

Racism and Sexism: a False Analogy

Ann Dummett

Anyone who cares about getting rid of racism in Britain is accustomed to massive difficulties. The disastrous immigration policies of governments of both parties since 1962, the institutionalised racial discrimination built into public and private organisations, the tragedy of human potential lost and destroyed in our educational system, the insensitivity and ignorance of many people in the news industry, racism in entertainment and cartoons, public indifference and private malice, are all too bitterly familiar. But the anti-racist, as if he had not trouble enough with enemies, needs more and more protection from his friends. Government money for 'community relations' has recently become more plentiful, but practised hands are holding the purse-strings and know just how and when to draw them tight. Job opportunities brighten a little for specialised social workers, charged with containing the discontents of the young and black : *their* job opportunities are less than ever. Various groups on the Left are eager to help in the racial struggle, but usually on their own terms. And now we have Women's Lib as well.

'Women's Lib' is a vague and disputed term ; it is more usual to hear of 'the women's movement' now in this country. This includes some formal organisations, some informal groups and some individuals, all in some way or another concerned with women's rights. These groups and individuals vary in beliefs and in action. Some are old-established reforming organisations, some new community action groups, and so on ; their work often overlaps, but there is a marked difference, all the same, between the new ideology of liberation and the old ideology of equal rights for women. The difference is in mood and style rather than in a set programme ; the new mood and style can conveniently be called 'anti-sexism'. Anti-sexism is putting together the fight for more nursery schools and for getting men to look after the children, campaigning for easy abortion as well as for equal pay, asking for picture-books in which little girls play with trains and mothers are depicted following interesting professions like medicine and the law. Anti-sexism is also claiming that it is the same kind of fight as anti-racism. It is not.

Anti-sexism has in fact imitated much of the language of anti-racism, transferring it unadapted in some cases, for example, where women are referred to as a minority, which they observably are not. The word 'sexism' itself is a coinage struck from the mould of racism, and the word 'liberation' draws its power from association with the fight against colonialism, against economic imperialism, against disfranchisement, fought by non-Europeans in many parts of the world ; it resounds with echoes of events in Vietnam and southern Africa. Anti-sexism has, in

short, cashed in on the turnover of the worldwide racial conflict. The style of its complaints and demands seeks to elevate women's escape from the domination of men to the same importance as the fight against racism. But this attempt has to ignore or distort contemporary world history. It has to point to women's sufferings alone in many countries where women's sufferings are either no worse than or not significantly different from men's, where menial work and degraded status are the lot of the poor of both sexes, or where to have the job of caring for children at home is a kind of blessing compared with toiling in mines or enduring permanent unemployment. It has either to show that the separate struggle of women as women is as significant in international politics and economics as the struggle of oppressed or despised racial groups, or else it has to imply that racism is no worse than sexism.

While the women's liberation movement itself of course insists on the worldwide importance of its own struggle, those who are committed to working against racism must surely be fearful of the debilitating effects of the comparison on their own strength. In the United States, the great Civil Rights movement of the early sixties, followed by the Black Power movement, black nationalism and a tremendous eruption of change in public debate and public attitudes on race *preceded* the new style of women's liberation, and provided a vocabulary and style that could be copied. In Britain, there has been no equivalent of the American transformation of the race picture during the Sixties; there has been far less publicity, too, for racial discrimination and its effects. An imitation here and now of the American women's movement appears in quite a different context from its original, and women's liberation gets much more Press coverage here than racial issues. Anti-racist demands will often be seen here, therefore, against a background of women's demands, instead of the other way round. And where women's demands seem trivial or misdirected, it will be all too easy for anti-racists' demands of a superficially similar kind to be dismissed as trivial too. For example, the anti-racist protest against the presentation of black people in children's books as savages, cannibals or primitive idiots is a difficult enough protest to get taken seriously in Britain by educators and publishers. It will not be helped by the good offices of *soi-disant* allies in the women's movement who want to get rid of pictures of mothers ironing and little girls playing with dolls. If the two protests are taken to be of the same character and importance, we shall have all the longer to wait for improvement in any direction. Indeed, I fear we shall get pictures of father ironing and little girls playing with trains long before we shall get much accurate and rational presentation of African, Asian and Caribbean peoples in children's books.

