

## **CULTURAL PESSIMISM OR GENUINE MULTICULTURALISM: A RESPONSE TO GILIOME**

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Dear Hermann

The recent racialisation of the SA debate is ominous and worrying. Incidentally, Afrikaners are not underdogs in post-apartheid South Africa, they are still privileged and to claim minority rights for formerly dominant groups trivializes the real minorities, even if they are nominally majorities.

Our real disagreements can perhaps be best articulated by close analysis of your powerful speech to your fellow Afrikaners. I have not given up the hope to convince you of some crucial errors of your views. I share your preference for cultural distinctiveness and also reject the liberal Anglo arrogance which views Afrikaner traditions as comic relics. Does this make me a "post-nationalist chauvinist", as you say, or a genuine multiculturalist, as I would prefer?

You admit that Afrikaner language and culture will continue but you declare them purposeless if "no longer underpinned by a specific view of life and a particular world vision which are shared by most of the people belonging to the language group". This reflects a nostalgic desire for homogenisation, characteristic of previous periods. A "shared specific view of life" people acquire only in traditional agricultural societies. When ethnic group members occupy diversified positions in life, like Afrikaners so successfully do, their world vision naturally is equally diverse.

Such people with diverse educational and professional backgrounds define their interests differently, they adopt multiple identities in constant flux and yet they can remain self-respecting, cosmopolitan Afrikaners. You yourself admit this sociological fact when you later write: "The more complex a community becomes, the more inclined it will be to displace ethnicity from its central position in its life and work". So why inveigh against an inevitable trend with a

lament for a past where people did not have “identity-choices”? It puts you, (wrongly, I hope) among the conservative cultural pessimists who romanticize a lost past and fear the future. One gets the same impression when you construe a governmental intention of reducing “the space available for cultural diversity — to be replaced by the individualist and technologically-based identity of the developed Western world”.

If South Africa is to become a modern successful economy and liberal democracy it has to follow the Western route. Far from being incompatible with cultural diversity, as you assume, all Western societies have no choice but to be ever more multicultural and accommodate diversity.

Yours is a vision of a homogeneous, regimented group with “agreement concerning its origin”. Only then, you assert, can they “hope to arrive anywhere as a group”. But why must people be herded into groups to achieve their goals of happiness? The conformity pressure of group opinion, imposing a particular vision of historical understanding on sceptical members, constitutes one of the most oppressive forms of subtle tyranny. You as a reborn liberal and President of the liberal Institute of Race Relations should be in the forefront of applauding rather than regretting voluntary individual choices. The core of the liberal creed has always been the freedom of the individual and not individual subjugation under collectivities of any kind. That does not preclude that cultural groups also have rights to limit individual choices for the sake of their linguistic survival, as Charles Taylor has argued in the Quebec case. But in Quebec the overwhelming majority supports the collectivity while you bemoan that the majority of Afrikaners ranks linguistic and cultural consensus low among current concerns.

You write: ‘The bad news is that well-educated and well-qualified persons are less inclined to identify themselves in ethnic terms’. I have always considered this to be good news! You, on the other hand, label such voluntary choices “shameful”. You make your fellow Afrikaners into rootless, atomized creatures who have lost their

bearing, individuals almost without culture. In this situation where a group loses its intelligentsia, you say, "cultural survival is out of the question". However, have you considered that the new Afrikaners have redefined their cultural values, away from a parochial discredited apartheid past towards an open multicultural appreciation of difference or even consumerist apathy towards ethnic tradition? Do you think the better quality of Afrikaans newspapers and their increased circulation would have been possible with the traditional Afrikaner outlook? With a newly assertive coloured consciousness freed for the first time from master domination, with more non-whites than white Afrikaans speakers insisting on a distinct indigenous tradition, Afrikaans literature is likely to flourish rather than being "in danger of simply reverting to a kitchen language".

You rightly point out that ethnic identification "is often strongly reinforced by the perception of injustice". The inverse conclusion then is also true: the lack of ethnic identification among Afrikaners points to little complaints about the current government's cultural policy. You attribute far too much to ANC policy by stating that "the ANC asserts the importance of cultural diversity" but wants to build a single nation from which any "differences based on race or ethnicity would have been eliminated". Even if the government were to pursue a policy of cultural totalitarianism it could not succeed in a multi-ethnic society where Afrikaners may have lost political power but retained substantial economic clout and cultural capital, necessary for the stability and success of the state.

According to your logic you should welcome government repression of cultural diversity because it strengthens ethnic identification! Unfortunately, some idiots in the SABC and among black student racists reinforce the delusion that an ethno-racial war is coming. Those at UCT who declare it an unilingual institution when 90% of the Western Cape population does not have English as a childhood language, are as wrongheaded as those who want to force Stellenbosch to abandon its Afrikaans character, particularly since UWC provides another English medium option nearby.

However, you are wrong in the interpretation of the international literature on second language acquisition. The correct emphasis on mother tongue as a base for learning English derived from contexts where indigenous minorities (native people in North America)

were forcibly assimilated in distant residential schools and their language and culture suppressed. A similar context are immigrant societies where the children of immigrants are made ashamed to speak the language of their parent at school. Yet another impetus for this literature comes from the under performance of Hispanic students in the US where excelling in the mother tongue is a necessary and often the only source of self-esteem.

None of those conditions apply to a master-language like Afrikaans anymore. Milnerite circumstances have long gone after Afrikaans became an official state language for 40 years and Afrikaans with a solid recognized base is not at risk. The literature on the huge success of French immersion programmes in English Canada also contradicts your insistence that students must be grounded exclusively in their mother-tongue before learning another language. Your admonition of Afrikaans parents for being poor pedagogues when sending their children to dual or English medium schools is not supported by the literature and also smacks of coercion.

What you are really worried about is that more and more Afrikaners become “detrIALIZED”. Hence, you should also not advocate multilingualism, and, like the Quebecois, insist on exclusive unilingualism. But even if people lose their language - which is out of the question for Afrikaners - they not necessarily lose their ethnic identity! Jews came to South Africa as speakers of Yiddish and despite them all speaking English now, Jewish self-esteem and consciousness has suffered little and is very much alive. Only if the ANC were so stupid to declare war on Afrikaans would you be able to create an Afrikaner Board of Deputies along Jewish lines of credibility, derived from centuries of global antisemitism.

Do you really want to argue that Afrikaners constitute the new Jews of Africa? Spare me the false tears and spare you the paranoid anti-modernity. New multilingual cosmopolitan Afrikaners will thrive in the new South Africa on the basis of their own redefined strength, unburdened with the guilt of racial privilege and state-sponsored gangsterism.

With great respect and in old friendship

Heribert Adam