

Article

Race counts in contemporary South Africa: 'an illusion of ordinariness'

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In the distasteful realm of racial classification [US secretary of state Colin] Powell, at a glance, would appear to have a far higher percentage of white blood in him than anything else. In this go-getting world, he might have been forgiven for trying to pass for white. But in this age when race and power are also still inextricably bound up in a fatal and unloving embrace, there might well be calls down the line for putting him on trial for another kind of misdemeanour – coming to Africa and trying to pass for black.

– John Matshikiza, *Mail & Guardian*, June 8, 2001

Introduction

Races exist, and can be recognised, and that existence is there for the claiming. The subtitle of this paper, 'an illusion of ordinariness' (Nobles 2000), captures this state of affairs. It was so in the process of classification that allowed the apartheid Population Registration Act to allocate individuals to race groups (Posel 1999), and it is so now. After an initial titter of embarrassment from some, all students that I teach, and ask this question of, can write or tell me what 'races' are. They do start off with the ascription of race-belonging to the obvious colour-of-skin feature of this category. Once we start discussing that aspect and comparing skin colours, other features are added to make sense of the confusion that soon enters this context-specific discussion – hair texture, facial features and so on. Always waiting to enter is a link between these markers and certain essential cultural attributes and claims of origin of various kinds. Continuities are implied and crude generalisations made that allow for stereotyping (which similarly falters under closer scrutiny).

Despite these contradictory perceptions, there are very few students I have taught over the years who would not initially be able confidently to illustrate the common-sense existence of races. Those few dissenting voices would advance a social-constructionist interpretation – we have been turned into races through social practices in apartheid South Africa. Many people hold both views – constructionist and biological-essentialist notions – and shift back and forth between them depending on situational demands. As Gilroy (1998) has argued, and as could similarly be illustrated in the South African context, social scientists, too, operate with simultaneous constructionist and effectively bio-cultural notions. Among the students, general agreement on the existence of races is offered for discussion with a level of certainty that is the trademark of stories of everyday life, of common sense.

The overall purpose of my current research, course content and methods of teaching is to question the easy capitulation to, and the unquestioning acceptance of, the existence of biologically distinct groups of human beings called 'races', with the simultaneous attribution of, at best, cultural-essentialist attributes and, at worst, a range of linked abilities and moral characteristics. The overall inquiry, still in its initial stages, is to examine the manner in which such race thinking in contemporary South Africa is conveyed, created and maintained, and what content it is given.

How do notions of race inform the 'structuring of identity' (Campbell 1992), in which some aspects are generally shared while others display the variety that reflects personal components of individual identity? What are the social contexts within which social identities are constructed, confirmed and maintained? What is the process (or processes) through which 'an image of similarity, which is the defining characteristic of collective identities, is symbolically constructed'? (Jenkins 1996:127; Berger and Luckmann 1971).

In this article I put forward suggestions for investigating some key areas of public discourse: form-filling, race-based legal requirements, policy formulation, the census process – what I call the banality of race confirmation – which play a central role in forming race thinking. Here I employ the work of social psychologist Michael Billig (1995), historian and philosopher Agnes Heller (1982) and theorist Göran Therborn (1999) for the tools with which I work at this stage, and that seem to make sense of the mass of empirical material that I have already collected, and data that still needs to be gathered.

Social identity, stories of everyday life, and ideology

Race thinking shares processes of identity formation with all social identities. Race thinking refers not only to the manner in which we make sense of social relations, actions and events, but also to the way in which we perceive our own group membership and those of others, the way in which we share identities with some and are distinguished from others – the making of boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Social psychologists in the Tajfel school have argued that the essence of social identity is 'that inter-group bias might be a direct result of individuals' perceptions that they belong to a common social category' (Campbell 1992:14), arising out of the processes of social categorisation (simplifying social reality) and social comparison (creating a status hierarchy). While sharing these processes of social categorisation, the content of race thinking differs in important ways, not least because it serves powerfully to consolidate so many 'subsidiary' identities. Racism, because of its obviousness and apparent capacity to solve so many problems of explanation, becomes the organising principle of an array of other identities, especially under circumstances where race has been privileged, negatively and positively, within society. Religion often plays a similar role.

