Arnold Abramovitz

Alienation and Race: A Psychological Perspective

Although I propose to say a good deal about alienation it is possible that some of you will raise an eyebrow if I tell you at the outset that I have done no research at all on the topic. By research I mean currently construed by my profession. I *have,* however, done some paper research but the result of that endeavour was to discover that the term is employed, or rather bandied about, in such an enormous variety of ways by such a variety of people working, in many cases, from incompatible sets of axioms, that it has become almost valueless; a catch-all vogue term, fastened on by every passing wastrel with intellectual pretensions. Perhaps you can understand why I myself have not done any empirical research on such an unrespectable topic, and moreover why I haven't the least *intention* of doing so.

Albert Einstein, talking about some of the limitations of science, said that 'science cannot give us the taste of the soup'. I propose to adopt this stance by asserting that just as each of you knows in terms of your own personal experience, what the soup tastes like, so each of you already knows what alienation is–certainly psychological alienation–even if you haven't given your experience that label, or, for that matter, any label.

Now, just as the broth that is ladled out of the same tureen doesn't taste the same to everyone, and certainly needn't be 'to everyone's taste', as it were, so we can expect *my* experience of alienation to differ from *yours,* and yours from you neighbour's. Let's see if we can make a start by playing a game. It's not an original game. I believe it was first popularised by Charles Schulz, the creator of Charlie Brown, who illustrated a series of situations in the lives of his peanut characters, each one evoked by a sentence beginning with, 'Happiness it . . . ' (His idea has since been done to death: I recently saw a poster which proclaimed that 'Happiness is sharing a basket of Colonel so-and-so's Southern fried chicken with your friends'). Anyway, here are some of my own moves in the game called, 'Alienation is'.

* Alienation is not knowing who my neighbour is, even though I may know his name and address.

* Alienation is not *caring* that I don't know.

* Alienation is not knowing the surname of my domestic worker, let alone not knowing who she really is–*and* not caring.

* Alienation is reaching out to touch someone I like and finding that he or she 'isn't there', isn't 'present to me'.

* Alienation is watching someone trying to reach out to me and adroitly managing to evade any real contact.

* Alienation is the feeling that I am a stranger in my own planet, or country, or town, or home.

* Alienation is receiving a card from the Race Classification Board in Pretoria informing me that my identity is 'White' or 'Coloured' of 'Bantu' or whatever, and feeling docile about it.

* Alienation is abdication of responsibility.

* Alienation is black rage.

* Alienation is white indifference.

* Alienation is not knowing what I want.

* Alienation is not knowing what life is all about.

* Alienation is not knowing who I am.

* Alienation is sitting passively and reading someone else's views (I warned you it was a game).

Well, I don't know if any of that was to your taste, but it does, for me, represent a random sample of the varieties of situations which I call *psychological alienation* which I have experienced and still *do* experience in my daily life. These experiences vary not only in content, but also in degrees of importance. None of them are unimportant to me but some are more fateful, more sinister, more malignant in what they point to, than others.

Now, a fair question from you at this point would be, 'What *isn't* alienation? What are you comparing alienation with? What is the opposite of alienation?'. Three interrelated concepts spring to mind when I am faced with this kind of question. I will call them *identity, reconciliation, and community,* and of the three I will deal more specifically with the psychology of identity and community and try to relate them to race.

First, identity. The neo-Freudian analyst, Erik Erikson, has, of all writers I know , been most influential in putting forward a notion of the individual's sense of identity within the context of the life cycle and 'mutual activation' within and between the generations. It is an exceedingly complex notion and I shall try to do no more than give you some of its salient features. (Erikson's book, 'Identity: Youth and Crisis', is worth studying, or perhaps I should say grappling with, but don't feel too dismayed if you come away with your head spinning: in his introduction he himself says, 'Have I understood myself?').

Identity is an 'ego strength'. It is a 'strength' in that it connotes a state of mental health, of maturity, and of ethical soundness. It is a combination of courage and restraint. It is specifically a state of the ego in that it involves a sense of wholeness ('I am together') , of centrality ('I act from some kind of centre within myself'), and of

freedom of choice ('I experience my actions as free and responsible rather than as compulsive or impulsive').