Racism, arguably the most important political phenomenon of the Twentieth Century, is a denial in theory and practice of the equal humanity, equal capacities and equal rights of men, women and children categorised by physical appearance or by national descent. Sexism, anti-sexists would say, is exactly analogous: the denial of these same kinds of equality on the grounds of physical difference. But this apparent similarity breaks down as soon as we begin to examine the *results* of

racism and sexism. Millions of people in this century have been killed because of their 'race': Jews systematically exterminated by gassing, American blacks lynched, shot, beaten to death, burnt. Many more have been enslaved, in practice if not always in name, because of their race; Slavs by the Nazis, worked to death in forced labour; Africans in South Africa, serving prison sentences for breaches of the pass laws which are explicitly racial, and working the land unpaid and unfree. Many more again have been reduced to utter poverty, degradation and powerlessness because of their race; many denied the right to be with their own wives or husbands or children because of their race: the victims of South African and Rhodesian land and labour laws, the victims of Britain's immigration laws.

It is impossible to understand racism, to evaluate its workings realistically, to assess the true nature and importance of any of its manifestations, even apparently minor ones, unless we look at it against this hideous backcloth of cruelty and death. Racism denies the right of certain people to be alive. It does not always deny them life itself; since it is often a matter of economic or political policy to keep them alive, but ultimately it regards the lives of certain human beings, racially categorised, as disposable. It may be expedient to give a few of them good jobs in certain circumstances, as a tactical manoeuvre, but in other circumstances it may be expedient to deport them, evict them, or leave them unpublicly to starve: always in the background is the shadow of death.

The doctrine of women's inferiority to men has no results comparable with these. It is true that in many countries women have fewer rights under the law than men. Concern for their difficulties was not the guide to shaping anti-sexist doctrine and policies. Their distress has been absorbed into the concerns of the women's movement at a later stage than the comparatively far less serious difficulties of well-to-do wives in the West who resent looking after babies, washing their husbands' shirts and being regarded as featherheads. Anti-sexist magazines in this country devote more space to discussing abortion, lesbianism and sexual self-stimulation than to injustice, or to international political issues. And the fact is that sexism is not, in the same sense as racism, an international political issue. It does not swing foreign policy decisions, guide investment or affect the course of wars. Nor has it caused mass exterminations. We have not seen millions of women being put to death because they were women. Women were shot down at Sharpeville, but because they were black, not because they were female. Women in the Twentieth Century have been killed, tortured and imprisoned, but not because they were hated or despised *as women*, always for their race, their political opinions and activities, their religion or some other cause for which men have suffered at the same time.

This vital difference between sexism and racism is not one of degree, but of kind. Racism postulates an essential *functional* difference between one 'racial' group and another, associating with skin colour or national descent the possession of certain qualities and lack of others: e.g.: 'they' are less intelligent or more cunning; they are more violent by nature or

more cowardly; they are better adapted to hard physical work, less apt at the arts, more feeble, more avaricious, less technically adept, because of their race. Thus their function in society must be marked off separately; their history must be distorted to fit these assumptions. Male prejudice and discrimination against women postulate similarly false theories: women are less intelligent or more emotional and so on, but with the crucial difference that there is a functional physical difference between the sexes, and a fundamentally important one, whereas there is no analogous functional difference between racial groups, however defined. Women bear and feed children: men do not. This fact has nothing to do with women's intelligence or aptitudes, but it has a great deal to do with their relationships towards the youngest human beings. In most parts of the world now, as in all parts of the world in the past, a baby needs a mother's (or a nurse's) feeding for many months, perhaps years, in order to survive; more obviously still, it needs a mother's nourishment before birth and effort at birth to be born at all. These are functions that no man can perform. Anti-sexists would like to have a world where this functional difference was as illusory as the supposed functional differences between races that racists pretend exist: that is why abortion and deviant sexual behaviour are so important to anti-sexists.