The term 'social identity' refers 'to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities', and it is 'the systematic establishment and signification ... of similarity and difference' (Jenkins 1996:4). Race thinking (or racism) shapes notions of significant 'similarity and difference', and thereby creates group boundaries, allocating people to those groups.

These identities are given expression through stories of everyday life (Heller 1982, Wright 1985), referring to those actions and experiences that are not subject to deliberate and self-conscious investigation. Agnes Heller writes that '[e]very story (...) "makes sense" of our world. It is obvious that all theories and interpretations do this. They use certain procedures of "making sense" that are applied on various levels by everyone in everyday life' (1982:65). The 'most elementary forms' of this process of making sense is through naming: 'The doctor makes his diagnosis: "This is small-pox"', writes Heller. Patrick Wright also notes the 'prominence of narratives ... that everyday life is full of stories and that these (...) are concerned with being-in-the-world rather than abstractly defined truth' (1985:14). These stories have to be 'authentic', 'plausible', and have 'a powerful sense of what is *probable or possible*' (1985:14-5, *emphases original*).

I wish, briefly, to build on Heller and Wright's observations on the power of stories to 'make sense' of the social world because of its relevance in my own work on race thinking. Stories provide us with common sense, 'that rich yet disorganised, non-systematic, often inarticulate and ineffable knowledge we use to conduct our daily business of life' (Bauman 1997:13). These stories are not free-floating but shaped in various ways by more structured processes and institutional practices in historically specific societies – the 'systematic establishment and signification' noted above. Language is central to these processes, serving as 'the pre-eminent source of this superimposed order in the form of ritualised speech, rules and laws, written records, narratives, etc' (Jenkins 1996:129), the material with which this paper deals.

Naming (the doctor's diagnosis, as Heller calls it) what we perceive in everyday life is confirmed through perceptions of the social and material world, through descriptions of events and the provision of interpretations and allocation of causes (all of which are already there, or repeatedly confirmed, done through the minutiae of everyday life). Let us call the systematic, examinable aspect of the formation of common sense ideology. We find an echo of the approach of Heller (and Wright) in the writing of Göran Therborn. He argues convincingly that ideologies serve to fit people into a given order but that ideology also qualifies them 'for conscious social action'. Ideologies are not 'ideas possessed' but '*social processes*' within which agents act (1999:vii, emphasis original).

Therborn notes that ideologies work through hailing (or 'interpellating') us. Ideologies tell ('qualify') us, relate us to and get us to recognise the social world in specific ways, namely:

1. *what exists*, and ... what does not exist: that is who we are, what the world is, what nature, society, men and women are like...;
2. *what is good*, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites...;
3. *what is possible* and impossible; our sense of the mutability of our being-in-the-world and the consequences of change... (1999:18, emphases original).

Therborn's three modes of hailing us or calling upon us, I argue, relate to the processes noted by Heller and Wright of the construction, maintenance and confirmation of stories of everyday life. In the case being discussed, the stories tell us that what exists is a society where races are fundamental building blocks of society. These stories, for example, privilege racialised

political actors (see Maré 2001, Maylam 2001), subject racialised citizens to a given order and qualify them (us) for conscious social action in racialised terms. What is good (and bad) is racialised, approached through moral codes shaped by race stereotyping and/or racism. What is possible within a society in which race thinking predominates is to shape 'race relations' – the relations between existent races; and what is impossible (or extremely difficult and even threatening) is to perceive a world that does not start with the idea of the existence of races.

Not only does the ideology of racialism subject people 'to a given [racialised] order', but it simultaneously excludes or suppresses alternatives, other questions that could be raised of the existing order, other visions of the society and its future, other ways of understanding or structuring social relations, other policy proposals. Attendant with such a racialised order are instances when accusations of racism, or of being the dupes of racists, effectively silences dissenting voices. The conscious action for which social agents are qualified is a factor of their race – that is, as racialised citizens and as members of 'race groups'.