The struggle for identity is, for Erikson, an adolescent struggle. But, of course, it usually goes on for very much longer than the relatively brief period of being a 'teenager'. In fact one of the hallmarks of our age is the progressive prolongation of the period of adolescing, the struggle to enter true adulthood. There are even some, notable existential psychologists, who say that this struggle is literally never-ending; I have constantly to define and redefine who and what I am through my choices, decisions and commitments: in fact, I *am* my choices, provided they are real and authentic. For Erikson the counterparts of identity are *identity diffusion identity confusion:* these are the adolescent states of alienation. (For existentialists, to be alienated is to choose inauthentically, that is to play a role, to be what *you* would like me to be, to abdicate my responsibility because that would mean to be free, and true freedom is painful and frightening and something to be avoided.) The 'identity crisis' is the attempt to negotiate this antinomy or conflict. Its solution one way or another, can be fateful for the whole future development of the individual. What determines a 'successful' negotiation of this psychosocial crisis? Three things. First, the individual should have, more or less, successfully negotiated the previous psychosocial crises of childhood, which include trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt and industry vs. inferiority. Secondly, the adolescent should have the opportunity of competition and sharing and experimentation with different roles and life styles with his age mates. And thirdly, he should be able to find ideals and values and models of leadership within his community or larger society which he feels are worthy of his loyalty and to which he can freely pledge his energy and zeal, and that he is in turn thus *confirmed* in his entry to the larger group or community.

A very important concept, especially in the context of race, is that of adoption of a *negative identify.* Rather than experience myself as a nothing or a nobody, I prefer to be a 'bad body', who is at least *somebody.* I can be a 'Hell's Angel', and flaunt this identity knowing that it is negatively judged by the larger society. If I live in a pervasive climate of overt antisemitism (to add the racist dimension), and if a developmentally acquired ego-weakness predominates, I may allow to connotation of, say, 'dirty little Jew-boy' to pervade my consciousness. I will take up a slinking abject stance towards myself and my fellows, *including* possibly my fellow Jews. I may, of course, choose a negative identity in a very different direction: my stance might be one of arrogant or snide superiority: 'I come from a race of priests and kings; I am special in the eyes of God himself; I am the conscience of the world; inevitably I will outsmart you and outsurvive you'. My identity here is purchased at the cost of downgrading yours. My identity is a negative one in that it negates yours, and between us we cannot achieve any kind of *community*– about which more later.

What about black negative identity? I have recollections of two men whom I knew more than thirty years ago in the Transvaal. In the case of the first my acquaintance was gained in a master-servant context and this should be borne in mind. I was interested in the black man's concept of God, and I asked him, 'Is God a white man or a black man?' 'A white man', he answered, without any hesitation. How do you know', I asked. 'Baas', he replied, 'I have seen a snapshot'.

He was referring, of course, to those cheap icons portraying Jesus as a well-groomed hippy with a halo. I did not go further with my interrogation, but my fantasy is that for him a negative identity of the following kind had formed: 'I am the ignorant chattel of the white man. My boss is white, even God himself is white—and I find photographs of him in the white man's shops. What further proof do I need of my inferiority?' I remember him as being an alien, cringing sort of person, even with his fellow blacks.

We can pause here to contemplate the ravages which the white man's cultural and technological imperialism (to speak of no other kind) can wreak on an individual who is developmentally vulnerable to its impact. That there was another way of reacting, theologically and psychologically to this imperialist climate is demonstrated by the behaviour of the other person I have in mind. He was a self-employed black: he peddled butcher's offal in black squatter camps. And he read the Bible and had become a rabble-rousing evangelist. His most frequently repeated slogan, which he spat out at you with a leer, was, 'Se vir my: wie was Gam se pa?' ('Tell me: who was the father of Ham?') the Import of his question was clear. The biblical tradition that the world's ethnic groupings were descended from Shem, Ham and Japheth might well be true: they were our post-diluvian progenitors. But one man, Noah, was their father, and therefore ours. So we are all brothers. But this man teased and taunted his white 'brethren' to the point that he was frequently in trouble with the police, whom he called, by the way, 'die grootste klomp moordenaars op God se arrde' ('the biggest bunch of murderers on God's earth'). His was a tragic negative identity: its very boldness (or foolhardiness) prevented the assumption of a more all-embracing identity. 'Listen, white man,' I fantasise him as saying, 'I may be black, but by the Holy Scriptures I am your brother: I spit in your eye!'

I want to go on to the concept of community, but before I do let me recap what I have been trying to say about identity and its distortions. Before I can truly relate to you I have to have a secure sense of who I am. I cannot commit myself as your brother or your spouse or your partner in any sense until I have found myself by weathering the vicissitudes of my personal journey through adolescence. Your recognition of me as a person of worth may be necessary but not sufficient if I do not recognise myself as a person of worth. If I am divided within myself; if I have an under- or over-inflated sense of self; then it will be difficult for me to take a chance with myself, risk myself, share myself with you. For Erikson, true intimacy occurs when one 'finds oneself by losing oneself in another'. Beyond intimacy there is what Erikson calls generativity, that is, taking care of what one has started, whether as the biological parent of my children, or in some analogous way, e.g. making a long-term commitment to some project that I have started within the community.