Western technology and social organisation have taken away some of the functions of a mother with artificial feeding; they have attempted to take away more, by experimenting with rearing embryos outside the womb; they have given women the power to avoid conception or to have some choice over when it takes place by the use of oral contraceptives. In most of the world outside the rich countries (apart from the disastrous effects on infant health in parts of Africa of the commercial promotion of artificial feeding) these innovations have had little effect. Women in the richest countries have been greatly affected by the use of contraception and artificial feeding; most women have not. Some women in rich countries have taken these changes to be on a line of development towards complete abolition of sexual function, and are impatient to press on to the end of the line: a point at which men's and women's physiology are not essentially different from each other. (Germaine Greer says: 'Of forty-eight chromosomes, only one is different: on this difference we base a complete separation of male and female, pretending as it were that all forty-eight were different'. She also argues that body-hair varies racially rather than sexually and gives as an example—an example whose expression suggests that she is ready to swallow racial stereotypes if not sexual ones—'That most virile of creatures, the buck negro [sic], has very little body hair at all'.)

Anti-sexism's idea of women's equality is quite different from what might be called the political or reforming idea of equality; it depends not on accepting a functional sexual difference while demanding equal rights in education, employment, property and so on but on minimising sexual difference itself, sexually as well as socially and politically. An important part of anti-sexism is an attempt to find a new theory of human sexuality. Sometimes the minimising of difference involves

rejection of motherhood, sometimes sexual admiration centred on the self rather than on another person, sometimes a sexual attraction towards other women rather than towards men, sometimes a relationship with men in which women can play the part of aggressors. All these attempts represent a revolt against conventions of Western cultures, but unhappily they do more than this. They deny universal qualities and happinesses which American conventions in particular have vulgarised : they vulgarise in their turn, and counter one distorted theory of human sexuality with another.

The mood and style of anti-sexism have come to Britain and elsewhere, but derive originally from the United States, and reflect many aspects of culture, convention and economic organisation which are peculiarly American. Transplanting this mood, this style, to different cultures, sometimes leads to absurdities. They are less immediately obvious here, so heavily are we influenced by American culture, than they would be in many places—in West Africa, for instance, where women are traditionally in charge of commerce, in a way that is quite alien to American culture, or among the nomadic peoples of central Asia whose women do the creative artistic work of making superb individual carpets while the men look after the animals, or in the kind of Muslim society where it is enormously practically important to have a son because custom decrees that the eldest son is responsible for looking after his parents in their old age when they cannot work to support themselves. The idea that a woman cannot be beautiful *and* intelligent would seem extraordinary in many cultures; anti-sexism has rebelled against the idea in the United States where it is particularly strong : indeed, the dumb blonde is a specifically American creation, as is the girl who gets her man by taking off her glasses and forgetting her interest in books. The anti-sexists' objection to beauty contests represents a reasonable and valid revulsion against what American culture has done to the idea of what a woman is, but outside the United States a demonstration against beauty contests has a less deep significance. It finds fewer echoes, for instance, in the treatment of little girls; for a long time little American girls of kindergarten age and above a certain income-level have endured elaborate hair-dos, nail-varnish and a different dress each day of the week as though they were miniature contestant sex-symbols; most of the world has mercifully been spared this phenomenon.

Anti-sexism has attempted to generalise from the situation of the discontented middle-class white woman in an American-style culture. This generalisation very rapidly becomes strained. First, it enlarges its own claims by asserting or implying that all kinds of misery suffered by women are due to sexism, to the denial of women's equal humanity with men. But in doing this it muddles a lot of issues, claiming as manifestations of sexism what are really manifestations of racism, of oppression of the poor, of the cruelty of the strong to the weak, sometimes too of the protection of the weak against the strong. Second, it creates a new theory of what a woman is, a theory in no way analogous to the anti-racist's theory of what a human being is, since it is an attempt to throw