Jenkins, drawing on Berger and Luckmann's (1971) influential text on the 'social construction of reality', notes that 'habit' – or Nobles' (2000) 'illusion of ordinariness' – is the 'precursor of institutionalisation'. In effect it means that 'choices are narrowed to the point where many courses of action or ways of doing things do not have to be chosen at all ... there is *no need for every situation to be perpetually encountered and defined again*' (1996:128, my emphasis). We have moved into the comfort zone of common sense. Intellectually, too, it has implications. In response to critics of his position denying the existence of races as bio-culturally (Gilroy's term) meaningful categories, Appiah argues that for some 'the erasure of the term "race" ... simply threatens to leave too vast a discursive void' (1989:41). We have become used to a racialised world, and fearful of a world where we will have to examine critically alternative ways of understanding and explaining social reality.

Race thinking is shaped through ideological habits (Billig 1995:6). Billig titled his book *Banal Nationalism* to draw attention to the everyday, the common sense of the existence of nationalism, the time-space 'between' the bright moments of nationalist mobilisation: 'The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building' (1995:8). This is also the case with race thinking. We are only starting out

on the task of examining the ways in which the flags of race thinking hang limply in the public sphere. The task of research is specific for each society where the expressions of banal racialism, as well as the appropriate ways of addressing them, need to be addressed with due regard for the sensitivities of the past and the present.

I will draw attention to a few instances where such banality of race thinking is to be found.

Social Science and race thinking

It is not only within everyday life that common sense perceptions of the meaningful existence of races feature. Politicians share, or cynically manipulate, ideas of race, of which there are countless examples. In social science research, too, as Rupert Taylor and Mark Orkin (1995), among others, showed some years ago how such common sense informs the work of social scientists (also Webster 1976, Gilroy 1998, Stanfield and Dennis (eds) 1993).

This is an aspect for further and future investigation – how dependent are we, as social scientists, on the uncritical acceptance of race categories in our own research and writing; how do we address a rejection of the actual ‘existence’ of races as well as the overwhelming existence of the social construct in having shaped – and still shaping – the life chances of citizens; how do we avoid our own intellectual curiosity and critical training being blunted through the acceptance, for whatever reason, of these categories of race?

Race Counts: banality in forms

Under the Stats SA directorship of Mark Orkin, one of the authors of the 1995 paper on race in social science, a question was asked, during the first census in a democratic South Africa, about the ‘race’ of respondents. Those who completed the form in 1996 were asked to state how (the person) would describe him/herself?

1 = African/Black

2 = Coloured

3 = Indian/Asian

4 = White

(Questionnaire 1. Household Questionnaire)

On one level this was not a surprising question to ask during the first post-apartheid census – it was somewhat more disturbing to find that no subsequent transparent discussion of the use of such categories had taken

place before the 2001 census. The country would need to establish a baseline from which to judge the effectiveness of measures of redress as envisaged in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC 1994). Martin West (1988:101) writes that:

While South Africans, for political or other reasons, may affirm or deny the existence of such [race] groups, they have a special significance in that the system [of apartheid] forces people into structured inequality by virtue of their classification.

Here lies a central argument for the continuation of race-based policies of redress, as a (necessary) mirror of the race-based discrimination of the past. Without tackling the effects of race discrimination through race-based affirmative action, we will continue to live with a racially discriminatory system. It is necessary, therefore, to inscribe race-based 'fair discrimination' into our Constitution and into the legislation that is necessary to redress the past. If we are addressing race discrimination we need the tools to measure the improvement in the situation of races. For that we need information about races through accurate local and national statistics; and for that we need race classification. In this case 'race' could be said to be a 'technical' term, forming the basis of policy and legislation. Of course, it is anything but the neutrality implied by such an argument.

Melissa Nobles, in her study of 'race and census' in the United States and Brazil, notes in words that have pertinence: 'Counting by race is hardly a transparent process because of the very conceptual ambiguities that surround race itself, and the political stakes attached to it' (2000:11). She continues:

On these views [of race as neither fixed nor objective], taken together, race is at once an empty category and a powerful instrument. Yet theoretical formulations that stress the radical plasticity of race, mostly correctly, risk obscuring its concrete manifestations and the institutional sites of its construction and maintenance ... race is not something that language simply describes, it is something that is created through language and institutional practice. (2000:12, also Wetherell and Potter 1992).

