

# Bigotry without racism? -- Lessons from Orania

**VADIM NIKITIN - Sep 15 2011 14:21**

"I've heard many people apologise for apartheid, but I haven't seen a single one of them sell their Mercedes and buy a bicycle instead."

Few liberally minded South Africans would disagree with that statement, but many may be surprised to learn that it comes from the Carel Boshoff Jr, leader of this country's last whites-only enclave and son of its founder. Yet Orania, his widely-ridiculed town, has a thing or two to teach its smug liberal critics about decoupling whiteness from white privilege in contemporary South Africa.

Despite being just a tiny pecan-farming community of fewer than 2 000 people, Orania has become an easy media byword for racism and irredentism. The privately owned dorp grants residence only to white Afrikaners and seeks eventual independence. A creepy shrine to apartheid mastermind Hendrik Verwoerd takes pride of place downtown. In a country that still overwhelmingly runs on unskilled black labour, all the manual farm and domestic work in Orania is performed by white residents and seasonal employees. Predictably, tourists and journalists regularly flock to the Karoo outpost for "a chance to gawk or experiment around open racists", in the words of one such "bigotry tourist" writing in the pages of the *Mail & Guardian* last year.

You won't win any Pulitzer prizes for reporting that many, if not most, Oranians dislike black people. Coming overwhelmingly from rural or working-class Afrikaner backgrounds not renowned for racial liberalism to begin with, they suffered hardest from the fall of apartheid. After all, the paternalistic regime had artificially shielded scores of poorly educated Afrikaners from competition with masses of equally low-skilled blacks. Cut down to size, embittered by BEE and often victims of crime, it's not surprising that they have few pleasant words for their new fellow citizens. But does that necessarily make them racist?

Boshoff, a former philosophy professor and direct descendent of Verwoerd, says no. He and his townsfolk claim that, regardless of individual attitudes towards black people, Orania's system of self-reliance prevents them from participating in the structural racism endemic to mainstream South African social and economic life. According to them, liberal whites who live in cities and inevitably employ domestic servants or other cheap black labour, act hypocritically by proclaiming black equality while indirectly engaging in apartheid-style patterns of exploitation. Retreating into his self-sufficient, racially exclusive kibbutz, Boshoff believes, could be the only way for white South Africans to lead a moral life in contemporary South Africa.

"Blacks can't be racist," famously proclaimed Andile Mngxitama. He did not mean that black people are unable to hate whites because of their skin colour. Rather, he meant that racism is a system of exploitation rather than a mere individual feeling of prejudice. As a result, "when whites hate blacks, there are consequences. But when blacks hate whites, there are none." For example, the racism of a white employer can cost a black person his job, compared to the empty anti-white prejudice of an unemployed or otherwise disadvantaged black person. True racism manifests itself in hatred's effects, not the hatred itself. Racism will only come to an end, argues Mngxitama, when whites are rendered incapable of causing harm, regardless of their personal beliefs.

Ironically, by providing a place where whites may hate blacks all they want but be unable to exploit them, Orania has more in common with Mngxitama's radical neo-black-consciousness than with dominant liberal thinking about racism. When Oranians wash their own floors and iron their own shirts and cook their own meals instead of employing blacks to do such things, it may be because they loathe blacks too much to even have them as domestic workers. But so what? Boshoff's Afrikaners are left to their harmless, empty prejudices, but without exploiting anyone. Like Mngxitama's privately and passively hostile blacks, their hatred leaves its targets untouched.

It's all very well for the likes of Samantha Vice, Mark Heywood and Eusebius McKaiser to tell whites to be ashamed and regretful of their colour-determined privilege, but what practical impact can such well-intentioned soul-searching have on the country's structural racism? The earthy Oranians may not talk the talk, but at least they walk the walk. "In Orania, we are not saying sorry [for apartheid] with our mouths," says Boshoff. "We are doing something about it."

Should all whites be packed up and sent to the Karoo for the sake of the country? President Julius Malema will no doubt consider it, but the Oranian model could - and, obviously, should - never be reproduced on a wide scale. Yet, rather than sneer at its obvious bigotry, socially conscious South Africans should be inspired to think beyond prejudice itself. To many black South Africans, when they see a middle-class white person, it doesn't matter whether he is a repentant, guilt-ridden liberal or an unreconstructed AWB sympathiser secretly pining for the bad old days.

What they see is someone whose entire existence, from his or her Woolies bag to his or her suburban garden, is -- by a complex confluence of history, culture and economics -- inextricably tied to their own poverty. His or her pale complexion is just the tip of an iceberg of hurt, an iceberg that cannot be willed away no matter how progressive the beliefs that he or she may hold.

No amount of "rainbow nation" rhetoric, with its blinkered focus on fostering politically correct attitudes and beliefs, will be enough to decisively challenge underlying, structural racism. It's a pity that Orania's unrepentantly retrograde residents have done more on that count than a score of self-flagellating white liberals.

*Vadim Nikitin is a journalist, analyst and blogger. He is currently working on a comparative study of nostalgia in South Africa and Russia.*

**Academic Samantha Vice has caused a storm of controversy with her thoughts on white shame in South Africa. Read the reactions. [view our special report.](#)**



**Source: Mail & Guardian Online**

**Web Address: <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-09-15-bigotry-without-racism--lessons-from-orania>**

