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PBM - 20
An Example of
Economic Integration

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

A few days ago I had lunch in the office staff restaurant of the Hercules and Phillips Bicycle manufacturing plant at Springs, about 30 miles southeast of Johannesburg. Three hundred yards from where I was sitting 576 Africans were just finishing their noonday meal of mealie "pup" (a dish made of ground corn that closely resembles Cream of Wheat), minced meat (extra-fine ground hamburger), a few vegetables and tea.

As I whittled away at my liver-and-bacon the conversation between me and my four luncheon companions swung away from Senator McCarthy, the H-Bomb and the chances of an American depression and came back to South Africa in general and the bicycle factory in particular. "What do you think of the plant?" the neatly-dressed young man across the table asked.

"It looks very efficient," I said, "but I have a couple of hypothetical questions to ask. They will probably sound foolish to you, but I think perhaps they are important." At this serious note the others around the table paused in their eating. "Suppose that all the non-Europeans in the plant walked out tomorrow. What would happen?" There was a moment's silence, then a burst of laughter as the ridiculousness of my question struck home.

"What a question!" said the young stenographer across the table, grinning broadly. "It's simple. We wouldn't be able to make any bicycles. We'd all have to go home." The three others were still smiling as they nodded agreement.

"Well then," I asked again, "what would happen if all the Europeans walked out tomorrow?" I saw the beginnings of four smiles--as though the thought was going to be as amusing as the previous one--then the smiles faded.

"I'm not sure," said the stenographer. "I guess the Natives would go on turning out bicycles--at least until the machinery broke down or the building got so full of 'cycles that they couldn't work any more." There was a thoughtful silence around the table as my companions mulled over the problem and jabbed at their apple tarts.

"One thing, though," said the young man on my right. "They might keep turning out bicycles, but every bicycle they made would be the same model they had been working on when the Europeans left. They wouldn't be able to change that. And they wouldn't know enough to be able to sell the bicycles they made or keep up the stock of parts."

This snatch of conversation, although whimsical, shows something of the essence of what is meant by "economic integration" (PBM - 19). Last week I spent several days at the Hercules and Phillips plant in an attempt to see just what the place of the African is in South African secondary industry. I took my first trip through the works with a company draftsman. We walked into the building through a large, truck-sized door. We were in a stock room, surrounded by steel shelves and racks that ran up the walls around us. African workers in blue coveralls were moving among the piles of pig brass, steel

rods and pedals. A few of them had pieces of paper in their hands--and after a bit of concentrated reading they would dart to the specified bin and pull out the required number of handlebar grips or unfinished tubing.

"These Natives, as you can see, can read and write," my guide told me. "We don't need a foreman in here--these men are on their own." From what I had been told previously, I expected that the stockboys would be Africans. That they were unsupervised was a surprise to me. But I was in for more of a surprise.

From the stock room we walked through a wide door into the basic assembly division. It is in this section, which occupies one end of the building, that all the rough work of assembling the frame of the bicycle is done. The first man we saw was an African. He was operating a small drill press, smoothly and effortlessly. "I thought Africans aren't supposed to do this sort of work," I said. "I thought they were supposed to stick to hewing of wood and drawing of water."

"The rules say that Africans can do repetition work," came the reply. "Look closer." I peered over the worker's shoulder and saw that he was fitting the key joint of the bicycle--the joint down at the pedals where all the bars of the frame come together--into a permanently set frame, or jig, which held the joint at precisely the right angle for the drill press. "He can't go wrong," I was told. "All he has to do is put the joint in that jig--and the joint will only go in the right way--pull the handle, and the hole is drilled in the proper place."

We moved along the workbench and found a group of three Africans surrounded by component parts of the bicycle frame. They were picking up the parts in a certain order and placing them in a set of clamps, forcing the ends of the tubing into the proper holes in the joints and holding them there by driving in brads, or short nails. "The same thing applies here," my guide told me. "It's impossible for these fellows to put the parts in the clamps the wrong way--they just won't fit."

Throughout the rest of the factory the work went on the same way. The frames were preheated and coated at the joints with molten brass--the heaters and brazers were Africans. The excess brass was removed in baths of acid--the men dipping the frames were Africans. The handlebars were bent from pieces of straight tubing in special machines--the men running the machines were Africans. The handlebars were put into brackets which could then be attached to the front wheel assembly--the men doing the electric welding in carefully preset machines were Africans.