In her case, the data of 'institutional practice' is provided through a comparative examination of the regular census processes in two countries. Census-taking is not just counting the obvious, 'races' that are already out there, gathering the necessary data, and establishing the 'demographic profile' of society, but 'is a place where racial categories themselves are constructed' (Nobles 2000:17). In her conclusion she notes that in both Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa, there were race categories in the

censuses, but warns that 'the extraordinary nature of these regimes and the centrality of racial thought to them have given counting by race in the United States and Brazil, paradoxically, *an illusion of ordinariness*' (2000:180, emphasis added). Nobles could probably also have added post-1994 democratic South Africa to that paradox for there has been little or no 'transparency' to debates around these categories here, either before or during the second post-1994 census in October 2001 – it appears that these discussions hardly moved beyond stating the 'ordinariness' of the need for race figures.

However, the everyday banality of race classification permeates South Africa on an amazingly regular basis, and not just during the census periods. Institutions, such as the university where I work, confront staff with the requirements to specify 'race', 'ethnic group' and 'population group' on forms (where these mean exactly the same thing). Bureaucrats, trained as they were under apartheid and certainly not exempt from generalised race thinking, with new recruits fitting easily and of necessity into the same race paradigm, seem to have no difficulty in continuing with race classification or dealing with citizens already classified in race terms.

To meet with the requirements of the Employment Equity Act, to gain admission or be refused admission to universities, to claim travel allowances, to play in sports teams, to provide information for tax purposes, to ask the National Research Foundation for funding, to register births and so on, each requires statement of race belonging – these are the limp flags. There is no opportunity in these forms to avoid the issue. At every level there is an official, from the government minister responsible to the company personnel officer or employment equity manager, to monitor adherence or compliance or progress. No provision is made for alternatives to the basic 'four races' of apartheid South Africa, or to reject such classification. Leaving the space blank, which remarkably few seem to do, means that someone else is required to complete it to balance the books.

There is a present logic that requires the information – it is not simply a legacy of the past, of old forms. Where race is 'legally' required (the status of such classification is not clear) and it has not been provided, citizens are allocated to a category by line managers or by human resources personnel. This means that people tasked with various forms of race relations, in its bureaucratic form in post-1994 South Africa, are required to make decisions on race allocation of individuals, to monitor that forms have been correctly completed, that targets (quotas) have been met and to

account for the failure to meet such targets; that the racial appearance of sports teams, committees, work places, meet the requirements of the 'demographics of society'.

The racialised population wheel of South African society, and its four spokes, is, of course, not new. Colonial, segregationist and apartheid South Africa all lived by that given. At best it was the basis for 'race relations' that concerned the government of the day; at worst it was reflected in policies and practices of racial and racist domination, shaping the life chances and living standards of every single South African. It reflected the approach of the liberation movement (the ANC) and its allies, too. The classification of the population into four races, despite a rhetorical commitment to non-racialism, displayed, perhaps unsurprisingly, a shared notion of the general acceptance of race and of what was, in effect, multi-racialism rather than non-racialism (for discussion of this issue see, for example, Alexander 1985, No Sizwe 1979, Taylor 1994, Taylor and Foster 1999, Sharp 1998, Maré 2001a).

Apartheid policy not only continued with the common sense of race, already socially entrenched by 1948 and generally accepted as reflecting and not creating society, but embedded it legislatively within the Population Registration Act (of 1950). What is interesting to note is that apartheid did not provide a biological definition of race, despite the general availability of such thinking. It was probably partly in response to the worldwide abhorrence of racism after the horrors of the holocaust that apartheid legislators chose to classify according to criteria that drew on social construction and general social acceptance of race groups (see Dubow 1995). In practice, people were allocated to race groups through a population registration process, with the categories fixed in various identity documents, coded in identity numbers. It went beyond the four spokes in sub-dividing coloured people from 1959, and the Bantustan policy was justified in the first instance on a further ethnic ('nation') sub-division of the black African population.

Horrell (1966:11) notes, in comment on the Population Registration Act, that:

Race classification presented no problem in respect of about 99 per cent of the population (emphasis added); but there were numerous 'borderline' cases who did not fit clearly into any category. Much humiliation, anxiety and resentment has resulted from official investigations into such cases.

