



The Race Paradox of Our Time

By Dr. Lorne Foster

How can we account for the paradox of racial inequality in a professed age of equality? For example, a typical Canadian job ad today might include as an egalitarian mission statement something like the following:

Company X is strongly committed to diversity within its community. The Company especially welcomes applications from visible minority group members, women, Aboriginal persons, persons with disabilities, and others who may contribute to further diversification of ideas.

Or

Company Y is strongly committed to equity in employment and encourages applications from women, Aboriginal people, people of colour and persons with disabilities.

Now given that there are virtually no Black people in any significant positions of power in any of the major social institutions in Canadian society, one might wonder what it means in a contemporary context to be “strongly committed to diversity,” or “committed to equity in employment?” Or, given that the concentration of wealth in the White population continues to increase disproportionately, one might ask what it could possibly mean in the work world to say that “people of colour are encouraged to apply?”

Oddly enough, the answer to this 21st century’s racial paradox was initially anticipated by the man who was recognized in 18th century European circles as the first philosopher of history and culture. In his *Scienza Nuova*, Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, presented the principles of humanity and gave an account of the stages common to the development of all societies in their historical life. According to Vico, human societies progress from barbarism to civilization then back to barbarism again.

In the first stage of civilization – which is a primordial phase of reflective humanity he called the “age of gods” – religion, burial rites, the family, and other basic institutions emerge to lay the foundations of human culture. In the succeeding and advanced reflection of the “age of heroes,” a dominant class of humans – the “heroes” of the evolving culture – emerge, typically, to subjugate the common people. These are men with great physical prowess who inspire fear and admiration in the common people. The latter typically ascribe divine powers to these “elites.” After a period of domination, a third stage – the “age of men or equals” – invariably takes shape in which the common or subdominant people rise up and win equality. But in the process society begins to disintegrate as it returns to a more vile and violent form of barbarism – a kind of rational or reflective barbarism, if you will.

Vico's new science is now, of course, in many respects a very old science in the sense that there is nothing unfamiliar in the theory of the rise and fall of civilizations. Indeed, his conclusion that the natural "course" of human cultures is not linear nor inherently progressive, but cyclical and finite, is widely acknowledged by most serious observers of all cultures. Cultures do not go on forever. They are born and they die; and in their "death" lies the potential to be "reborn" with a more ethical form of humanity.

However, there is a caveat to this theory of history and culture which is not recurrently acknowledged. Although cultures do not go on forever, they often do attempt to resist the inevitability of their own death and rebirth, and in so doing they can be consumed by the self-deceit of their own reflections.

Vico used the term "*reflective barbarism*" to describe this pervasive and prevailing thought-structure in a culture that often functions as an unconscious survival mechanism – both defying factual reality and denying progressive change through an intricate labyrinth of internal rationalizations and subliminal justifications. So, initially primitive cultures begin with the raw exercise of physical force and coercion. And as they become more sophisticated they tend to adapt full-scaled ideologies that perform the same function of sustaining the prevailing patterns of power and privilege. In their later stage, however, when the ethics of force and the limits of ideology are questioned, cultures often resort to a "veneer of civilization and openness" as the final strategic maneuver for maintaining fatiguing social arrangements and ethno-racial dynamics.

When the story of the rise and fall of the Western civilization is finally written, racism will be documented as the cultural convergence point of a reflective barbarism, where the reality of White privilege was located and played out over against the counterfeit overtures to the equality of human life. And in this connection, the now open invitation of the 21st century – "people of colour are encouraged to apply" – will eventually be seen for what it is, and record as just one more meaningless concession in a desperate attempt to postpone the inevitable.