There were presses making lamp brackets, presses making drive wheels, drill presses making pedal bars, rolling machines shaping fenders, presses making all the parts of the front wheel fork, machines chrome-plating handlebars, automatic lathes cutting metal bars for nuts and bolts, grinders polishing rims--all the work was done by pre-adjusted machinery and at every machine was an African operator or attendant.

In the paint shop there were Africans using spray guns on bicycle parts, Africans loading the painted parts into the drying oven, Africans unloading them at the other end, Africans putting on red and gold decorative lines with little wheeled brushes, Africans wheeling the painted parts to the assemblers and Africans putting trade-mark decals on back fenders.

Even in the final assembly line the work was done by Africans. There were Africans doing the delicate work of fastening wheel hubs to rims by means of spokes--and then following up by tightening and loosening each individual spoke until the

balance of the wheel was perfect. The perfection of the result was measured by an African boss boy. There was an African who could take a finished wheel and wrap a tire and tube around it in six seconds. Africans were picking up tiny ball bearings with tweezers and putting them into moving parts of pedals, axles and steering assemblies. There were Africans walking slowly beside an endless belt attaching wheels, chain guards, handlebar-operated brake fittings, chain drives and lamps to frames. One African at the end of the belt adjusted nuts and bolts so that front and back wheels ran smoothly and in perfect line.

For two days I wandered around the plant, watching the work in each division. The Africans were doing it all--running their preset machines smoothly and assembling finished bicycles as regularly as clockwork. I watched two men who were operating a machine which cut fenders from a roll of sheet steel. They worked almost automatically, pushing steel into the machine until it would go no further, stepping on a pedal which sent down a blade, and stacking the cut pieces on a wheeled frame. When the steel was used up, they stopped. For a few minutes they stood idly--then two Africans appeared, pushing a hand truck loaded with another roll of steel. The four of them loaded the roll onto the machine, the two men with the truck went away, and the machine operators began turning out fenders again.

According to the personnel records, there are 150 European employees. These include stenographers, draftsmen, typists, switchboard operators, clerks, accountants and skilled factory workers. The latter work in a special section of the plant cut off from the rest by a steel mesh fence. Behind the fence are lathes, drill presses and other non-automatic machinery. The European workmen use these machines to turn out spare parts for African-operated machines and make jigs and forms to prevent African operators from making any move but the right move.

In each department there is a white foreman. In some departments the foreman has an assistant who spends most of his time on the factory floor as a trouble-shooter. At two or three points in the manufacture of the bicycle, there is a white inspector who checks to see that the parts that are coming through are up to specifications. That is the sum total of white factory labor at Hercules-Phillips. There is not one European workman who actually makes or assembles any part of a bicycle. This is the reality behind the dry-sounding statistic that in 1947-48 there were 210,000 Europeans employed in secondary industry as compared to 401,000 non-Europeans.[1] It is the reality behind the fact that by 1950 non-Europeans constituted 16.4 per cent of the skilled, 67.1 per cent of the semi-skilled and 98.5 per cent of the unskilled wage-earners in the Union.[2]

During the afternoon of my second day at Hercules-Phillips, I dropped into the office of Mr. Palfrey, the man in charge of hiring and firing factory workers. I had met him earlier in the day, and although I learned later that he was about to retire, his appearance showed that his retirement was not because of disability or desire, but because of an arbitrary age limit. I also learned that he is of British stock, he has been working with African labor for the past 40 years, and after his retirement he plans to move into a trailer and spend the rest of his days wandering from place to place in South Africa.

1. 1951 Hoernle Memorial Lecture, "Some Aspects of the South African Industrial Revolution" by Dr. H. J. van Eck. Other figures from his lecture, sponsored by the Institute of Race Relations, show: 1937, 143,000 Europeans, 204,000 non-Europeans.
2. Figures compiled from Table 34, Report of Department of Labor for 1950.

"I thought you'd be coming along about now," he said as I walked into his office at about 4 p.m. "Have a cup of tea." The tea poured out, strong and dark, from a well-worn pot. "Got a lot of questions, have you?" he asked, holding out the sugar bowl.

"Yes," I said. "I wrote a lot of them out on this list. I could answer a lot of them myself, but they are the kind of questions that are brought up time and again and I thought it might be a good idea to get the answers direct from the source."

"I'll answer anything you have there," he said, nodding at the piece of paper in my hand, "and probably a lot more. Let's hear what you want to know."

"Well," I said, opening the question sheet, "what work is there that Africans do that you consider skilled or semi-skilled?"

