



Apartheid by Another Name

By Dr. Lorne Foster

A Centre for Social Justice study using Statistics Canada income data from 1996 and 1998 showed that White Canadians had a poverty rate of 17.6 percent, compared to 35.6 for racialized minorities. The dramatic differences in poverty rates between White Canadians and members of racialized minorities has been referred to by sociologists as “economic apartheid.”

It is important to understand that the reference to apartheid here, is a sociological and not merely a metaphorical one. It is true that the very word “apartheid” conjures up images of police-state oppression. This is not without reason. For apartheid was historically introduced to the world and into law in South Africa in 1948 by the Africaner-based Nationalist Party, and subsequently became the most universally reviled system of institutionalized racial segregation known in the twentieth century. Its creation codified the separation of the races into the political, social, economic and cultural infrastructure of the society. For instance, the notorious Population Registration Act, was passed in 1950 to regulate the influx of migrant labourers by imposing compulsory registration according to race and ethnic group. The Group Areas Act then outlined where Blacks could or could not live. Finally, a series of discriminatory practices were instituted to deny Black access to normal amenities – including White-only beaches, the prohibition of mixed marriages or even mixed sexual relationships, and “pass laws” dictating where people could travel.

Now, even though Canada is not an Africaner-like police-state, the comparison made by sociologists recognizes that apartheid is fundamentally a principle of race relations and not merely a system of segregation. The foundational principle of apartheid is “racial hegemony” – managing the presence of large populations of Non-Whites without undermining White power and privilege. In this respect, apartheid doesn’t have to be formalized to exist, it can actually be persevered informally in the absence of an infrastructure of laws and institutions to support it. Today, formerly official and overt systems of domination and racial hierarchy are primarily being replaced by unofficial and covert systems that entrench power in the workplace along racial lines through racialized immigration, corporate cronyism, patronage, and other preferential hiring policies and practices that function to control access to resources and jobs.

In short, the principle of apartheid now resides primarily in the workplace, rather than in the rule of law.

Indeed, even South Africans are now coming to understand that a non-segregationist society is not synonymous with racial equality. While the release of Black leader Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990, together with the conferral of universal enfranchisement and multiparty elections in 1994, marked the dawning of a hopeful new era in South Africa, a painful reality is beginning to sink in – ballot-box democracy cannot overcome the dependency and impoverishment of three centuries of colonialist domination. Blacks may now control politics, but Whites remain in charge of the economy. Wealth continues to be concentrated in the

White population, while 70 percent of Blacks live below the poverty line. Black workers earn about one-eighth of the monthly income of Whites. Black infants are six times more likely to die than Whites. And illiteracy rates are 1 percent among Whites and 46 percent among Blacks. With 5 percent of the population owning 90 percent of the wealth, the battleground has shifted from the politics of race to an apartheid base colour-coded economics. The entrenchment of economic inequality suggest that the new South Africa may be little more than a facade behind which apartheid continues by another name.

Similarly, in Canada, crisis levels in visible minority unemployment and poverty reflect the fact that incomes for people of colour trail those of White mainstream Canadians by 15 per cent across the board, and the situation is deteriorating. More specifically, according to a 2001 report by the National Anti-Racism Council (Saidullah 2001), 28% of racialized minority women were low-income earners, compared with 20% of all women. The average annual income for a racialized minority woman in Canada was \$13,800, \$1800 less than the average for all women (\$15,600). The earnings of immigrant women of non-European origin were 90% of the earnings of immigrant women of European origin.. While the average income of racialized minority men was \$22,608, \$6,769 less than the figure for other man (\$29,377), which accounts for an traumatizing disparity of 33%. Or in other words, racialized minority men in Canada are often compelled to live, and try to provide for their families in this society, on approximately two-thirds of the income of their White counterparts.

The inverse corollary to this race-based economic disparity is that dysfunctional families and chronic social problems are more highly concentrated in racialized communities – which can also be informed by a comparative analysis. For instance, like (the Black townships of) South Africa, race related-violence is rife in Canada, particularly in highly urbanized regions; a disproportionate percentage of crime is committed by racialized minorities in racialized minority communities; resulting in an ever-growing threat to the social fabric of society and attendant increases in the counter-productive economics of more and more policing and prisons.

In the end, however, from a sociological perspective, if we are ever to begin taking positive action to address the vicious cycle of psycho-social trauma ravaging many racialized communities today, here and around the globe, it is imperative that we begin by first critically examining and thinking through all of the covert systems of colour-coded economics that are crystallizing the 21st century.