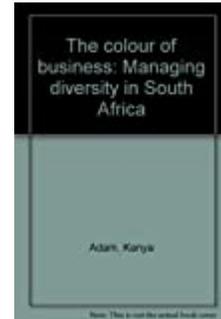




Kanya Adams. *The Colour of Business: Managing Diversity in South Africa.* Cape Town: Creda Communications, 2000. xii + 215 pp. CHF 30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-908193-05-0.



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The Colour of Business by Kanya Adams was first written as a thesis for her Ph.D. at Oxford University. It has now been turned into a book so that more people can have access to it. Adams in her book deals with a very topical issue, which has assumed political dimensions and divided people across colour lines and political beliefs in South Africa. Perhaps I should also point out that the issue of Affirmative Action is in itself political in nature. It is political because it seeks to correct a situation that arose because of the politics of a particular period, whether in South Africa or anywhere. For those people who might not know, apartheid in South Africa, among many other things, meant the following: that certain jobs in South Africa were reserved exclusively for white people. These would be jobs that: pay high salaries; do not involve manual labour; are provided by the state and generally do not allow for maximum socialisation of the races.

No doubt, among many other consequences of the policy was that Blacks became impoverished as a result of the policy. Poverty prevented them in the new political order since 1994, from making an impact on the economy of the country. This is the context of the book by Adams. How can the new government facilitate the entry of the Black people, who were excluded from many jobs on the basis of apartheid, into jobs that are occupied

by other people? What can the new government do to satisfy the Black people who voted it into power? On the other hand, whatever the new government does should not create the feeling among other racial groups that they have fallen out of favour with new government.

This then is the context of the book by Adams about how, with the policy of affirmative action, the new government of 1994 tried to introduce a new labour policy that would reverse the effects of apartheid on the labour market.

In her first chapter on “The Politics of Redress,” Adams deals informs us why she embarked on the study, who it involves, why affirmative action is supported and the political atmosphere in which it takes place. This chapter is quite comprehensive, concise and holistic in contextualising the problem the problem at hand. The chapter promises a lot in the form of academic discourse, and the reader does get what is promised in the chapters that follow.

The second chapter is on “Theories of Social Justice.” In this chapter Adams explains the theoretical foundations on which she makes her hypothesis. Her theoretical foundation is based on what is called Liberalism I and Liberalism II. In the first, which is called traditional liberalism, only individual rights are recognised.

In the second, which is called social liberalism, collective or group rights are seen as inherently dangerous and oppressive. She explains that two Liberalisms clash on the basis that there is no connection between individual and group rights.

There is no doubt that Adams argues her case brilliantly in the context of the thesis of Liberalism I and II. Even where some academics want to claim that affirmative action policies highlight group differences and perpetuate inequality, her refutation of such claims is valid. Affirmative action does not confer permanent rights on its recipients, and neither does it confer self-government on groups.

Chapter Three on “Historical Perspectives” deals with the history of state sponsored preferential employment in South Africa. In South Africa there are three such categories namely, that for the poor whites of South Africa which began just after the formation of the Union of South Africa around 1925; that of the Coloureds in the Western Cape during the days of apartheid; and now affirmative action in post-apartheid South Africa. Nobody can disagree with Adams that the nationalist government of the apartheid era found it relatively easy to empower the poor whites because it totally disregarded the economic well being of the Black people and the economic climate of the period favoured what it was doing.

When the nationalists took over state power they began a process of empowering the poor white of this country. To a very great extent they succeeded in securing jobs for the majority of them but failed to eradicate poverty among the white people. The question that arises is: can the ANC do the same thing that was done by the nationalist government under apartheid? In answering the question, Adams mentions constraints that will make it very difficult if not impossible for the ANC government to have the same success (albeit limited) of the national party government under apartheid. The ANC has no intention, and it cannot, explicitly dispossess white people in order to enrich Black people. The present economic climate also does not favour the ANC to embark on such a course of action.

So whether it was in government or in the private sector, the National Party government made sure that the white people of the country were favoured. However, as time went on the National Party government realised that it could not sustain the policy it was following without modification. This is because apartheid cannot just be explained in moral terms only; the economics of apartheid also have to be taken into consideration. This

chapter ends with Adams posing the rhetorical question whether the ANC government would what the National Party government did. She concludes, and rightly so, that only history will tell us. But she states categorically that the preferential treatment of the apartheid government and equity policies of the ANC are vastly different. And indeed, this is so.

Chapter four is titled “International Experiences With Affirmative Action: Implications for South Africa.” This chapter tries to trace the origins of affirmative action. Where does it come from? Why was it introduced? How was it introduced? Many readers in South Africa will be surprised to learn that affirmative action did not originate in the USA as they have always assumed. But unlike in the USA or anywhere else, affirmative action in South Africa is aimed at a majority population, which has become politically dominant. As Adams correctly explains it should not be seen as a permanent panacea but temporary remedial measure.

