interest and a more significant role in it, but it in fact gives him no real power. It is power which is the crux of the matter. The worker may be given [78] a consultative role, but power, in particular power to decide what shall be done with the profits, lies with ownership and management. The term 'exploitation' describes this power differential and its implications.

Contemporary radicals suggest two other areas of possible human experience which, they argue, are more fulfilling:

(a) the idea of work as a creative activity. This means that work satisfaction should be seen as one of the products of the production process, and should not play a secondary role to narrow criteria of economic efficiency.

(b) The idea of community, love, co-operation with one's fellows as an end in itself.

These two may be united in the concept 'participation'... a human model of fulfilment through creative involvement in the social process.

I said earlier that the Old Left had concentrated to a great extent on material problems. The lesser emphasis placed on such problems in contemporary theory is of course at least in part the result of much greater affluence in advanced capitalist societies. In such circumstances it is natural to turn to other unfortunate results of capitalism. But in South Africa our problems are perhaps closer to those of nineteenth century Europe than to those of contemporary Europe: an extremely in-egalitarian society where large sections of the population still live at or below subsistence level. Any reasonable human model will include as real needs adequate housing, food, cloth-

ing and health, so perhaps at the moment in South Africa issues beyond this are irrelevant. Let us therefore consider the problem of inequality in South Africa.

There is certainly, in South Africa, considerable antagonism between the different 'race' groups. If we reject the thesis that this is due to some inherent incompatibility of the different 'races', we must inquire what the conflict is about. The history of South Africa since the beginning of white occupation is the story of the use by whites of political and military power to ensure first a near monopoly of land, and then a complete monopoly of skilled, highly-paid jobs. This means that today the large share of the wealth which accrues to the white section of the population is as much a result of their control of political power as it is of their actual contribution to production. It is this fact, I believe, that lies at the roots of conflict in South Africa.

Race prejudice itself is of course a reality, in that most whites in South Africa express, in their behaviour towards [79] blacks, and in their thoughts about blacks, attitudes based on prejudice; prejudice there is, and prejudice affects behaviour. But it is in two senses, very much a 'secondary reality'. Firstly there is no factual basis for beliefs about racial inferiority, or about the inherent unpleasantness of members of other 'races'. White prejudice against blacks is based on ignorance whereas black hostility to whites is based on the hard facts of exploitation. Secondly, it is probable that, in South Africa at least, race prejudice plays an important role in justifying to the whites their right to treat the blacks in the way they do. That is, it is in some ways a rationalisation of exploitation: in addition, it is reinforced by the effects which exploitation has on the blacks. Black hostility to whites is based on real grievances. White hostility to black is based on the realisation that the blacks threaten white privilege. Conflict will not end until the grievances and the privileges end. But once these have ended, there is no basis in race difference for further conflict. That is, there is no reason why whites should expect to be discriminated against in a democratic South Africa because of their whiteness.

However, it seems unwise to assume that blacks will not use political power to end exploitation, since whites used it to install the exploitative system. The whites are so entrenched in the economic structure at the moment that the only conceivable way in which this could be changed would be through some form of socialism; that is, it would involve a radical change in the white dominated economic structure. Such a solution, by restoring some relationship between effort and reward, would also be a just solution. Any 'black' government is likely to be socialistic, and will be

morally right in so being. The impulse which has lead most independent African countries to declare themselves socialist will be enormously strengthened here by the fact that, in a country with a developed and entrenched business elite, there will not exist the possibility of a new black elite rapidly working themselves into a position of power in the private sector.

It is important to ask why the whites used their political power to exploit the other inhabitants of South Africa. After all, they could, 300 years ago, have started off by attempting to co-operate with the others to develop South Africa's resources for the good of all. The reason that they did not do so, I would suggest, is that the society from which they came was an essentially exploitative one, so that they saw exploitation as a natural relationship between men. In general, one cannot dismiss the surge of western imperialism, which led to almost total global [80] dominance, as being in some way accidental and extraneous to western culture. Western culture, as the lived norms of society, as opposed to its 'written' expression in Kant or Marx, Christ or Russell, is still exploitative; the norms of western society are the norms required by the capitalist system for its survival.

