

NEUTRALITY ENTRENCHES RACIAL INEQUALITY

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About the Contributor



Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh attained his MPhil with distinction at Oxford University, and is currently undertaking his PhD in International Relations at Oxford; he is also a founding member of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. Previously, Walsh completed his Honours degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the University of Cape Town, where he was elected president of the student's representative council and was awarded an internship at the United States House of Representatives. At the age of 18, Walsh, co-founded Grow2Lead, a youth leadership programme which had opened the door to another venture, InkuluFreeHeid, a social movement that unites politics and civil society. Walsh was also previously a speaker of the Johannesburg Junior City Council and was nominated for an All Africa Music award for a hip hop album.

At the turn of 2016, race has returned to the South African public debate with a new urgency. In this essay, I want to focus on two approaches to confronting racial oppression: the first is 'post-racial pragmatism',¹ a strategy advanced, to varying degrees, by both the DA and the ANC. The second is racial radicalism, a strategy exemplified in various new student movements.² I will argue that post-racial pragmatism is a deeply misguided strategy, and that a radical approach to racial inequality is the appropriate response, given our current malaise.

If one myth captures post-racial pragmatism, it is that racism can be equated with the sum of people's private racist beliefs. It is true that private beliefs reinforce racism, but the story is much more complex. Racist beliefs are, no doubt, regrettable but the more pressing question is whether the vestiges of socio-economic white supremacy persevere.

The point is this: South Africa does not need racists for racism to persist. Conversely, by addressing systemic white supremacy, we would also deprive racist belief of its force. Therefore, any assessment of the racial situation in South Africa must begin by acknowledging that we are talking about a deep-rooted rupture in every aspect of South African life, and not simply a collection of racists.

¹ A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. See, for instance: Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. "KEEPING UP WITH JIM JONES: PIONEER, TASKMASTER, ARCHITECT, TRAILBLAZER." *Wis. L. Rev.* 2013 (2013): 703-1489.

² The strategy is also pursued by the EFF, though I do not focus on them here.

The point can be illustrated by way of analogy. South African society is a profoundly complex shared home, filled with archways, pathways, and enclaves. Its architects and engineers built in advantages for white inhabitants from the very start. White South Africans enjoyed the best rooms, and reserved for themselves, by force, special passages that maximised their comfort and position of domination. On the other hand, black South Africans were forced into the worst parts of the home, and denied access to the staircases and doorways that led to its upper levels, secret chambers, and gardens. They were left with no other option but to become servants of their white co-occupants.

Post-racial pragmatists believe that we can solve this problem by making the white inhabitants less racist, and creating conditions of legal equality. But this would neglect the tremendous historical advantages that had accrued to the white inhabitants over time. They would still enjoy the best rooms, and control the corridors of privilege. Even if the white inhabitants changed their minds about racism, this would have no impact on the home's internal structure. Indeed, even if a small number of black inhabitants came to occupy some of the home's more beautiful spaces, this would not render the structure fair.

By contrast, a more radical approach suggests that the home needs a structural overhaul. New architects and new engineers would have to review the plans, and change the distribution of opportunities within the structure. New structures would be needed to complement old ones, so that, over time, the home's benefits could be distributed more justly.

The fundamental mistake of the new neutrality discourse, then, is it confuses neutrality with equality. Only if we intervene decisively against the racist structure of our society can we overturn the defects of our current situation. At best, neutrality freezes the status-quo in place, but it has no power to reverse injustice or reduce inequality. As author Marlon James argues, there is a great difference between being 'non-racist' and being 'anti-racist'.³

Yet, examples of the post-racial pragmatism abound in South Africa. For example, in a recent speech on race, DA leader Mmusi Maimane outlined his party's view on racism. The speech acknowledged an understanding of the problem of 'racialised inequality'. But when it turned to immediate remedies, Maimane focused almost exclusively on the problem of racist belief. He claimed the DA would initiate a series of racial dialogues, introduce a new pledge for its members, and set new targets for DA structures (although the party would not resort to quotas).

Maimane also promised to 'introduce' a policy to the party's Federal Council, which would 'contain a plan to overcome the structural inequalities that continue to divide us' and 'identify the key obstacles to redressing this inequality'. However, this policy is yet to materialise, and there is no guarantee that it would pass as envisaged, given recent internal DA policy debates. If current DA policy is anything to go by, then these proposals will not invoke reparatory justice or structural reform, but focus on 'growing the economic pie'.

For all his acknowledgement of structural problems, then, Maimane's only immediate solutions are post-racially pragmatic. Nothing in them would destabilise the status-quo. Rather, they centre on removing any obvious residual biases in the system, and hoping some invisible social market will bring society to a fairer equilibrium. As I have already argued, this may prevent the status-quo from worsening, but it holds no prospect of actually reversing it.

