

Racism in Black and white

By Theodore Dalrymple

I am coming around to the idea, though reluctantly, that there is much hidden or subconscious racism in our society, though not where it is most expected or searched for. This is particularly noticeable when modern journalists attempt to parse morally complex events, alleviating their psychological discomfort by weak attempts at displaying their goodwill. Shallow conventions of speech become a refuge from the unbearable weight of history.



I recently read an article in [*The i*](#), a British semi-tabloid newspaper of mildly leftist disposition, about farming in Zimbabwe, a subject in which I retain a slight residual interest since I spent seven months as a young doctor in that country in 1976, when it was still called Rhodesia and ruled by a white minority government.

Rhodesia, as it then was, was the breadbasket of the region. Its productivity, however, was undoubtedly founded upon an inequitable distribution of the land, with a very small number

of highly productive white farmers not only owning half the cultivable land, but owning all the best land into the bargain. Millions of African peasants shared the rest, most of them living barely above subsistence. Needless to say, this distribution rested on a foundation of past forced appropriation.

While in Rhodesia, I read with close attention a book by a social anthropologist, A. K. H. Weinrich, who was also a nun. I do not recall the details of her long and dry book, which I possess still, but its drift was that a more equitable, or equal, distribution of the farmland would conduce to general prosperity. Peasant farmers were eager to adopt modern methods and would cultivate their land more intensively than the white commercial farmers ever would, and therefore raise production. With the peasant population rising fast, the author predicted a peasant revolt in the very near future unless there was land reform.

The book was published in 1975, and a revolt was not long in coming, though it was certainly not led by the peasant class, which was probably capable of nothing more by itself than a jacquerie. The author had, of course, that firm grasp of unreality peculiar to academics of generous sentiment who study a subject deeply: for any likely land redistribution in the wake of a revolt or revolution was most unlikely to favour the peasant class. Even if, *per impossibile*, it had done so, it would not have solved the problem of rural overcrowding, with the population increasing by nearly 3 percent a year.

In due course, the white farmers were dispossessed, in a fashion and with results that were only to be expected. The breadbasket became the basket case in short order. Those on whom the land was bestowed, however, had not been given it freehold: the state remained the ultimate landowner. This was probably the worst of all possible solutions, but recently, as reported in *The i*, the present occupants of the land, beneficiaries of political largesse, have been granted full

ownership in freehold. This, it was hoped, would conduce to greater long-term investment.

What struck me in the newspaper's reporting of this development was the way in which the letter *w*, as in "white farmers," was written in the lower case, while the letter *b*, as in "black farmers," was written in the upper case.

Of course, *The i* is far from alone in employing this typographical quirk: the day before, I had been reading for review a book published by an eminent and generally excellent university press in which was to be found exactly the same phenomenon. Indeed, it is now widespread, at least in certain circles. What does it mean?

Clearly it is an attempt to be "nice" or "good," and to demonstrate that one is being such. One is trying to make up in some way for all the wrongs done to blacks in the past, to atone for those wrongs, and to elevate their victims at the same time. It is morally grandiose, for it represents an attempt to take on one's shoulders the great wrongs committed not by oneself, but by ancestors or merely people who share one's race. In this sense, it is a gesture that is racist: it ascribes guilt or innocence by membership of race and not by personal conduct. It also brings with it great relief of a burden, at least psychologically if not in logic, for it serves to emphasise that the expression of correct opinion rather than good behaviour is the principle criterion of personal virtue. Opinion is easy while conduct is hard. Thus, for modern people, opinion is the royal road to virtue.

There is more, however. What kind of people could be so downtrodden, so mired in injustice, so pathetically incapable of helping themselves, that differentially capitalising an adjective that others apply to them could do them good, or bring them any, let alone great, relief?

We do not do this with the Fat and the thin, for example, the

tall and the Short, the clever and the Stupid. We should not be so foolish as to suppose that capitalising the word *Fat* would protect the fat from the medical consequences of their adiposity, or even from their self-consciousness about their shape. The stupid are not to be made clever by means of a capital letter.

The supposition that by capitalising the word black, but not the word white, some benefit is being conferred on black people is both condescending and demeaning to the supposed beneficiaries. Among other things, it supposes that they are defined purely or largely by how others refer to them in newspapers or other publications. It suggests that they can, and indeed need to, be rescued or saved by the merest gesture of those higher in the social scale than they.

What weakness! What incapacity! What helplessness! How feeble must they be whose salvation can be bought in so cheap a fashion! How completely is their fate determined by their skin colour!

This belief in turn raises the question as to why the typographical Mrs. Jellybys believe these people need, and are able to benefit from, such typographical assistance. The answer is obvious: those who believe it have a deep-seated contempt for that category of people they claim to want to help: in short, they are racists. If institutional racism means anything, it means the university presses that capitalise the word black but not white. They are both institutions and racists.

I need hardly emphasise the implicit racism of those who employ the term "people of colour," with its implication that all humanity except for whites is one big happy family, united by its victimisation and with no divisions between them worth mentioning.

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