"The Government says we don't have any skilled Native workers," came the answer. "For the good of the company, I agree with them. But here's the semi-skilled job list for the bicycle-building industry." He opened a drawer and pulled out a thumbed, worn blue folder. "Semi-skilled, semi-skilled," he murmured as he hunted. "Oh yes, here it is. The highest grade of semi-skilled Natives we have are what the Government board calls Rate Eight. Once a Native gets into Rate Eight he can't go any farther. The jobs in Rate Eight are brazing, dip brazing, final bicycle adjustment, cutting and welding and truing wheels. You've seen all that, I guess."

"Yes. The thing that surprises me, though, is truing the wheel. If ever I saw a skilled job, that was it. One mistake and the wheel would buckle as soon as someone got on the 'cycle--or at least the tire would wear unevenly."

"Well, the answer to that one is that board didn't have anything to go by when we started making bicycles--especially as far as truing wheels is concerned. So they put it down as semi-skilled even though it does take a lot of skill. It was good luck for us, otherwise we'd have to hire Europeans to do it. Then"--he went back to the blue folder--"there's Rate Nine which is assembling frames, attending automatic grinders, buffing, machine riveting, and operating power and manual presses. Below that there's Rate Ten which is applying transfers (decals), fitting tires, debrazing, grinding spoke ends, loading and unloading the chrome-plating baths and attending the furnaces."

"How much do these jobs pay?" I asked.

Palfrey ran his thumb down the list of ratings. "Rate Eight gets a shilling and a penny (16¢) an hour for the first three months and a shilling and a tickey (18¢) an hour after that. Rate Nine gets ten pence ha'penny (11¢) an hour for the first three months and a shilling an hour (15¢) after that. Rate Ten gets nine pence (10¢) an hour for the first three months and ten pence ha'penny (11¢) an hour afterwards."

"If Europeans did the same work would they get the same pay?" I asked.

"Can't say," Palfrey answered. "It's against every rule in the book for Europeans to do the same work as Africans."

"All right," I said, going back to my list of questions, "where do your non-European workers live?"

"Well, about 60 per cent of them live in the Springs municipal location about five miles from the plant. The rest live in a municipal hostel that serves this industrial area. It's only about a half-mile away. It takes," he continued in answer to another question, "about 40 minutes for a Native to get back to the municipal location at night and he usually rides a bicycle or takes a bus. The bus costs one shilling sixpence (about 21¢) for a weekly ticket."

When I asked "Just how permanent do you think your African labor is?" Palfrey thought for a moment--then he reached up and pulled a record book from a long pigeon hole in his desk.

"Our monthly turnover is about 14 per cent. That means that out of every 100 employees, 14 must be replaced each month. Roughly speaking, the majority of those 14 workers are the ones in the lowest brackets--common laborers or Group Ten semi-skilled men. I've found that if you give a Native a good job he likes to keep it. The Native with a good job is the kind that brings his family from the reserve--or tries to. He's not likely to give up his job without good reason. I'd say the average employee stays a little more than a year but there are a good many who have been with us ever since the plant opened (under Hercules-Phillips) 4½ years ago.

"Just a minute," Palfrey said as I was about to go on to another question. "There are a few things that you people from overseas and a lot of South Africans don't understand about Native workers. A lot of people say that an African is just naturally more stupid than a European. That just isn't so. I've got a few European workers here that I'd replace with Natives in a minute if I were allowed to. A lot of them have real ability with intricate machines. More and more have been to school and can read and write--well, too, which is more than I can say for a lot of Europeans. Some say Natives from South Africa aren't as intelligent as Natives from up north (Central and East Africa) and some say just the opposite. That's a lot of foolishness too--there are intelligent Natives and there are stupid Natives just the same as there are intelligent and stupid Europeans. I'm not saying it will happen tomorrow or next year, but the time's coming--it's bound to--when there will be Natives doing white men's work and doing it well. You can't go on protecting the white worker forever." He picked up his cup and took a sip of tea, frowning when he discovered that it had grown cold.

"Do Africans cause more accidents than Europeans? Are they more careless? Are they more likely to malinger or not show up at all?"

"The answer to all those questions is largely yes," Palfrey said, pouring a fresh cup of tea. "They just haven't learned anything about responsibility to the job. They work well when they have to or when they want to, but if anything comes up they'll drop a delicate jig or play sick. Look at this," he said, picking up his record book. "Every Monday there's always this long list--15 or 16 Natives--who don't show up because they don't feel well after the Sunday beer-drink or because they've got the business end of somebody's knife in them somewhere. They'll learn some day, but as things stand now you have to watch them like a hawk and not take any foolishness."