This word 'community'. It is used so often, so glibly. Where, for example, is the community to which I belong? I am told that my university is 'a community of scholars and scientists' (which sounds very fine, and I have heard some of my senior colleagues roll those words around their tongues in an obviously satisfying manner). But I personally don't *experience* a real sense of community, either in these academic confines or in my own suburban neighbourhood. In fact I am specifically aware of a pervasive ***lack*** or real community and the more I read and learn the more I discover

that this absence of community, this vacuum in our lives, pervades a very large part of western urban-industrial society– and its name is alienation. Robert Nisbet, the sociologist, in his book 'The quest for community', has defined alienation as 'the state of mind that we can find a social order remote, incomprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility . . . // for millions of persons such institutions as state, political party, business, church, labor union, and even family (yes, even family) have become remote and increasingly difficult to give any part of one's self to'.

Theodore Roszak in his book, *'Where the Wasteland Ends'*, paints an apocalyptic picture of Western urban-industrial alienation, and paints it on a vast canvas– so vast that no words of mine can distil it adequately for you now. He has tried to show how the history and sociology and especially the *psychology* of Westerns science and religion have brought us to the present-day pandemic loss of community. He has, in fact, given us a space-time portrayal of white alienation which no-one, black or white, who is concerned about psychological and spiritual estrangement should omit to read. Listen to him on white alienation and its sources:

'It is no mere coicidence that this devouring sense of alienation from nature and one's fellow man–and from one's own essential self–becomes the endemic anguish of advanced industrial societies. The experience of being a cosmic absurdity, a creature obtruded into the universe without purpose, continuity, or kinship, is the psychic price we pay for scientific 'enlightenment' and technological prowess. Only those who have broken off their silent inner dialogue with man and nature, only those who experience the world as dead, stupid, or alien and therefore without a claim to reverence, could ever turn upon the environment and their fellows with the cool and meticulously calculated rapacity of industrial society'.

And again, on the possible effects of this spiritual blight on what we condescendingly call the 'underdeveloped' or, more diplomatically the 'developing' countries:

'One need only glance beyond the boundaries of the high industrial heartland to see our science-based technics rolling across the glove like a mighty Juggernaut, obliterating every alternative style of life. It is difficult not to be flattered by our billions of envious imitators. Though they revile the rich white west, we nonetheless know that we are the very incarnation of the 'development' they long for. And if all the world wants we have got, must we not then be *right?* Are we not the standard for all that progress and modernity mean?'

'But it is a pathetic self-deception to beguile the impotent and hungry with our power and opulence, and then to seek the validation of our existence by virtue of all that is most wretched in them . . . their dire need, their ignorance of where congratulations have no proper place in a serious assessment of our condition. There are those of our fellows who still struggle to enter the twentieth century. Their search for human dignity sets them that task, perhaps as a necessary stage in cultural evolution. There are those of us who are now *it* in the century (who have indeed *made* this century) and our task is another–possibly one which the underdeveloped will scarcely appropriate. They pin their highest hopes to science and technique, even as our ancestors did. Our

job is to review the strange course that science and technique have travelled *and the price we have paid for their cultural triumph'.*

In this truly magnificent book he is not content merely to diagnose: he puts forward certain tentative concrete remedies, which include political decentralisation, an emphasis on human ecology as the queen of the sciences, and communitarianism, as ways of returning to a healthier, more spiritual consciousness. Of these I should like to focus on communitarian movements in the western world and their possible implications for our theme—which is black alienation *and* white alienation.

A communitarian, or a communard, is one who wants a *chosen extended family.* He wants to be part of a network of authentic human relationships; preferably in the form of a close clustering of households in which children and adults may associate freely—that is, without the constraints and taboos and institutionalised deceits that have made such a poor thing of the western nuclear family.

Talk of the psychological condition of the nuclear family forces us to examine a terrible irony in our own country. In town and country alike black families are in dire trouble. We know why: the name of the devil is Migrant Labour. The 'homelands' are depleted of ablebodied persons; the urban ghettoes often have a preponderance of 'bachelors'. (I am told that the proportion of men and women in Langa, for example, is about 10 to 1. We do not need long-term research by a team of social scientists to delineate the havoc which this can wreak on black urban family life.)

But the white nuclear family is also in trouble. Certainly, white marriage is in trouble. With a divorce rate approaching 1 in 3 in our big cities, the anguish in many white families can be guessed at, if we have not indeed experienced it for ourselves. The same state of affairs is of course to be found throughout the western world. My guess is that it is part and parcel of the whole catastrophe that we call alienation.

But, to return to our own country: family and community are in a state of alienation for blacks as well as for whites, although the societal causes may be different and the individual patterns may be different. Essentially we are in the same boat: most of us lack the rich, warm experience of fellowship and brotherhood in the setting of a non-authoritarian extended family, and this is what the communitarian movement is all about—becoming members one of another.