This, I think, would be accepted by most people, but what one does about it depends on whether one sees the willingness to exploit as being part of human nature, or merely part of one human model. If it is part of human nature, then it would seem unlikely that change will come about in South Africa without violence since the whites will not stop exploiting voluntarily. A policy which tries to extend political rights to blacks in such a way that the rights will not be used by them to change their economic status (which, as I understand it, is the essence of Progressive Party policy) is not going to solve the basic conflict problem. On the other hand, if it is not part of human nature then it may be that some whites at least may be brought to accept another human model. It might be possible to show them that they too suffer under apartheid, that it deprives them of important areas of experience, that fear and cultural primitivism go together, and that it might be worthwhile exchanging a high level of consumption for community with one's fellows. That is, it might be possible to persuade them that loving one's neighbour is more fulfilling than the pursuit of wealth, which is the message of the 'western tradition', from Plato to Marx, and is also the central principle of Christian ethics and of contemporary radical thought.

This would involve an attack on the life-style of the society, and an attempt, on the cultural level, to show that there are other possible ways of relating to the world and to one's fellows. In working out the details of this 'counterculture' it would be important to look at the human model charac-

teristic of African tribal societies. Two important values here are a preference for leisure rather than for a higher level of consumption, and a wider sense of family.

A 'Black Power' movement is neither a return to tribalism nor a form of racialism. It is a refusal to accept the present standards of 'white western civilisation' as an ultimate, a refusal to accept the right of the whites to lay down criteria of responsibility or acceptability in any sphere. The basis of this refusal is not that they are white, but that their civilisation is inadequate. It is therefore an attempt to build a better civilisation and culture, in which whites also could share, and can therefore tie in with what I have said about the necessity for getting white South Africans to accept an alternative model of [81] man if they are to play any positive role in the future of South Africa.

Another important feature of contemporary radical thought is the attempt to work out political institutions for a socialist society. Both parliamentary democracy (as at present organised) and the soviet model are rejected. It is argued that present forms of parliamentary democracy centralise political power and take it out of the effective control of the people. Five-yearly elections are not an adequate check on government. When the voter's only major involvement with government is to cast a vote once every five years he is effectively alienated from the real political process, and develops little understanding of the issues and of their relation to his everyday problems. The political party as mediator between individual and government tends to take on the characteristics of the system itself, the 'party machine' dominates the membership and the rank and file become increasingly divorced from the actual policy-making. The party tends to become an organisation for the achievement of political offices for certain individuals, rather than a co-operative effort to carry out a coherent programme to attain certain specific ends. This affects political campaigning in such a way as to reinforce the political isolation of the individual. The political arena becomes polarised between an atomised mass and a number of small groups trying to manipulate the mass in order to get political jobs. The result of this is to move the source of power in society out of the political arena and into the control of functional power groups, for the politicians have no real power-basis in popular support, as opposed to popular acceptance. In a capitalist society the major functional power-groups are the economic powers. In a socialist society the central planning body would be the major functional power centre. Parliamentary democracy of the type I have described would not be adequate to control it. There must be other additional centres of power which can be used by the people to exert their control over the central body.

The most frequently suggested solution to this problem is some kind of workers' control. The advantages of this would be, firstly, that the workers' control of their own factory or industry gives them a source of power and a natural organisation; and, secondly, that their involvement in the day-to-day running of the business would increase their awareness of economic and political problems, and of the relation between general policy and their own particular area of experience, and so would produce a much more responsible and aware electorate. Of course there are many detailed problems to be worked out before [82] a working model of worker's control is arrived at. For the moment I merely wish to use it as an example in order to make the point that 'responsibility' is a function of degree of integration into the society's decision-making processes, and so that it is necessary to work out more effective ways of achieving this integration than have yet been put into practice.

Along with the rejection of parliamentary democracy as a solution, goes a greater willingness to use extra-legal and extra-parliamentary methods in the attempt to bring about change. Violence is only one such method, and has been advocated or used by a relatively small number of radicals in Europe or the United States. It has been realised that power cannot be divorced from organisation, and that organisation (as distinct from an organisation) can only be meaningful and lasting when it is related to specific and immediate problems. For example, in the United States black leaders have been organising tenants associations to take direct action against slum landlords. The importance of such organisation is that through it individuals learn to co-operate, learn that co-operation gives them power to achieve changes in their environment, and learn, through the attempt to deal with problems, the relation between their immediate problems and the wider political and social structure. In the present situation in South Africa this type of organisation is perhaps the only avenue left for fruitful political activity, on the part of both whites and blacks.

To conclude, I would suggest that the following aspects of contemporary radical thought are particularly relevant to South Africa:

1. The rejection of the materialistic human model characteristic of capitalism in favour of a more open model which is much closer to the Christian ideal.