"What about labor conditions?" I asked. "Are there any African labor unions or labor associations? Do the European labor unions object to the presence of Africans in semi-skilled positions?"

"The answer to that one is easy. This is an open shop. There aren't any Native

labor unions because Native labor unions are not recognized as bona fide labor unions in South Africa. But I can tell you from past experience that if there's ever a question of taking a European off a certain machine and replacing him with a Native, for instance in the gold mines, you're in for trouble. Oh, and that next question"--he put a finger on my sheet of paper--"there are no pension plans or health schemes for non-Europeans. The Government is supposed to take care of that. And as for leaves (vacations), for every 15 days we give a European, we give 10 days to a Native. Here, give me that list and I'll just run down it. The answer to Number 37, Are there any non-European white-collar workers at Hercules-Phillips? is yes, six. Most of them work for me and a few of them are in charge of stock rooms and so forth.

"Say, that's a good question you have here--If all of your non-European employees walked out tomorrow, how would it affect production? I can tell you that production would just stop. We couldn't do a thing. And this next question about the Europeans leaving--well the Europeans supply all the know-how and the money, but I dare say that if all the Europeans walked out tomorrow there would still be a few bicycles made." There was a silence as Palfrey went over the questions. He finished his tea and put down the cup.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be too good on this last set of questions about apartheid. Why don't you ask Commander Watkins--he can give you some answers about that and maybe help you with these questions about the bicycle plant in England." He pushed the questions back at me and we both stood up. "Enjoyed the talk," he said. "Come and see us any time you're in Springs."

I got my chance to ask (former) Commander G. R. G. Watkins the remaining questions on my list the following day as we were having lunch together at the Springs Country Club. Watkins, a pukka Britisher, served in the Royal Navy during the last war and came to South Africa as part of the Tube Investment Ltd. expeditionary force looking for new worlds to conquer. Since Sir Francis de Guingand, managing director of Hercules-Phillips, was ailing it was he who had made the arrangements for my visit to the plant at Springs.

"I'm afraid I've got some put-up questions about apartheid to ask you," I told him as we stirred our coffee in front of a window overlooking the golf course. "It's about the Nationalist claim that when apartheid runs its natural course all the Africans will return to the reserves and secondary industry will have to move to the borders of the reserves to find labor." As I spoke I pulled my sheaf of questions from my inside coat pocket.

"Let's see what you have there," he said, holding out a well-manicured hand. He began to read over the questions I pointed out--then began to laugh. "I'm sorry," he said, "it's not because your questions are badly put--it's just that the whole thing looks rather silly put down on paper like that. I'll just answer them in order as briefly as I can." He began to read aloud. "Do you think that if this plant were moved to the edge of an African reserve it could (a) produce more bicycles? No. (b) Produce them more cheaply? Definitely not. I don't know what sort of economists they have in the Government, but they are definitely very foolish. It's obvious to me that a manufacturer doesn't build a plant in a certain place just because there is a plentiful labor supply nearby. He builds it where he does because it's near his source of raw materials or near a market or seaport or there is cheap power and water or good transportation. But the labor supply, good heavens--it's the most mobile factor of the lot. Where there is good employment there will always be a supply of labor.

"(c) Sell more bicycles? No. The main market for bicycles is among Natives in the urban areas, not in the reserves. Natives leave the reserves to make money in the towns--so the towns are the best markets. There are many Natives there who want bicycles to get to work and who are earning money with which to buy them. (d) Could get labor more easily? Perhaps. (e) Could get parts more easily? No, not unless all the parts manufacturers also moved to the edges of the reserves and that's bloody unlikely. (f) Could send the finished product to the market more cheaply? That's foolish. Even if the Government builds a railway line out to the factory we would still have to ship the finished bicycles miles more to get them to market--and shipping rates are based on miles, not apartheid. (g) Find transportation facilities equal to those at Springs? Perhaps, if the Government wants to finance the building of them. (h) Find power supplies equal to those at Springs? Not on your life. (i) Find the same supply of European skilled labor and office management staff at the same cost and in the same numbers? No, you'd never get Europeans to live out there. Look at the trouble Anglo-American is having getting European shift bosses and so forth to go to Welkom in the Orange Free State. (j) Find an equally well-trained non-European labor supply? We might get one if apartheid really works and all Natives are returned to the reserves. But I frankly believe that apartheid can't possibly work--it involves too much expense and trouble, not to mention racial trouble and pressure from overseas. (k) Be built inexpensively there because of the abundance of cheap labor? No, it's the transportation costs for all the building materials that would finish that idea." He handed the paper back to me.