Four countries are cited in this chapter as being in the forefront of introducing affirmative action. In the USA affirmative action was introduced in the 1960s to give preferences to members of groups defined by race who were discriminated against in the past simply because they belonged to that particular group. As an example the laws on affirmative action in the USA required that contractors doing business with the federal government ensure that their workforce is representative of all racial groups before they could be granted that contract. Obviously there were arguments for and against the policy in the USA with some Blacks, the recipients of the benefits of the policy arguing against affirmative action. Proponents of affirmative action in the USA argued that it is consistent with liberal values and can unify the American people.

Where else in the USA affirmative action was intended to address the problems created by race, in Malaysia it was introduced to address the problems created by ethnicity. Economic power in Malaysia is in the hands of the Chinese who are a minority; where else the majority Malay population was not Chinese. In Malaysia affirmative action was negotiated. The Chinese would control the economy of the land, and the Malays would control the levers of the state. Perhaps South Africans can learn something from this agreement.

The Indian experience is both racial; ethnic and class at the same time. If the darker Indians are regarded as something else and not Indian, or as a lower ethnic group, or even as a sub-class compared to the lighter-skinned

Indians, their plight was worse than that of the South Africans. This is my own comment and not what Adams says. Other than that, the Indian experience is of little value to South Africa because the caste system is non-existent in South Africa.

The Canadian experience is more like the American and apparently the one from which South Africa obtained the employment equity principles. Canada introduced the employment equity laws in 1986. The above international experiences all emphasize one thing, so Adams tells us. It is this: that equal chances of getting employment should be paramount in any society. If that is the principle on which all of us can agree upon, how is that to be realised? Adams proposes that affirmative action may be one vehicle for achieving that. Affirmative action may be a vehicle although it has its own problems. She also proposes that because South Africa late to the table of affirmative action, she may be able to avoid the mistakes of the early comers and contribute positively to the debate.

The main subject of her book however, was: how can South African business handle its predicament of so-called efficiency and standards based on Eurocentric notions of corporate culture when they operate in Africa?

Chapter five has the title "Public Discourse on Employment Equity: Positions of Major Political Actors." In simple terms, this chapter is intended to explain how the different political parties in South Africa view affirmative action. The ANC is the proponent of affirmative action. It believes that affirmative action must touch all aspects of life: education, politics, economics and everything else. This would seem to contradict the non-racialism of the ANC.

In effect it does not. Non-racialism cannot be embraced in a society of unequals. If that were to happen, it would perpetuate racism. Race as the ANC has correctly noted, has impacted in different ways on the people of South Africa. Coloureds and Indians, although to be found in all the political parties of South Africa, regard themselves as marginal in terms of benefits from the post 1994 policies. This is so because they claim that affirmative action excludes them because the primary beneficiaries of that policy are Africans. The National Party viewed affirmative action as apartheid in reverse. How they could that is not easily understandable. Why they cannot the logic of affirmative action as a simple reversal of the complications they caused is beyond me. They even speak of special measures but one is hardpressed to

understand what those special measures are. The Democratic Party is ad idem with the National Party on this issue. COSATU supports affirmative action and the equity laws though its approach is different to that of government. It suggests that government must use its power to grant contracts to the private sector as a lever to enforce its equity policies. It wants employees to be forced to provide education and skills training for its employees.

Chapter six is titled "Managerial Perceptions of Affirmative Action." It details the results of a questionnaire that Adams sent out to managers at various times during her research. The questionnaires dealt with issues of merit and tokenism in employment; reverse discrimination, moral reasoning and profitability and perceptions of hiring practices. The feedback that Adams received is very interesting. It shows that many people in South Africa are still trapped in the racist time frame with very little understanding of what the ANC is faced with. They also reveal that some white managers have no problem with employing qualified Blacks and women in their organisations. They recognised that to be competitive and preempt legislation, they must employ Blacks and women. Business has realised that in order to survive it must address the interests of the government of the majority.

Chapter has the title "Affirmative Action Beneficiaries and the Devalued Perception of Self." In short, this chapter deals with the question whether the beneficiaries of affirmative action are destroyed by the policy because they lose self esteem. It is suggested that affirmative action stigmatises its recipients as people who would have otherwise not made had it not been because of the policy. Generally the respondents indicated that they would have still made even without affirmative action. That what the policy did was to remove the prejudice they would have suffered at the hands of the white bosses.

This book should serve as standard reference work for human resource professionals and government policy makers. It has the advantage that it is a piece of academic research that has now been turned into a book. As a result of that, it is thoroughly and meticulously researched. It is boon to the whole problem of affirmative action in South Africa. It should also become compulsory reading for all the politicians in South Africa.

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