To be fair, the DA is a soft target for a racial critique, given its history. More surprising is the ANC's continued reliance on post-racial pragmatism. Take President Jacob Zuma's recent comments on race in South Africa:

³ James, Marlon, Leah Green, and Bruno Rinvolutri. "Are You Racist? 'No' Isn't a Good Enough Answer – Video." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

With time, people have tended to exaggerate the issue of racism because they say South Africa is still a racist country – not true. We defeated racism when we pursued the non-racial society. Our society is a rainbow nation, it's a non-racial society. But it does not remove certain individuals who have racist behaviour who are uttering racist statements.⁴

In his State of the Nation address, Zuma went further:

The nation was shaken last month when racism reared its ugly head on social and electronic media, causing untold pain and anger. There is a need to confront the demon of racism. Human Rights Day, 21 March, will be commemorated as the national day against racism this year.⁵

Soon after, the ANC embarked on a march to the Union Buildings for 'unity, non-racialism, and democracy'. In a statement on the aims of the March, secretary General, Gwede Mantashe, said:

The ANC March for Unity, Non-racialism and Democracy is not a protest march. It is a march about facilitating conversation amongst South Africans. This conversation has been reduced in recent times.⁶

Like the DA, the ANC's main remedies centre on individual action, not structural intervention. But they also embody another aspect of post-racial pragmatism: the idea that racism can be defeated through dialogues, marches, and 'days of reflection'. Again, these interventions focus on changing individuals' beliefs, without addressing the underlying social structure. These responses are superficial; they may mobilise society around the problem, but not the solution.

I am not saying that dialogue is unnecessary, or that reflection is unwarranted. But these acts are deeply insufficient. If all that government can do to fight racism is establish a 'day of reflection', then it might as well do nothing. Government should *already* have reflected, and should now be acting. Reducing this battle to symbolic gestures is a way of kicking the problem into the long grass.

Moreover, this ANC rhetoric seems to confuse non-racialism with colour-blindness. This was never the intended meaning of non-racialism. Non-racialism's original formulation might better be articulated as racial transcendence i.e. the state of having overcome racial subjugation in society. Phrased in this way, non-racialism is a destination, not a strategy. But it seems that this meaning has been lost over time, and that the ANC has landed on a watered-down understanding of 'non-racialism'.

By contrast, radical student formations have rediscovered a more fundamental critique of our racial problem, and argue for more far-reaching remedies. Athabile Nonxuba, a member of Rhodes Must Fall, recently described this position as 'an oath of allegiance that everything to do with the oppression and conquest of black people by white power must fall and be destroyed'⁷. This is reinforced by a new call to abandon the project of 'transformation' altogether, in favour of 'decolonisation'.

The core difference between this approach and post-racial pragmatism is that all social questions are linked to race. Race is no longer a separate problem, to be dealt with independent of 'the economy'.

⁴ Zuma Speaks to ENCA's Thulasizwe Simelane. ENCA, 10 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁵ South Africa. President (2009-: Zuma), and Jacob Zuma. *State of the Nation Address by His Excellency Jacob G. Zuma, President of the Republic of South Africa on the Occasion of the Joint Sitting of Parliament, Cape Town, 14 February 2013*. Government Communication and Information System, 2013.

⁶ Mantashe, Gwede. "March for Unity, Non-Racialism and Democracy to Be Held on the 19 February 2016." Speech.

⁷ "The Protests Will Continue, Says Rhodes Must Fall Leader." *CityPress*. 2016. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

Instead, it infuses every debate, every social interaction. Students have demonstrated this by combining the struggle over fees with the question of racial justice: financial exclusion is racialised, and merely the new form of an old problem. On this view, to fix South Africa is to fix racial oppression, and vice versa.

This position is not without its risks. As with all radical projects, the limits of legitimate resistance must be closely monitored. Recent events at the University of Cape Town (UCT) have shown how noble causes can be co-opted by rogue individuals. But the debate over 'violence' in South Africa is completely flawed. We paper over centuries of violence inflicted on black people, but condemn a handful of students for their violent reaction to it. Even the worst acts of student 'vandalism' have not actually hurt any people. Yet, white racists inflict untold violence on black people all the time, and we remain silent.

The shocking recent scenes at the University of the Free State (UFS) are a case in point.⁸ Never mind artwork. Never mind buses. What about actual black people? Will the establishment be in uproar over this heinous attack, or will the politics of post-racial pragmatism paper over the cracks again? UCT and UFS demonstrate our exact predicament: white life and black life are not valued the same or protected equally. Black reactions are always punished, white violence always forgiven. Whatever their shortcomings, student movements have forced us to overhaul our understanding of what progress looks like, and made an indispensable contribution to an otherwise complacent public debate.

Progress must mean more than just changing racist attitudes. It must mean more than hosting 'race summits', or 'marches against racism'. It must mean uprooting and ultimately destroying the remnants of white supremacy. We simply cannot persist in the belief that neutrality will lead, by some magic, to racial justice. Radical and structural changes to our economy and society are the only way out of this conjuncture. And while these solutions may fill us with dread for their unintended consequences, we should realise that we already are – and always have been – living in a nightmare.

This paper forms part of the ASRI Short Papers Series on 'Race and Identity'. For permission to republish, interviews with the Contributor and to provide feedback or submit your own papers for consideration in futures series please email salma.abdool@asri.org.za

⁸ White spectators assaulted black protestors who interrupted a rugby match to bring attention to the conditions of black students and workers.