off responsibility towards babies, even if this means killing off the unborn ones, whereas the anti-racist argues responsibility towards other human beings. The anti-racist's human being is a personality worthy of life and respect, regardless of racial or national character; the anti-sexist's woman is defined in terms much narrower and more specific: a woman who does not accept that it is her job to look after children, a woman who goes out to work, a woman who does not want to look after a man; a woman whose rights over her own body include rights of life and death over her own unborn children (even if these are female). The style adopted by this new kind of woman is distinctive and recognisable: it is not the same as that of the 'New Woman' of the early Twentieth Century, confident in her own femaleness at the same time as being intellectual and independent-minded; rather it is ambiguous, disliking and yet imitating men at the same time, asserting the value of woman while resenting being one, and keener on karate than on either knitting or classical studies. The language used about sexuality by anti-sexists is crude, mechanical and often contemptuous. Whereas anti-racism has used as one of its slogans, 'Black is beautiful', anti-sexism absolutely rejects, 'Woman is beautiful'. That would have to be, in their book, a sexist concept, a way of implying women are mere sex-objects. (It would also imply accepting that beauty in all its aspects is an important human value; an idea that would fit very uneasily into the style of most anti-sexist propaganda.)

Yet the liberated woman represents a revolt against real evils in the society from which it springs. If anti-sexists hate the ideals and stereotypes of American womanhood, who can blame them? The mindless fun-girl, Bunny or topless waitress; the active and hygienic suburban pie-maker and committee-runner; the career girl who comes to understand in the end that all the time she has been yearning really to put on an apron and start cooking and that her career was just a freakish phase; the horny-handed pioneering mother who raises ten children and a shotgun with equal facility: none of these ideals is associated with sensitivity, tenderness, wisdom, gentleness or subtlety, qualities which other cultures, rightly or wrongly, have attributed in different ways to women. But nor is the counter-ideal the anti-sexists have put up. The counter-ideal, instead of building on all the real potential of real American women themselves, has abandoned the stereotypes of American womanhood in favour of some equally unappealing stereotypes of American manhood: toughness, go-getting, self-assertiveness—and preferring karate to knitting or classical studies. Of course, in the United States, rape is commonplace enough for it to make very good sense for a woman to learn karate: she has a powerful practical need to be able to defend herself which is much more important than being able to produce hand-made woollies or construe a passage of Greek. When, however, an American style of women's liberation is imitated outside the United States, it is important to remember that such a style has a different significance in different kinds of culture: what may express, in one place, a practical need for self-defence, may in another signify only a readiness to be aggressive. In countries where a woman is well protected

from random violence, she may also suffer restriction on her freedom of movement. The restriction that guarantees security may often be excessive; it may lead to real oppression, but it originates not in contempt for women but in a desire to give them more security than men. There are other ways in which a status for women that is different from men's offers advantages as well as disadvantages: the poorer and less technologically advanced a country is, the more disruptive of a practicable pattern of life will be the attempt to transplant a Western idea of the liberated woman.

Male prejudice against women is often combined with respect for women. In this way male prejudice is very different from racism. The denial of women's rights to work and live as they individually choose is often associated with contempt for women's intelligence and capacity, but at the same time with a desire to protect those who have the main responsibility for perpetuating human life. The slogan, 'Women and children first', invoked in shipwreck or other disaster, is not an expression of contempt or hostility but of a belief in the special *importance* of women and children in the crucial moments when the choice of who among many are to deserve survival is a real one. The racist would not be crying 'Jews and blacks first'; on the contrary, racially despised groups would be the expendable ones.

Anti-sexism is concerned with many genuinely good causes: the protection of women against rape and of wives against extreme physical violence from their husbands; the right to work in all kinds of employment and to receive an equal rate of pay with men for so doing; the provision of day nurseries for small children; legal help against heartless bureaucracy; help for widows; decent housing. All these causes, however, can be and have been fought for without the necessary accompaniment of anti-sexism's characteristic style, and without being listed alongside abortion on demand and sterilisation or with the suggestion that if women want an amelioration of their condition they must refuse to marry, bring to an end the patriarchal family and stop buying cosmetics. Anti-sexists tend to sneer at old-style women reformers; here again they borrow terms from quite a different kind of political battle in demanding revolution, not reform. But their desired revolution is in sexuality, not in the workings of justice throughout a society: public events, rather than public events, are their chief concern.

