

Affirmative action should be about fundamental social progress

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Jayrajan is 30 years old and lives in Bayview, Chatsworth. Having finished school many years ago, he has never been employed, despite desperately trying to get a job. He has had a few odd jobs though. He has vivid memories of the promises of the government in 1994, when he had just completed matric. That was a proud moment for him and his family. Jayrajan tells me that he distinctly remembers the promises of a 'better life for all' but now he can only talk of how 'bitter' life has become.

He has two kids and survives by fishing, 'cutting deals' and is open to any 'lucks' that he could have access to. 'Lucks' here would be a reference to goods acquired in ways that may not be completely legal. I insist that he hasn't tried hard enough to find a job and what he tells me in response is politically intriguing. Jayrajan had acquired several certificates and diplomas in IT, but has hitherto not been successful in his attempts to get a job. He tells me that on the last two occasions, he was refused employment in favour of two guys that he knows. "Yes, they were black, but they came from very wealthy backgrounds, living in sea-facing Umhlanga apartments" he complains. He is confused about why the employer chose the wealthy applicants over him.

The above raises a number of serious political questions that need urgent interrogation. While affirmative action included elements of social ambivalence in its initial construction, it was no doubt necessary to address inequality based on the logic of the situation in 1994. But part of the initial social ambivalence was the assumption of a homogenised and equal playing field among Black people. This was far from the truth and all major studies continue to show that while inequality between races is closing, inequality within racial groups is growing. Today, the largest wealth gap is not between White and Black, but between the wealthiest Black and the poorest Black.

In South Africa today, the apex of the social strata is being deracialised while the base is being increasingly re-racialised. That would explain why we see fancy 'racially plural' bars and coffee shops where conversations revolve around potholes in the suburbs, how nice it is to be wealthy and 'if only workers could stop this nonsense of strike action.' On the other hand, racial attitudes in working class neighbourhoods are hardening and the talk on the streets and in the shebeens are about how hard survival is becoming and how the 'darkie ou', the 'bruin ou' or the 'charou' managed to get a job. With increasing competition to survive, it is not difficult to understand this process of re-racialisation. In this context, class-based criteria would allow for a deracialisation of the base of the class strata. The problem, however, is that it would also stagnate attempts at deracialising corporate ownership, which remains a challenge in an environment where the economy was and is dominated by Whites. And prominent political scientists have already pointed to the limitations of using purely a class-based indicator for affirmative action.

So, the solution seems to lie in criteria that are more complex and nuanced, taking into account both race and class. This would benefit South Africa's poor, who, by no co-incidence, happen to be overwhelmingly Black. No doubt, moving towards such criteria would not be easy as it would involve the introduction of complex means testing to determine class positioning, which by its nature, would be difficult. But, it needs to be done so we do not continue to have a situation where only the most advantaged of the disadvantaged benefit from affirmative action. And, like a prominent commentator explained recently, attempts at deracialising corporate ownership in terms of the economic empowerment agenda and targets laid out in the sector charters for black ownership and management need to go on. The clear difference in a new system should be a serious attempt at including both race and class in constructing affirmative action.

But taking this seriously also requires us to take a critical position with regard to the neo-liberal dogma that asserts that the whole of society benefits when individuals become very wealthy. Sometimes this is true. But sometimes it is not and we need to face up to the fact that, sometimes, making a rich person richer has the direct result of

making the poor poorer. We need to guard against affirmative action becoming a policy for elite enrichment. It should be a policy for fundamental social progress.

By the way, Jayrajan tells me that he has given up on finding a job. I explain to him what I think should happen in terms of deracialising both the apex and base of the social strata, especially in a context where most working class families with disposal incomes of less than R3000 need to spend more than 50% of that on food. I also tell him that he now is part of what is called the extended definition of unemployment. He responds by telling me that he doesn't care about big words and is prepared to be part of any definition, as long as he can find a job and 'put food on the table'. "Money can't buy happiness, but happiness can't buy groceries," Jayrajan says, in his typical style.