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Short Papers Series on Race and Identity

February / March 2016

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Race Trouble in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Kevin Whitehead[1] and Kevin Durrheim[2]

Nineteen ninety-four was a watershed year for South Africa, ushering in democracy after centuries of colonial and apartheid rule. Prior to this, South Africa was the infamous “last bastion of legislated white supremacy” in the world. How have race relations changed since the transition to democracy?

The answer to this question depends on who you ask. In the early years of transition, Desmond Tutu proposed that we are a “rainbow nation,” a unified cultural melting pot characterised by broad racial reconciliation. However, public opinion has become more jaded since then, and is characterised by competing narratives that often invoke racial stereotypes.

An Afro-pessimist narrative, haunted by the spectre of Zimbabwe and other post-colonial African states, recycles discourses about crime, corruption and nepotism in Africa. An

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anti-capitalist narrative lambasts members of the new ruling class for entering into an alliance with white capital, enriching themselves and serving the interests of big business at the expense of the masses.

A narrative focusing on apartheid and its legacies attributes ongoing racial conflict, inequality, and other social ills to the continuing systemic privileging of whiteness . A narrative of “reverse racism” equates apartheid era oppression and exclusion with post-apartheid measures designed to redress the legacies of apartheid.

These and many other narratives circulate in complex, competing ways as people struggle to account for ongoing race trouble in the country.

Debates around pressing issues such as violent crime, redress and transformation, service delivery, and access to jobs and education very quickly become racialised, dividing people into opposing camps that often fall largely along racial lines. In public contexts such as politics, business, education, and sports, ostensibly non-racial, but potentially implicitly racialised, comments and events provoke accusations of racism and outrage, which are met with counter-accusations of “playing the race card”.

Racial divisions lie just beneath the surface of social life, always ready to be unearthed, dusted off and deployed in discussions and debates. In the past, accusations of racism tended to unify diverse voices of opposition to apartheid and the government at the time. Today, however, accusations of racism tend to fragment society into an ever-changing matrix of conflicting camps and interest groups.

Underlying these debates and contesting views is a dominant narrative of race and social history. According to this narrative, blacks are oppressed and disadvantaged, and whites are oppressors and privileged. Like all stereotypical depictions, this narrative weaves together truths and untruths.

Certainly, apartheid was a system of white supremacy, but the narrative also distorts by flattening out difference, diversity and nuance. In his book *Native Nostalgia*, Jacob Dlamini protests against this narrative, arguing that “black South Africans have been turned into abstract entities called PDIs (previously disadvantaged individuals) and

townships have been reduced to places in need of service delivery."

Similarly, in his book *Pale Native*, Max du Preez protests the use of the "race card" against white critics of the ANC government, noting that his criticisms have made him "a lightning conductor for some of the fury – and being a white Afrikaner made [him] a very convenient target."

These contestations show how South Africans are grappling with the legacy of apartheid by trying to distance themselves from this dominant racial narrative, which robs all of us of our shared humanity. There is a desire among many to resist being seen, and seeing themselves, in stereotypical terms, as members of racial categories before all else.

However, the well-worn stereotypes of oppressor and oppressed are buttressed by material conditions that continue to serve as evidence of their validity. The wealthier classes have been substantially deracialised, and by 2004 a substantial black wealthy and middle class comprising approximately 10 million people (close to 20 percent of the population) had emerged, aided by market-based policies such as affirmative action and black economic empowerment (BEE).

At the same time, however, inequality has deepened, and the poor remain overwhelmingly black. Unemployment levels have risen over the past two decades, with more than 40% of the population, the majority of whom are black, now unemployed.

These unemployed and their compatriots in irregular and informal employment make up a substantial racial underclass. Most whites, on the other hand, continue to deny racism while seeking to preserve the kind of lifestyle that was formerly reserved for whites only: living in spacious, comfortable homes in leafy suburbs or gated communities; driving privately-owned vehicles and having no need for public transportation; having access to world class medical facilities, educational institutions, and other services and amenities; working in jobs that provide time for leisure and recreation, and sufficient financial security to enable the hiring of low-wage domestic workers.

The challenge for many white South Africans is thus to deny racism while continuing to benefit from its legacy, living in fortified enclaves of privilege. The challenge for many

black citizens, in contrast, is associated with acquiring the kind of wealth and privilege previously reserved for whites, or at the very least achieving a better life than they could aspire to under apartheid.

However, when black people overcome the material legacies of apartheid they are vulnerable to the accusation that they have been co-opted by whiteness, lost their culture, and have become “coconuts” – “black on the outside, white on the inside.” Moreover, overlaying these responses to new black wealth are the racist stereotypes of the black elite as self-enriching and undeserving recipients of privilege.

Redress in the post-apartheid context has included dual strategies of social and economic inclusion and service delivery, both of which may reproduce hierarchical racial relations of the past.

Economic inclusion has been spearheaded by affirmative action and BEE policies, which continue to do important work in changing the composition of work and public places, and often disrupt comfortable routines of power relations. However, they generally involve the movement of black people into positions and spaces historically occupied by whites, which can leave the racialised character of institutions intact.

For example, historically white universities today have majority black student bodies, but as the #RhodesMustFall protesters of 2015 articulated, they continue to privilege social and institutional arrangements that are associated with whiteness.

Another way in which stereotypes are preserved is, paradoxically, in their denial. When people say “I’m not like that,” – “I’m not a racist!” or “I’m not a PDI!” – they adopt an individualistic strategy of social mobility which preserves the stereotype.

That is, in distancing themselves from the prevailing racial stereotypes, people portray themselves as individual “exceptions to the rule,” a move that assumes the ongoing validity of the rule in other cases.

Contestations of the nature of racism and of (non-)membership in categories like “racist”, “PDI”, and others, have recurrently surfaced in public discourse surrounding socio-

political mobilisations, with the contrasting debates around the #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall movements offering recent high-profile examples of these processes.

Despite what many have hailed as the miracle birth of the rainbow nation, there remain deep racial fissures in post-apartheid South Africa. There will be no easy solutions to these social conflicts and struggles over race and its stubborn entanglements with other facets of social organisation.

A number of great challenges confront us as we seek to create a socially just post-apartheid society:

(1) How do we judge between good and bad ways of escaping the dominant narrative of racial difference?
(2) How can we escape this narrative of blame and persecution without legitimating the material legacy of apartheid?
(3) How will we move from attempts at individual mobility to collective strategies of social change?

Certainly, much progress has been made to challenge the legacy of apartheid, and South African civil society remains politically engaged, savvy, and active in its demands for change. This offers us hope that we will see the kind of collective action that will help us forge a truly just, non-racist society.

Suggested further reading:

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