

Lecture held by **Abram de Swaan** at the NiNsee Amsterdam, 30 6 2013
at the eve of the celebration to commemorate the abolition of slavery and
remember the victims

THE PAINS OF VICTIMHOOD AND THE GAINS OF MILITANCY; 150 YEARS AFTER SLAVERY

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we commemorate the belated, partial abolition of slavery, one hundred fifty years ago. The masters were compensated, the former slaves forced to continue working on the plantations.

A century and a half is long ago. An adult descendant of slaves must be the greatgreatgreatgrandchild of the last ancestors to live under slavery. Indeed, it is all so long ago.

But slavery lasted for so long, for two and a half centuries. Ten generations lived as slaves from parents to children, in dire exploitation and the utmost humiliation.

In fact, all over Russia forms of servitude prevailed until deep in the nineteenth century. In the colonies, there were forced laborers and indentured workers throughout that century and after. In the industrial cities of Europe and the USA factory workers lived under material conditions hardly better than those of slaves. But they, serfs, indentured workers and proletarians, were not robbed of their humanity. They were still recognized as human beings in their own right, even if they lacked all the guarantees and freedoms that are called inalienable human rights..

Slaves did not. Clerics conspired to abuse the Bible in order to deny people of color their humanity. Lawyers twisted the laws to take their human rights away. And in the end, biologists, and social scientists concocted racist dogma that assigned 'Negroes' to a different race, subhuman, not quite part of human kind.

This did not end in 1863, it went on for another fifty years, for another century.

When the slaves were liberated from their chains they were once more caught in a web of racist doctrine that impeded their effort at full emancipation.

It is very hard to tell what two hundred fifty years of slavery did to Blacks in the New World. It is difficult to know what another century of insistent racism did to their descendants.

We, today, in this country, may congratulate ourselves that racism has disappeared from view, it is no longer openly professed, it is no longer manifest in public places. Or is it?

The Netherlands today still is a society where Blacks rarely achieve prominence, except in sports and entertainment. How many black professors are there in the universities, how many members of parliament, cabinet ministers, chief executives of corporations, judges... Yes, they began to arrive here in great numbers not even forty years ago. It takes time for newcomers to reach the highest circles. But in the meantime, in the movies, on TV, and even in actual reality, Black people are usually

in subaltern positions. And that is how they see themselves and that is how their children learn to see them and that is how other Dutch people perceive them. It is not so much a matter of race, as of class.

But all of us, in the Netherlands and in surrounding societies, would rather not hear either of these words, 'race' or 'class'. Yet, these are the two dimensions within which the past of slavery is reproduced in the present.

Artwell Cain has identified the three D's of coping with the heritage of slavery. The native Dutch are inclined to *deny* the past and present impact of slavery: It is too long ago, anyway, and it is all over now. The Surinamese descendants of those made into slaves are prone to *demand* compensation or at least satisfaction, Dr. Cain says. The Antilleans, in his characterization, tend to *distance* themselves from their history of slavery and its persistent aftereffects.

Except for a special day such as *keti koti*, the commemoration of the abolition of slavery, the subject is almost entirely absent from public discourse. When Black people meet other Dutchmen, color, let alone race or the slavery past are not a subject of conversation, they are discretely passed over.

As far as I know, and I don't know very far, these themes – color, race, the heritage of slavery – are topics that Blacks keep mostly to themselves. Social psychological experiments show that even black toddlers are very color conscious, in a negative way. Black psychotherapy patients almost invariably turn out to be highly preoccupied with matters of race and color, according to the rare, anonymized patient descriptions by psychotherapists. The social repression of the themes of race and color and slavery, the general denial by the indigenous Dutch, reinforces the tendency among individual Blacks to avoid thoughts and feelings about these issues or keep them to themselves. If Blacks do express themselves, it is almost invariably among their peers, Blacks among Blacks (how do I know? Good question.)

As a consequence, race, color and the burdens of slavery are overwhelmingly private concerns, private troubles.

'Nobody knows the troubles I've seen'.

- No, how could they, if you don't tell them openly what you went through.

In other words, these personal troubles have not been adequately reworded as public issues.

There are many pitfalls in trying to translate private feelings into public emotions. The past of profound humiliation did not end in 1863, and not in 1913, and not in 1963. It still evokes shame and anger. People who are overcome by shame tend to be silent, people carried away by rage tend to overshout. The native Dutch tend to complain about those few Surinamese activists who are loud, they should be much more worried about the vast majority who are silent.

When the descendants of slavery express themselves in public, one stance is that of the indignant victim. No one understands what they went through. Now they are entitled to apologies and indemnification. This, indeed, once seemed to be a viable strategy in a society such as the Netherlands with its rather generous cultural and welfare provisions. But there is a pitfall in the self-presentation of the victim as

victim: if you were so damaged by your collective past there now must still be something wrong with you.

