

## **Affirmative Action and the invisibility of white privilege**

David Benatar's inaugural lecture critiquing affirmative action has been given wide coverage in the media and provoked a vigorous debate on the campus, as have the many replies to his polemic. In one of his responses, David Benatar laments the personalising of the issues, claiming that it fails to grasp the logic of his arguments. However, personalising the issue is exactly what I plan to do in this response. That person I will write about is myself because in reflecting on my own academic career, I think the reasons why employment equity strategies (which David calls 'Affirmative Action') are absolutely necessary if justice is to be served. So, now to get personal.

I am presently a Professor in Public Health at UCT, having been appointed as an Associate Professor in 1997 and a full Professor in 2005, both ad-hominem promotions. I am told that the ad-hominem route to academic advancement is far harder than application for a chair because of the rigorous peer review. I am therefore unashamedly proud of my achievements and feel I deserve the recognition bestowed on me by my peers.

But how did I get to be where I am now?

I grew up in a family that, by 'white' standards in apartheid South Africa, was not wealthy. My father was, for most years of his working life, self-employed as an electrician, despite an electrical engineering degree from UCT. We never, as a family, took any holidays outside of the Cape, and we owned, for most of my parents' lives, a single motor car that doubled as my father's business van and the family vehicle. I was introduced to things such as swimming pools and film societies by parents of my friends at school. When my father reached retirement age, there was no pension or provident fund to fall back on. Neither of my parents ever travelled by air to any destination. When I was thirteen, my father was severely injured in a motor vehicle accident and was unable to work for 6 months, during which time we had no income and were dependent on support from friends and family members. At school and university, I had to apply for, and did receive, financial assistance. By the standards of the time, I was socio-economically disadvantaged compared to equivalent applicants who were all white.

But, and this is a very large BUT, I was also white in Apartheid South Africa. This meant, for example, that my financial disadvantage could be easily compensated for by the availability of financial scholarships and by the fact that I did not have to apply for a permit to study at UCT. My family was able to rely on a black domestic worker, who gave up looking after her children to look after my siblings and I on a full time basis, freeing my parents to pursue whatever economic and social activities that would help their children study and acquire professional careers, which all three of us did. We could choose to live where we pleased, owned a house in a White Group Area, and did not have to produce a pass when we walked the streets of Cape Town. I was able to go to an excellent school, staffed by white teachers, who themselves had received excellent training and were able to imbue us with enthusiasm for learning without themselves having to worry about where they lived and travelled. I could go home to a house with electricity and hot water, where I had space and privacy to study, to play and to do the things that equipped me with the confidence to test myself against my peers in open competition.

I was able to excel academically and gain a place and graduate in medicine from the University of Cape Town. There were no African students in my class and few black students. After 5 years working in primary care for a trade union linked health service, I returned to UCT as a research fellow in 1991, 1 year after UCT graduated its first African doctor. I was mentored by colleagues I knew, whom I had worked with politically and was welcomed into an environment that was populated by people familiar to me. I did not have to compete with black candidates for the posts I was appointed to (registrar, then specialist, then

senior specialist) simply because there were none with whom to compete because of the consequence of systematic denial of educational and career development opportunities to black people.

I remember an incident during my schooling that remains with me as an image of how privileged it was to be a white South African 15 year-old. It was the height of the apartheid system when both grand and petty apartheid was the norm. I was playing in a provincial junior chess competition. The venue was the Claremont Chess Club (still in the same place under the Belmont Road bridge in Rondebosch). I was one of the stronger rated players in the tournament as was another pupil from Alexander Sinton High School. I will call him Naseegh. At lunch time, we walked across to the local Wimpy restaurant. It was then that I realised that Naseegh would not be allowed to sit in the restaurant because he was coloured. So, in solidarity, we ordered hamburgers to take away and ate them whilst sitting outside on the kerb, talking about the tournament, but thinking about the injustice.

I have no idea now what Naseegh felt about his treatment or whether this was so routine he no longer paid attention. But for me, I felt it was a humiliation beyond words. Naseegh may have been able to study at a 'good' school (Alexander Sinton has produced many of our current leaders) but he was still a black person treated with disrespect in broader society. He was also schooling in an environment where pupils were at the forefront of political resistance, where 'liberation before education' meant that learning opportunities for black students, even if the schools were adequate, were not comparable to those of white students. Disadvantage under apartheid was not just about received hopeless educational preparation. It was about life continually closing doors to opportunities and self-esteem. So, to dismiss race as a category for disadvantage is to sidestep the very profound consequence of systematic racial discrimination that enabled all white people (as a group) to have access to opportunities denied to black people in this country, irrespective of other aspects of disadvantage.

What has this to do with Employment Equity? In David Benatar's analysis of affirmative action, this racist treatment would be discounted because all that should be considered in weighing up the suitability of a candidate for appointment should be whether their educational disadvantage prepared them adequately or not for the job at hand. Should Naseegh apply for a job at UCT, David Benatar's selection committee would not pay any attention to the experience of, for example, the daily humiliation of racial prejudice under apartheid South Africa, how that impacted on his preparedness for appointment, and how his response to racial discrimination may have limited or constrained his career development. Naseegh, of course, was at a good school, where the opportunity to pursue a pastime like chess was available. Not so for millions of South Africans at Department of Education and Training Schools where rote learning, shared resources and absence of basic facilities were the norm. No wonder I never came across one single African chess player in my youth. Similarly, when appointed at UCT there were no black applicants to shoulder out of the way. The trickle in the pipeline was so slim that it was effectively dry.

To acknowledge, therefore, that I benefited from being a white person in racist South Africa is not to be ashamed of what I, or other white people, have achieved and contributed to society. Rather, it is to recognise that the past system has created a deep and profound structural inequality in our society that cannot today be wished away by a market-based philosophy that says that equal opportunity should only address barriers at the level of access to a job application and to an unbiased interview.

When I review CV's of applicants for senior positions at UCT, it is not an act of fate that the white applicants have generally accrued career experience (in the departments of their white mentors, through social networks, or by working overseas) that places them, at face value, far ahead of black applicants who have not had such opportunities. The question for selection is therefore not about changing the goalposts (lowering of standards), nor about the lack of a

level playing field, but about the relationship between the two. In other words, in determining what the (black) applicant can contribute to the UCT, it is about understanding that upward slope to get to the goalposts, how steep the gradient was and how the candidate's success in getting to the 6-yard box indicates their capabilities and ability to contribute to the academic environment at UCT.

To the extent that David Benatar's polemic has forced many people to confront a difficult issue, we should be thankful to him for raising the debate. What is missing, though, is recognition that 'Affirmative Action' cannot be critiqued without addressing the invisibility of white privilege.

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