

My critics have failed the rigorous test of reason

By David Benatar

For the past two months, the opinion and letters pages of the Cape Times have been featuring responses to my critique of affirmative action.

Although I have had a number of supporters, primarily in the letters pages, the majority of the opinion pieces have been critical.

Since so many of my critics are concerned about power and how it functions, it is worth noting that the asymmetry of critical and supportive responses is indicative of a crude power that my critics wield.

Not only is affirmative action imposed in South Africa, via the law, by those who hold political power, but it is also currently the orthodoxy in South Africa. There is a natural human reluctance to question dominant orthodoxies, particularly when one risks the opprobrium of the mass of "true believers".

Thus, it is defenders rather than critics of affirmative action who are more socially empowered to speak publicly on this topic.

I dared to question the ethics and wisdom of current affirmative action policies and practice. Had my arguments been as weak as my critics claim they were, I very much doubt that there would have been the outpouring of criticism that there has been.

Either each of my critics has been unconvinced by the others' responses, thus feeling the need to provide his or her own attempted refutation of my arguments, or the (perhaps unconscious) aim has been to drown out a challenging argument with a barrage of criticism.

The sheer volume of criticism makes it impossible for me to reply in full to it all. Given the space constraints, I shall make a number of general remarks with some illustrations.

First, it is curious that none of my critics has indicated how people ought to be racially classified for the purposes of racial preference. Given that a criterion for racial classification is absolutely essential for any racial preference policy, it is very revealing that none of them has risen to that challenge.

There is an obvious explanation for this - they are fearful of picking up this hot potato. They cannot use self-classification as a criterion, because then anybody could classify himself as "black" and be eligible for preference. Yet any objective criterion would be far too reminiscent of apartheid-style classifications.

Defenders of racial preference are being less than honest with us. They want a race-based policy, but they cannot provide workable criteria for determining people's "race". They are reliant on people's classifying themselves according to apartheid-style criteria. This is not an acceptable basis for public policy. I would be very interested to see how the courts would respond to a petition from a person, preferably of ambiguous racial appearance, who refuses to classify himself.

Second, almost all my critics think that, because racial preference is necessary to effect relatively rapid change, it is therefore justified.

Here they exhibit no insight into the shortcomings of their crude consequentialist reasoning, according to which the ends justify the means. Even defenders of current policies recognise that some means are unacceptable.

None of them, for example, recommends a temporary reverse-apartheid, under which "whites" would be treated as "blacks" were under apartheid, even if this would effectively attain the desired racial balances. Thus, it is not sufficient for defenders of racial preference to cite the connection between the ends and the means.

They also have to show why the proposed means are acceptable. None of them addresses my arguments why the current policies violate appropriate constraints.

This inferential leap (from the means-end relationship to the permissibility of the means) explains why a number of my critics think that my rejection of racial preference affirmative action implies blindness to "white" privilege or insensitivity to "black" disadvantage. They could not be more wrong.

Where they err is in failing to see that the undisputed discrimination of the past and its lingering effects today simply do not support the particular conclusion they wish to reach.

For example, Professor Leslie London ("The invisibility of white privilege", May 29) describes his own socio-economically disadvantaged background. Yet, he says, as a "white" in apartheid South Africa, his "financial disadvantage could easily be compensated for by the availability of financial scholarships and by the fact that (he) did not have to apply for a permit to study at UCT".

Fortunately, nobody now requires a government permit to study at UCT. Financial obstacles still exist for many, but scholarships for needy students are among the very mechanisms I recommend for addressing inequality.

Thus it is unclear how London's claims support his conclusion rather than mine. If such financial assistance is allocated in a "race"-neutral way on the basis of need, then numerous underprivileged "blacks" as well as a few underprivileged "whites" may benefit. Would London prefer to see financial aid given to all "black" students, including those who do not need it, and withheld from those few "white" students who do need it?

London then proceeds to describe the humiliations of apartheid victims. Again, these are beyond dispute. But it simply does not follow from the fact that somebody has suffered humiliation, that they should be given preference in university admissions or appointments. University places are not compensation for humiliations. If they were, then not only those humiliated under apartheid, but also those who have been humiliated in myriad other ways - including rape, child abuse and libel - should also be preferred.

Many of my critics misconstrue my views and arguments. For example, Ronald Swartz ("Race has to be point of departure", May 14) says it appears from my "arguments that, not only should we not apply affirmative action policies, but we should not intervene at all" in order to prevent inequality.

Yet that directly contradicts what I did say - namely that redressing injustice is essential.

Dr Zimitri Erasmus ("The language of race cannot be discarded", May 22) attributes to me the view that there should be "equal access - for the least prepared ... - to university education and professional positions in higher education".

I said no such thing. There is no way that those currently least prepared - those who cannot read or write, for example - can have equal access to universities. Nor should they have equal access as long as they are that unprepared. That would be a waste of public resources.

Instead, my argument was that something other than affirmative action is necessary to make sure that those who would otherwise be so unprepared for university will not be so in the future.

That would include diverting resources to primary and secondary education. It is absolutely essential that, insofar as possible, the injustice of an impoverished education not be inflicted on present and future children.

Erasmus also joins my earlier critics in denouncing my use of reason in pursuit of the truth about affirmative action. She claims that I imagine myself "to hold the meaning of 'truth' " and that I am "primarily concerned with 'being right' and with showing others to be 'wrong'".

I admit, without apology, that I regard some views about affirmative action to be true and others to be false. I want to hold only those views that are true. I present the arguments for those views, and I show why I think that others are wrong.

If Erasmus is not prepared to admit likewise, then it is unclear what the rest of her very long essay was intended to do. If she thinks that there is no truth about these matters, why should we be interested in her "alternative perspective"? It cannot be because we should think it is true.

By contrast, if she thinks that she is providing us with reasons why we should agree with her, then she imagines herself "to hold the meaning of truth" (sic) and to be showing me to be wrong. She would then be criticising me for the very thing that she is doing.

Swartz is another enemy of reason. He says that the "academic and philosophical" nature of my arguments tend to "exclude those who do not have a similar background or disciplinary expertise".

The implicit suggestion, then, is that we should abandon the very tools that enable us to engage the subject matter in a sophisticated way, in order not to exclude those who lack those tools. This is one of the professional hazards of the philosopher.

Nobody asks the surgeon to abandon his training and skills because they exclude from the practice of surgery those who lack the surgeon's training and skills. And nobody without surgical training thinks that they are equipped to teach the surgeon how to operate. Yet Swartz is happy to ask me to down my tools while he purports to show me how to use them.

He says that by my logic "a racist white minority government instituted racially discriminatory policies against a black majority; this resulted in the existing inequality between white and black, but this inequality does not constitute disadvantage of that black majority".

However, this is not my logic at all. Instead it is an argument of his own imagination - one that equivocates a key term. Obviously there is a "disadvantaged black majority" if by that one means that in general "blacks" are disadvantaged. That is quite different from saying, however, that all "blacks" are disadvantaged (in the relevant ways). It is only the latter claim that I deny.

It is a great pity that my critics have, among other faults, misinterpreted and misrepresented my claims and arguments, made elementary errors of reasoning, failed to take up key challenges and, when all else fails, attacked reason itself.

In doing so they have squandered an opportunity for a productive discussion about an important matter.

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Published on the web by Cape Times on June 20, 2007.

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