This can be seen, for example, in the discussions about the Caribbean family pattern as one aspect of the heritage of slavery. On the one hand it works as an overall excuse, on the other hand it entails a blanket disqualification. If slavery has destroyed the coherence of Black families, that can only mean that present black families are inadequate. That is a tricky argument. It turns the inheritors of Slavery into clients for psychotherapists and social workers. Most likely, the better explanation is that Black family patterns are quite adequate arrangements under conditions of continual insecurity of income and work in a discriminatory labor market. The fact that that labor market is loaded against Black people in itself has everything to do with the Slavery past.

The public presentation of the slavery heritage as victimhood holds a promise of gain, but is easily turned against the victims themselves.

There is a peculiar and perverse relation to that other human disaster in modern history, the extermination of millions of Jews (and so many other people). Many Blacks feel that it is impossible to explain how disastrous Slavery was, unless they equate it with that one disaster that by now everybody recognizes, the Holocaust. But the Holocaust is itself a misnomer, and to apply it to something so different as Slavery as a 'Black Holocaust' is a double misnomer.

Slavery lasted so long and affected so many, it was so deeply offensive and destructive, it deserves to be recognized as something *sui generis*, of its own kind. But the victims of the Holocaust by now, in Western Europe and the US, have gained such wide and profound recognition, while the descendants of Slavery still must do without similar recognition of their past suffering. This evokes a 'Holocaust envy': the Jews after all have got it made. Everybody respects their suffering.

The Jews, on their part, sometimes show a Holocaust jealousy: the Holocaust is theirs and nobody else's. Anybody who diverts the term Holocaust to highlight their own historical suffering tries to steal empathy from them under false pretenses.

In fact, this comparison with the Holocaust does nothing to clarify the public debate, it only blocks the understanding of the Slavery past by forcing it into an alien mold. Slavery as it was, was bad enough, it was neither worse or less bad, it was horrible in its own way.

There is not much explicit racism in Dutch society. That is in part a result of the Nazi occupation of the country almost seventy years ago: 'That never again.' There hardly is institutionalized racism. And still the dice are loaded against people of color. Racism in this country, as in neighboring societies, is a covert, an insidious affair. People have racist thoughts, they make racist jokes among one another and accept that others tell them in their presence, giggling surreptitiously. There even is a trick to get away with racist, sexist and anti-Semitic remarks: 'What I am saying now may not be politically correct'. This even makes the speaker sound daring and non-conformist while he mouths his bigoted clichés.

Racism has gone underground, it is part of private conversations, it works stealthily when people choose to hire employees, select new members for their club, recruit promising students for internships and so on. 'This has nothing to do with color, we

just want somebody, how should I say "compatible"., people who will feel at ease here'.

Racism in this society has gone in hiding, even in people's minds. It avoids conscious thought: 'me, racist ideas? I am colorblind, I even have black friends ('even?'). But there it is, in the back of their minds, just below awareness level. Not just in white people, also in black people.

Imagine, you have a worrisome medical complaint and have made an appointment at the clinic. There you are, waiting for the specialist to appear. There comes the doctor: a pretty woman this side of thirty. For one split-second you think: 'I don't want a young woman, I want an experienced, reliable middle, aged man'. I call that 'shutter time', the 1/10 of a second that your conscious mind sees a bright image of its own repressed prejudices. And then you correct yourself, or even ignore your sexist flash.

Let's make matters worse. There comes the specialist: a lanky, black man with an Afro. Shutter time: for one split-second you catch yourself thinking, I don't want a black doctor, I want a Caucasian middle-aged male to look into complaints. But already you have corrected yourself and made a full reversal: 'Oh, how lovely, an allochthone, multicultural, rainbow cardiologist.' But you and I know about our shutter-time.

[Let me give you one last example. This time the joke is on me. When I just started as an author, in my early twenties, I was about to leave for the USA, and a Dutch radio station had proposed I do a weekly spoken column for them from America. I was thrilled, of course. When, at the end of the conversation with the head of the station, the subject of payment was raised. I stated my fee. And he responded, 'that is quite a sum, we here at the radio station don't care that much about money.'

Immediately I felt ashamed. 'We at the station' as opposed to 'me', obviously a greedy Jew. Now you see... And in my embarrassment I accepted the smaller fee they offered. It never occurred to me that if they at the station really did not care that much about money, they could have paid me the higher amount. I had been caught in the web of my own inner prejudices about Jews that I too had absorbed from a surreptitiously anti-Semitic environment.]

Is it that bad, am I, are you really a racist at heart? No, of course not. Throughout our lifetime in this society we have absorbed zillions of images, millions of remarks that implicitly showed black people in subaltern positions, white people in positions of authority, ten times, one hundred times a day. How could we not have acquired a racially framed perception of the world. The opposite is true, the fact that we try to correct these racially framed perceptions, that we try to banish them from our thoughts, testifies to our effort to resist racism in the world and in ourselves. But that does not mean that our innermost thoughts are entirely free of it.

Allow me to give an example of private troubles that begin to transform into public issues. The Dutch celebrate Saint Nicolas, which I consider the heyday of the annual cycle in the Netherlands.