2. The attempt to rethink the political problems of socialism and to go beyond the Soviet model towards a participatory society.

3. The realisation that to limit one's actions to the institutionalised political arena is self-defeating. Political activity must be accompanied by

change-oriented activity in all sectors of society, in particular in the cultural sphere, and around people's daily work and living problems. [83]

Seeking change

I would like to append a few general remarks about bringing about change in South Africa. I think that one common mistake on the part of people who consider this problem is to think in terms of ONE method or cause of change. They then seek this unique factor, and despair when they cannot find it; or when they see it as 'violence' and cannot bring themselves to be violent. However, there is not one exclusive method involved in bringing about change, nor one factor involved in change. Those who say 'Change must be brought about by the white electorate', and those who say 'Only the blacks can change South Africa' are both wrong. There are a number of different forces at work, and one has to situate one's own activity within the context of these.

1. Outside pressure against apartheid. It is very unlikely that this will decrease in future. As the African bloc's economic significance grows relative to South Africa's, its ability to persuade Britain to take action will increase. The significant black electorate in the United States, together with growing social awareness there, makes it likely that United States hostility will increase. This pressure has a continuing nagging effect on the white electorate, and in a crisis situation it could be crucial if it were suddenly stepped up.

2. Guerilla activity in neighbouring territories. This shows no signs of abating, and if it is successful, as it could be in the Portuguese controlled territories at least, then it will pose an even greater military threat to a white-supremacist South African government.

3. Internal economic problems. These, it must be noticed, can, and probably will be solved within the context of white domination, bringing blacks a little higher up in the social pyramid, but not altering the fact that the top of the pyramid is white. However, at present the frustration they produce for whites as well as for blacks injects a certain amount of fluidity into the situation. Also the solution is likely to have the effect of increasing black bargaining power by introducing more blacks into semi-skilled jobs, where the potential for organisation and for strike activity is greater.

4. Increasing restlessness among Afrikaner intellectuals with the fundamentalism of the authorised version of Afrikaner nationalism. This could lead merely to their integration into the more materialistic but equally ex-

exploitative main-stream of [84] 'white civilisation', but it could also lead to a more radical critique of white society.

5. Black pressure against apartheid will probably find new channels for expression, including the kind of organisational work mentioned earlier, and the likely use by blacks of the institutions of apartheid, such as the Bantustan governments and the Coloured Persons Representative Council, as tools for organising and for bringing pressure to bear on the government. Within this context there are a number of possible and useful types of activity. It is unlikely that the white electorate can, in vacuo, be persuaded to 'change heart'. But it is important that they should react rationally, rather than irrationally, to increasing pressure. On the one hand, rationally, they may decide to accept ever-increasing compromises, even to accept international supervision, or else to emigrate. On the other hand, they may decide to 'fight until the blood runs up to their horses' bits'. Which decision they make will obviously affect both the nature of the process of change and the structure of the new society. It is therefore vital to continue educational work among whites.

Within the white group there are a number of people who may be brought to welcome the idea of the new society, rather than to accept it as a lesser evil. To get such people to accept the loss of a privileged material situation, it is necessary to show them a different human model. This involves making a radical critique of the culture, values and life-style of white society in South Africa. People who want to change South Africa must learn to live differently now. As far as whites are concerned, this does not simply mean being nice to their black servants. It means rejecting money-values and seeing political activity, the attempt to relate to one's neighbour, as the core of life, rather than as a spare-time activity. Even a relatively small number of whites living this way could play an important role in educating the electorate, who, on a personal level, are reachable exclusively by whites, and could also help in other activities. There is considerable scope for small-scale social-political organising among the black (African, Coloured, Indian) population. It is likely that most of this work can be done only by blacks. In any event, one of the main purposes of such community organisation is to encourage local community leadership.

The process of trying to bring about political change is, on one level, a process of learning to live differently. Community organisation work means people to learn to [85] live differently with their fellows, both because this is a good in itself, and because it is the only way in which power can be equalised, the only way in which the institutionally powerless can begin to generate the power to change their situation.

Footnotes

1. Easton: *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Prentice Hall 1965.
2. Buckley: *Sociology and Modern Systems Theory*, Prentice Hall 1969.
3. Marcuse: *Eros and Civilisation*, Sphere.
4. J.K. Galbraith: *The New Industrial State* (p. 321-2), Penguin Books 1969.