"I have a few more questions," I said, turning over the paper. "Has there ever been a comparison made between the efficiency of non-European bicycle-makers here and bicycle-makers in Great Britain?"

"Not officially, but I've made a few estimates of my own," Watkins said. "I would say that the Natives are about 80 per cent as good as the European women who work in Birmingham. But there are funny quirks to it, though. For example, I expect you saw the Natives putting the red and gold lines on the fenders and frames as they came from the enamel dryer. Well, those men can put lines on frames and fenders just as well and much faster than the workers in Birmingham. And another thing. The fellows you saw truing the wheels by tightening the spokes. Their efficiency compares very favorably with anything done overseas."

"How are the company's relations with the African employees?" I asked. "Did you have any trouble in 1952 during the African National Congress's defiance campaign?"

"The answer to that, I'm glad to say, is no. None whatever. And another thing, I'm not sure why, but we never seem to be bothered by agitators and African National Congressmen in or around the plant. Which is something to be thankful for, because if a bad type really went to work, he might easily stir up trouble. And trouble among the African employees would close us down."

"That brings me to a question I've asked several times before," I said. "What would happen at the plant if all the non-European employees didn't come to work tomorrow. Or, say, if only 50 per cent of the non-European employees came to work tomorrow?"

"We'd have to close the plant. We couldn't make one bicycle, as things stand now, without Native labor. And I've heard about the other half of your question. If the Europeans didn't come to work I think we could still make a few 'cycles until something broke down."

"Suppose 50 per cent of the Europeans didn't come to work?" I asked.

"Well, I guess that we could produce bicycles at a fairly good rate. Of course, the reason we could do that is because the 50 per cent who did come would do their best to do the work of the absent 50 per cent as well as their own. If 50 per cent of the Africans showed up they wouldn't have the slightest desire to double up and do someone else's work. It's something about European workmen that hasn't been transplanted to the Native yet."

The conclusions that can be drawn from the days I spent at Springs are obvious. Some of them are: (1) The African has come to occupy a permanent place in the economy of the country. To pass legislation today aimed at producing apartheid in 100 or 500 years ignores the practical fact that industry, primary and secondary, requires a free flow of labor right now. (2) To state that industry must move to the borders of the reserves to obtain labor is economically naive. (3) To say that Africans in general are hopelessly inefficient workers is not true, especially in light of the fact that industrialists are frankly anxious to replace many European workers by Africans. (4) To continue to regard African labor as necessarily migratory and temporary shows an extremely muddy interpretation of the facts. (5) To operate efficiently, secondary industry needs a healthy percentage of permanent, semi-skilled (and, eventually, skilled) African labor. The arbitrary withdrawal of freehold ownership of homes, the carefully regulated movement of Africans, the shortage of housing and the fact that men who leave the reserves to seek work must also leave their families are strong deterrents to permanence of employment. (6) The African has not yet realized the strength of his economic position in the makeup of the country. He has not realized that even a moderately successful stay-home strike would cripple industry almost immediately. (7) The economic prosperity and the future of South Africa as a world power depends on good race relations. Wide-spread trouble would cripple mining, industry, transportation and agriculture--and cut off the flow of capital from overseas.

The latter conclusion, coupled with the preceeding one, shows the strength that lies behind the proposed new United Party policy--the acceptance of economic integration--as outlined by Prof. Fourie and Mr. Strauss (PBM-19). To deny that Africans have become "economically integrated" is to deny hard facts. To deny that race relations are not good is to deny hard facts. To deny Africans who are economically integrated any voice in the government is to court trouble.

The problem in the Union is much the same as the problem I found in the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. On one hand you have Confederates or Nationalists who say that the only way the white man can stay in southern Africa is by strict segregation and control of the Native African. On another hand are those who believe that in time the Africans will be able to absorb enough civilization to wage an effective war against the Europeans and defeat them by sheer weight of numbers. The only answer, says the latter group, is cooperation between the races--attempting to show the African Native that the presence of the European is a good thing. On yet another hand is the African. A relatively voiceless creature, his simple wants are being blown up into a cry of Africa for the Africans by pressure of repression.

Sincerely,

Peter Bird Martin

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