Part of the ritual is the appearance of a little gnome in seventeenth century servant costume, and... in blackface, throwing candy to all children who have been 'good' in the past year, threatening 'bad' children with his rod, all in a sort of mumbo jumbo that might pass for Sambo talk. It all was good, healthy fun, until a few hundred

thousand dark skinned people appeared on these shores, many speaking Dutch with a distinct accent, but without either rod or candy.

All of a sudden the good-natured joke turned into an embarrassment, like students in class caught in a spoof of the teacher upon his unexpected entrance. Except that black Pete happened to be the servant in the play. The Dutch decided to act as if there was no connection whatsoever between the black caricature and the real black people who had turned up in such numbers: "Black Pete had nothing to do with slavery or with blacks, he was a totally disconnected figure out of an age-old Dutch national tradition, entirely innocent of any racial connotation whatsoever (and of course this national tradition had nothing to do with a history of three centuries of slavery). The Blacks were the aggressive ones, spoiling the party for the natives and denigrating cherished folklore."

Most Black people decided to turn a blind eye.... act as if they did not mind and as if it was just an innocent children's pastime that one should allow the Dutch natives.

But if the native Dutch take Black Dutchmen seriously, they should respect their feelings, even if they do not share them. They might make some allowance for Black sensitivities and paint Pete's face in all those gaudy colors they paint their faces in for football matches and the King's birthday celebration: multicolored Petes as a minor adaptation to the hundred of thousands of dark people who have come to live here in the past half century or so and who have adapted in so many ways to the manners of the native Dutch. Living together is a two-way process.

What we are talking about here, are the difficulties of translating private troubles into public issues.

But there is not only shame and mourning about slavery, in private, in confidential talk with peers. There is also, and increasingly so, another emotion: anger. Anger can be controlled and channeled for public purposes: then it becomes militancy. Militancy is the collective, controlled, and organized expression of private and spontaneous anger.

This certainly is a time of contestation. Demonstrations flare up all over the world, suddenly and in rather similar manner, in distant places.

But that is not yet the same as militancy, which requires a long term vision, organization, persistence. Quite old fashioned virtues, I admit. But it is an illusion that anything less will do.

I think Black people will have to organize, as Blacks, with their political allies, to gain recognition for the historical disaster that was Slavery. They must organize together with others to overcome the consequences of past oppression and humiliation that today work out as discrimination, in education, in housing and in the labor market.

Why is it, that in this society those who have little in the way of capital, authority, connections, the poorest, the least skilled, the excluded are also least inclined to use their one tiny ticket to political influence, the vote; why do they not use their one power resource, collective action in the form of demonstrations, occupations, strikes?

We are here in the much reduced headquarters of NiNSee, the 'National' (mind you, 'national', that is 'of the nation', Institute for the Dutch slavery past and its heritage.

The Institute was to do research about that past, to educate people about its enduring legacy and to commemorate past suffering. The Dutch were almost the last to grant freedom to the slaves and the first to forget all about it.

Only by the time hundreds of thousands of the descendants of their one time slaves came to live among the native Dutch gradually the memory of those dismal times was revived.

Slavery and the slave trade were an injustice, maybe the greatest injustice the Dutch ever committed. And even as they committed those deeds they knew very well that they were breaking their own religious and earthly laws.

Only by denying the humanity of the Africans could they gloss over their crimes, as if their own laws did not apply to these creatures. But the humanity of each and every person that had been enslaved was an undeniable fact, for everyone to see.

Ever so haltingly, the awareness dawned upon the Dutch that slavery is not just a thing of the past (*'it's soooo long ago'*), but that these centuries of dehumanization still work in the minds of the descendants of slaves, and in the minds of the native Dutch:

NiNsee was a gesture of contrition, an institutional way to apologize for past crimes of the Netherlands towards its Afro-Caribbean population. That is no small matter. It is about restoring one's own honor by honoring the humanity of the other. It is about a debt of honor. You cannot just withdraw that gesture when it happens to be a convenient way to cut costs. To retract that gesture is dishonorable. It was and is a mortal insult to all Africans they once enslaved.

It shows that they are still not taken seriously, not their past of slavery, nor their present presence in this country.

What happened to NiNsee shows in miniature the way Blacks are still treated in this country. NiNsee has become its own subject.

I must make an exception for the city of Amsterdam, which has shown in words and actions that it understands what is at stake here. (It is apparently possible, after all.)

Tomorrow you will stand with representatives of the Dutch government. They will speak pious and glowing words. They know, you know, we all know, that these are meaningless words spoken by authorities without honor.

The Afro-Caribbeans, and many, many native Dutch people have allowed this to happen, have let themselves be mortally insulted. That, now is our shame. I said that we must transform private troubles into public issues, transform personal shame and anger into collective protest and organized militancy.

lezingThere is a struggle to be fought, not just by Afro-Caribbeans, but by so many people who understand what this is all about and who will stand by them.

Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights.

Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight.

I've said enough. Now, it's your turn.