Western societies have for some time been socially very unstable. The centres of rapid change and new development have shifted away, in the Twentieth Century, from Europe and from the European culture that countries dominated by white people have inherited. Anyone who seriously wants to imagine how the world will look in two centuries' time (assuming it is still there) would be foolish to study the West now in search of answers; Asia and Africa are going to determine the patterns of change. Even before the West's self-confidence in its own assured economic progress and supremacy was badly shaken by the oil-price crisis, its instability had become evident in many ways: the rate of destruction of natural resources, the disruptive social consequences of wars, a loss of confidence in progress, a tendency to heavily bureaucratic

form of organisation, forced movements of population (from refugees to the victims of large-scale property development and municipal housing policies). In societies whose normal condition is one of flux and uncertainty, it is natural for a constant search to be going on for new definitions and new images that will make sense of the confusion. Women's liberation is one of the attempted new definitions, and its protagonists want to claim that it is the only possible definition of woman and her relationship to the rest of society that makes sense. Anti-sexism places itself on the Left, alongside anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, anti-pollution, and so pitches its appeal to radicals and revolutionaries.

Those who are already convinced of the validity of other causes generally labelled leftist or radical find it very hard to dissociate themselves from any revolutionary appeal. They have an understandable reluctance, for example, if they happen to believe that abortion is a particularly abominable killing of the innocent, to find themselves sneered at by anti-sexists and cheered on by the defenders of South African apartheid; if they find commercial pornography repellent, they may keep quiet about it rather than find themselves on the same side as Mrs Mary Whitehouse, and the opposite one from women whose names are associated with legal aid for the poor. But each cause must be examined for itself, not for its associations, and when we examine the anti-sexist cause, we find that despite its claims to be revolutionary it does not belong with those causes that are concerned with justice and a respect for human life. Far from being revolutionary, it has, I think, many of the reactionary characteristics of the rich capitalist culture from which it springs: aggressive egoism, ignorance of or arrogance towards the cultures of others, admiration for the strong self-willed individual.

Anti-racism, on the contrary, insists on a historical view of humankind wider than that taken by the contemporary West, and favours human variety and interdependence. I do not want to say that racism and anti-sexism are exactly analogous: rather, that the issue between racism and anti-racism is a completely different kind of issue, and a far bigger one, than the issue between sexism and anti-sexism. Attempts to pretend that these issues are, as a member of a conference I attended recently put it, 'two sides of the same coin', can only result in muddled thinking and false conclusions. Practical harm as well as theoretical difficulty can result from such superficial comparison of sexism and racism. The theoretical harm I have attempted to indicate briefly in some of its aspects. The practical harm is twofold: the devaluation of work against racism in this country, by false analogy with women's liberation, and the setting up of an ideal of what a woman should be which is grotesque, denatured and self-absorbed. A women's movement which really cared about human beings would be nothing like anti-sexism; it would be one that drew on all the strengths and capacities of women, including their special capacity to care for the youngest and most helpless humans, which respected the intricate balance between personal relationships and social organisation that exist in many different kinds of society, that was more concerned with helping people to be together than to be apart, and which honoured the need of men and

women to care for each other—in a manner summed up by the phrase we used to hear when the Labour Party in this country was something like a Socialist Party instead of a Conservative one : ‘from each according to his capacity, to each according to his need’.



COMMENT — *continued from page 483*

level with prices and that the British living standard is falling. The Archbishop of Canterbury seems left in almost sole possession of this worthless analysis.

It is sad to compare Dr Coggan’s Public School moralisms with the magnificent preaching of the gospel by, say, the Latin American hierarchies or the World Council of Churches. They do not indulge in general exhortations. Instead of reproaching a population they identify the concrete causes of injustice and place the Church unequivocally on one side of a struggle. Of course it is true that *all* men are sinners and of course it is the Church’s and a bishop’s duty to point this out, but as an abstract general truth it is not relevant to our troubles. The current shoddy state of our society results from quite specific evils which we can seek to identify and correct. This will not produce a sinless society or a perfect society, any more than the elimination of malnutrition or cancer will produce perfectly healthy people, but it will be a step in the direction of justice and peace.

But to return to the point about ecumenism with which we began : a society seems to get the Church and the Church leaders it deserves, so perhaps we should not be surprised that our bishops should be of such low calibre (small bores, as Michael Henry remarked) by comparison with the great men who stand up to bureaucratic repression in the ‘socialist’ countries or struggle for human liberation in the third world. Perhaps it will not be until our society is radically changed that we shall have Churches that really matter to people and therefore Churches in which unity matters.

H.McC.