Although part of this scattered and still fragile endeavour stems from the human potential movement in America, which is associated with what is known as humanistic psychology, I want to make an important disclaimer. And that is to ask you not to look at the psychologist as a so-called 'expert in living'. Psychology may give us certain important insights into how and why our behaviour and experience are what they are; *but psychologists cannot tell us what to do with our lives.* In fact, to take our problems in living to the psychologist in the hope that he will provide pre-packaged solutions is in itself a symptom of alienation. I can assure you that psychologists know as well as anyone else how to make a mess of their personal lives.

Carl Rogers, a founding father of the human potential movement, has said that the Encounter Group is one of the most powerful social inventions of the twentieth

century. The encounter group is a deliberately contrived intensive group experience which, if it is successful, will help me to get in touch with what is really happening within me—especially on a feeling level, which is the level I tend to avoid—and also helps me to convey or communicate this to you. It helps us to *meet,* to *really* meet, not merely to be formally and superficially introduced to each other. It helps me to resist the temptation to categorise and stereotype you, and one of the ways it does this is by giving us the opportunity to concentrate on what you and I are doing and experiencing here and now. I believe that what I can learn in a *micro-community* (which is what one can call an on-going encounter group) can help me to live the alternative style of life which I believe must prevail over and against the present state of dissolution and fragmentation that we find ourselves in.

There are, of course, many paths to the revival of community, to psychological and spiritual reconciliation and atonement. I have mentioned the break-up of family life in this country in terms of both white and black alienation. But there are small enclaves in Southern Africa in which communitarianism has been practised for scores of thousands of years! I included in your reading list the book by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas called 'The harmless people'. It tells of the life-style of those bands of hunters and gatherers in the Kalahari whom we call Bushmen. A small number of them have (so far) managed to remain authentically in tune not only with nature but with each other. Although they are nomadic, they maintain the close interrelationships of families and households in a manner which I believe we are at the other end of the civilised (i.e. 'citified') continuum can learn a great deal from. Their greatest fears, apart from thirst and starvation, concern possible strife between individuals within their communities. And they have spontaneously evolved ways of dealing with tension and dissension which have amazing similarities with our western 'invention', the contrived encounter group. I do not want to fall into the trap of romanticising the way of life of the Bushman. He can sometimes be just as callous and indifferent to his fellow as you and I can be to each other, but I believe his personal interactions are more real and less overlaid by the facade of politeness and brittle cordiality which you and I have schooled ourselves to adopt.

Your reaction at this point might well be, 'Of course, they stick together and try level best to prevent feuding and fighting; after all, theirs is literally a survival culture'. My response would be, 'Ours also is literally a survival culture'. We are ecologically and spiritually in a state of planetary emergency. We too must learn to live together, to find ways to meet each other, to value what is most human in each other even as we must learn to value what is most human in ourselves.' To end, let me briefly return to the theme of identity.

Having been born and bred in this country as a privileged white, it is not easy for me to enter a non-alienated state of consciousness. That I am a white man is an ineradicable part of my identity; but I believe I have to transcend that aspect of my identity because it prevents me from truly joining the human race. It encapsulates me in what Erikson has called a 'pseudospecies'. As he puts it.

'Man as a species has survived by being divided into . . . *pseudospecies.* First each horde or tribe, class and nation, but then also every religious association has become

the human species, considering all the others a freakish and gratuitious invention of some irrelevant deity . . . If identity can be said to be a 'good thing' in human evolution–because good things are those which seem to have been necessary for what, indeed, has survived– we should not overlook the fact that this system of mortal divisions has been vastly overburdened with the function of reaffirming for each pseudospecies its superiority over all others . . . '

'Our genuinely humanist youth, however, will continue to extend a *religious identity element* into race relations, for future over-all issues of identity will include the balance within man of technological striving and ethical and ultimate concerns. I believe . . . that the emergence of those youths . . . does contain a new *religious element* embracing nothing less than the promise of a mankind free of the attitudes of a pseudospecies: that utopia of universality proclaimed as the most worthy goal by all world religions and yet always re-entombed in new empires of dogma which turn into or ally themselves with new pseudospecies'.

What I hear Erikson asking me to do is to merge my 'white man' identity into saying, 'I am a man', or, better still, 'I am a person', and finally, to be able to make the simple existential statement, 'I am'.

Bibliography

Erikson, E. H. **Identity: Youth and Crisis.** N.Y., Norton, 1968.

Johnson, F. (Ed.) **Alienation: Concept, Term and Meanings.** N.Y., Seminar Press, 1973.

Marshall, Lorna **Sharing, Talking and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions among Kung Bushmen.** Africa, 31, 1961.

Roszak, T. **Where the Wasteland Ends.** London, Faber, 1972.

Thomas, E. Marshall **The Harmless People.** Penguin, 1969.