

Identity and crypto-racism: Len Bloom takes issue with Kevin Durrheim's review of his book (PINS 27, 2001)

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I wonder if I'm the best person to comment on Kevin Durrheim's (2001) mostly friendly and favourable review of my book **Identity and ethnic relations in Africa (PINS, 27, 123-125)**? I disagree that universalism and humanism are "of a previous age", and I resent his claim to have found "traces of crypto-racism".

Even the most fleeting glance at recent human history shows how people have justified persecuting and destroying one another by the power of anti-humanist and anti-universalistic ideologies – savagely, crazily, narcissistically, and divisively.

Consider universalism. It should be welcomed in Africa with open arms and a brass band! The world is fragmented.

Africa is too often dismissed as a world apart. Universalism reminds us that Africa is not a world apart, that Africans are people, too. We are just like them and they are just like us – whoever "us" might be. Haven't we learned from Nazi Germany and apartheid-colonialism South Africa what anti-universalism leads to?

I reject the view, implicit in anti-universalism that there are fundamental, bio-cultural differences between groups. If this Goebbels and Verwoerd view is accepted then it follows that sharing, trying to understand, being interested in other groups or cultures are futile efforts. There is no reason to assume that there are no emotionally and socially significant connections between groups, "civilisations", call them what you will. We have all learned from one another, however imperfectly. We are still learning. And if separatisms are weakened, we will go on learning. It is defeatist for a psychologist to hold the implicit view that individually and collectively humanity cannot be better understood, and socially and politically be less dangerously fragmented.

This does not deny the reality of cultural, social and political variants, nor does it deny the primitive separatisms and jealousies that are so destructive. But it is neither fruitless nor invalid to seek similarities and differences and what might cause them.

I resent Durrheim's claim to have inferred "traces of crypto-racism" in my book. If I intended to slip in anything "racist" it would not have been "crypto", hidden! Universalism again: nowhere do I imply that Africa is so hopelessly "different", "inferior", "unchanging", "romantic", "fascinating" ... that it is beyond a non-African's understanding, and should therefore be banished into an African, "non-European" world of its own. Of course I criticise some aspects of "culture", and I will continue to do so.

Observations similar to mine, some of them far sharper, have been published by, among others, Appiah, Hountondji, Irele, Nkrumah, Nyerere.

I cannot imagine why Durrheim “balked” at humanism. Why should a psychologist be startled, disappointed or pulled up by so innocuous an idea? For me humanism has many strands. I believe, though others may not, that humanism holds that progress is not limited to any group or groups, and all societies are capable of change and progress; that progress is secular, and is hampered by political and religious dogma. Moreover, that human life, individually and collectively, can be objectively studied and that something useful may come out of that study. Within a universalistic vision there may be many visions of progress and perfectibility, and that the freedom to choose and to decide need not degenerate into an exclusive, narcissistic, separatist and destructive vision. It is within the scope of a humanist psychology to examine, for example, a society based upon anti-semitism or apartheid or upon one with rigid and repressive class structures.

Alas, humankind is far from a widely-accepted sensitivity to what it means to be human. A humanist psychology is committed, as were Marx and Freud, to confront the individual and collective obstacles to self-awareness, reason, imagination and empathetic understanding. I am so committed. So is my book. So is **PINS**.