West (1988:104), for example, shows that in 1986 there had been 1624 applications for reclassification, of which 1102 were successful. In other words, the success rate was high enough for the expectation of more appeals than was the case – but then only in the ‘borderline’ cases. However, the degradation of the issue of ‘reclassification’ and of the process itself would have deterred many people from entering the quest for racialised mobility. Political mobilisation and energy was devoted to the overall policy of racial discrimination and the exclusionary policies that flowed from classification, rather than against classification as a specific issue.

Legislators in a democratic South Africa have avoided the pitfalls of defining race (as far as I have been able to establish), even though several – and possibly a growing number – pieces of legislation (such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and the suggested Black Economic Empowerment Act) and policy directives, depend on race classification. What this means is that the legislation continues with a reliance on the common sense of the existence of the four races of the past, with the buck of classification and implementation being passed to lower levels of bureaucrats, the very people we are training in our universities. We are back with – or rather have continued with – the notion of race established under apartheid. At times the formulation even refers to and requests the citizen to follow previous (apartheid) categories.

Race Counts: the banality of the material world

Heribert Adam wrote 30 years ago in his influential book *Modernizing Racial Domination*, that ‘one deals with epiphenomena so long as racialism is analysed in isolation from political economy. An analysis of racialism is sociological only if it probes into the historical dimension of racial attitudes ... in its entanglement with the social structure’ (1971:20). In this paper I am addressing the ideological continuities, and the manner of their reproduction, rather than the specific location within a global capitalist, and politically democratic, context in post-1994 South Africa. However, a word needs to be said about a couple of the aspects that serve the obviousness in the continuation of race thinking.

An essential element within the social structure inherited from apartheid is the inter-related spatial and the class location of the population. Apartheid distinguished itself from the segregation period in large part through its intensive separation of people spatially and the control over the movement

of labour – through the Bantustan policy and its associated influx control measures as well as the Group Areas Act (see, for example, the reflections during very different periods by Marquard 1958, and Christopher 1994).

For decades racialised communities were constructed through state-enforced proximity (and separation) – Group Areas, Pass Laws, Separate Amenities Acts and the Immorality Act with its prohibition on sexual relations between races, among others, combined with the Population Registration Act in ensuring that notions of race were given spatial form.

The body, through its spatial location, confirms social processes and continuities with the past. Apartheid spatially separated the people allocated to racial categories. This meant – and means – that not only were people living in 'own' areas but that many other spatially related activities were shaped by such allocation. Who is seen on which streets and in which dwellings and in which regions at which times of day or night; who utilises which transport routes; who frequents which recreational facilities and so on, still largely confirms a certain colour coding. The visual social landscape was racialised, and will continue to be so for a very long time to come despite fairly rapid spatial realignment on the basis of class, and rapid urbanisation.

Apartheid patterns shape the social and other activities possible in thousands of institutions: schools and tertiary institutions may be integrated but certain times and activities are governed by the needs for transport to far-flung areas, to take one example among many. Christopher, for example, notes that 'movement between place of work and place of residence was usually separate, as a result of the different destinations to which the various [racialised] groups travelled when going home' (1994:150). The 'two (race) nations' spoken of by President Thabo Mbeki are confirmed in this legacy of class-race patterning, from within a certain perspective.

In contemporary South Africa the body also reveals national origin, which then identifies in a finer gradation than two races what treatment is to be meted out. Anyone who has seen raids on illegal aliens in South Africa will have noticed how police and military personnel examine the arms of otherwise non-distinctive black-skinned people, where the different inoculation marks indicate who is *amakwerekwere* (foreign) and who not. Here it is not just language and accent that classify, but the body itself helps distinguish between black and black (see McDonald (ed) 2000).

Another example can be found in the carefully colour-coded advertising industry, often reflecting an idealised multi-racialism, appropriate to the

mixed but correct 'demographics' of the new South Africa. What is probably of greater interest here are the effects of the sometimes deliberate undermining of racial correctness, through exaggerated confirmation of stereotypes.

Conclusion: implications of, and alternatives to, counting races

Today, our laws and governmental regulations establish an enormously elaborate system of race-conscious policy, seeking to remedy the ill effects of past discrimination, to break down barriers to minority advancement and to allocate various sorts of social and economic benefits to those made in need by societal prejudice and contempt. Race is no longer strictly a factor that we aspire to render as irrelevant as the colour of one's eyes.

Only the term 'minority advancement' reveals that Ford (1994:1231-2), from whom this quotation was taken, was not writing about contemporary South Africa but about the United States. He argues that 'we cannot avoid having explicitly to determine and defend how it is we ask public authority to take account of racial identity'.

However, in South Africa too, a daily (as well as the five-yearly) census of race categories is argued to be necessary to advance the cause of redress of the past. How do we assess corrective action unless we know what base we started from, and what the achievements are in redistribution; how do we measure success or failure, in the workplace, on the sports fields, in educational institutions? There is a next step in this argument that is not often as clearly articulated because it is so ordinary, namely the obviousness that the past was a racially discriminatory system. Now and then, usually between periods of electioneering, when it is admitted that there was also a racialised hierarchy of discrimination under apartheid – clearly reflected in the figures of spending per child in education, per race in medical services, housing, social welfare – there are calls for divisions beyond the two race nations.

All these figures exist, and were used in the struggle against apartheid – after all, apartheid with its separate departments itself generated not only discrimination but also the measures of its effectiveness (even if it was called 'separate development'). Therefore, the contemporary census maintains four races, and the Employment Equity Act makes it clear that the 'designated group' 'black' is a generic term for three of the four races – which immediately demands that figures are collected to reflect these same categories. The argument advanced by Nobles (2000) is that race

categories in census taking do not only reflect what is there, but that they confirm, legitimise and serve to create race categories. She argues that:

Censuses derive their power from their competing sources: statistical methods and the political agendas of state bureaucracies. The crucial point is that political imperatives and, in certain cases, racial ideas infuse the census-taking process. They are not extracted from the process, magically producing a distilled statistical truth. Indeed, it is the tension between the imputed statistical objectivity of censuses and their grounding in political life that generates confusion and ambivalence among the counted. (2000:183-4)

Or, we may add, that confirms the obvious in a society as racially divided as South Africa.

But there is another step, one that has been ever more neglected since 1994, being largely relegated to the past where it had occupied such a central role in analysis of apartheid and in constructing visions for the future. I am, of course, referring to the 'class-race debate', not only within the 'mass democratic movement', but with other bodies opposing apartheid, both left (such as in the Unity Movement) and right (such as in South African liberalism) within the oppositional spectrum. All that it is necessary to state here is that anti-apartheid writing, until the transition in 1994, was filled with intense and widely accessible debate on the essentially class-exploitative nature of capitalist South Africa. Those who tried to marry race and capitalism in a positive manner within the struggle against apartheid did it in the crude fashion of the Inkatha movement's Mangosuthu Buthelezi, in terms that have, ironically, now become the norm – at times equating liberation with capitalist ownership and control, or with personal enrichment and the public display of wealth.

But is there an alternative? Is it not just blowing in the wind to engage in such discussions? Does the rejection of 'race' not do damage to the anti-racist struggle? This contribution is not the place to enter the debate on the rejection of race as a category in society (see, again, for example, Gilroy 1998, Appiah 1989). While it would be foolish in the extreme to ignore the effect of race thinking, as it would be to reject any other form of socially constructed identity, and certainly incorrect and insulting not to take into account the colonial and racist past, we can do that (take full account of the role of the construct of race) and simultaneously use it as a measure of the enemy to be destroyed. That is, after all, what a commitment to non-racialism sets out to do.

Brian Fay writes that 'The schemes of meaning which organise social life are not fixed texts but are more like heated conversations in which rival interpretations and conceptions compete in an ongoing process of cultural formation' (1996:232). This would seem to be a reminder so obvious to any researcher within the social sciences that it does not bear repeating, but in the academy, as in everyday life, those conversations are locked into a world of races (or of ethnic groups), where identities are forever frozen or treated as immutable. It does not much matter whether it is because we submit to the power of social construction or whether we accept biological determinism – the effects are the same. This is a situation where we manage race relations, the 'relations between races', and publicise, punish and focus our attention on outbreaks of racism. Whether it be the cases I mention here, or whether it is the fixing of identity through mobilisation of ethnic groups, heated conversations about identity are silenced, sometimes with horrifying brutality, at other times with stealth – the banality of reaffirming the existing obvious, the common sense of everyday life.

Nobles, too, notes that the issue 'whether a race question should be asked [in censuses] (and if so how) is inextricably linked to larger political and philosophical questions about citizenship, justice and democracy, whose answers are best provided through political argument and deliberation' (2000:170). The 'race question' is, however, too often being used to silence 'argument and deliberation' in South Africa, rather than to open debate. Part of the reason, I would argue, is that any acknowledgement of the power of race (debate may be too strong a word to use) has been (deliberately?) contained within the investigations and the discourse on racism, necessary though that might be.

Are individuals aware that behavioural choices are made, no matter how firmly those perceptions and behaviours seem to be inscribed in social identity, in this case in race thinking? Is it not the task of the social scientist, of intellectual activity, to undermine, question, rather than confirm, existing social categories, no matter how pressing a need politicians feel for the statement and restatement of such categories – as descriptive of what exists or essential to social ordering (what is possible)? Most of what I have discussed above falls into the category of confirmation.

I have suggested that through the banality of bureaucratic practice, and the confirmation of political discourse, race is every day created, confirmed, maintained, telling us what exists, what is desirable and what is possible (Therborn 1999). Steven Friedman recently reminded us that 'in a country

with our history, insistence on the majority's rights has a strong emotional appeal. We are used to defining majorities and minorities racially ...' (*Mail & Guardian* June 8, 2001) – the 'demographics' of which seem most appropriate. What exists is a world within which races are not only the natural building blocks of social life, but the behaviour of members of these already-existing races serve as sufficient explanatory tools for many everyday social interactions, relationships, motivations and actions. Our pre-cognitive universe has been shaped by notions of race, by race thinking. And what is impossible is to establish a cognitive universe that finds explanations for and perceptions of human beings that are not based on the given of race, that are instead open to alternative explanations and alternative ways of approaching the issue.

Let me mention a few of the additional problems linked to such a racialised approach to society. As Kanya Adam (2000:7-8,178-80) has argued, in her discussion of race-based affirmative action in South Africa, it reinforces race perceptions of the past. There is no need to question apartheid's race allocations as the present provides us with a seamless continuity, accepting the validity of and the ability to recognise races so necessary for policies based on this construction (obviously not in all fields, but the case largely in race thinking). In addition, material effects are attached to that continuation – race is rewarded. On the other hand, there is no reward for non-racialism, and even open debate of any significance at all, of what had been called 'the unbreakable thread' in the liberation struggle (Frederikse 1990), is so rare that it may as well not occur. Now and then some politicians will still slip in reference to their commitment to non-racialism, and very few will go so far as to argue against it. Xolela Mangcu, Director of the Steve Biko Foundation, did so in a stimulating intervention when an edited version of his 'Burden of Race' conference address was reproduced in *The Sunday Independent* (July 22, 2001; see elsewhere in this issue for the full version).

Unproblematic acceptance of the socially meaningful existence of races, furthermore, closes off the option of different ways of looking at the world and finding more complex and dynamic explanations for social conditions and social relations (see Anthony Holliday, *Mail & Guardian*, June 8, 2001, and Appiah 1989). This is probably the most embedded result of the uncritical continuation with multi-racialism in South Africa. Race is simply a given in the manner in which we think about society. It is the relevant common sense that explains events, behaviours, the past, present

and future, with no demand on suggesting alternatives to that which is encountered for the first time or encountered as already explained in race terms. Race as explanation is offered as adequate, as obvious, as common sense. It even stands in the way of seriously investigating the manner in which race thinking permeates social life, education, discourse – and here I am not writing about the obviousness of racism, but the socially shared foundations on which racism is built.

Third, it certainly prevents a class (and often gender) differentiated response to redress-policy formulation. The obviousness of a race-based response to a race-based system of discrimination potentially excludes certain of the most deserving beneficiaries of measures of redress. Was apartheid only about race discrimination or was it also about class exploitation, about spatial separation, about gender domination and about the complex articulation of these and other elements? What a race focus may well do, and such arguments have been made again in the area of affirmative action, is to stand in the way of what is being attempted – if redress is to be measured in terms of meeting basic needs in society, and redressing the gross inequalities of the past, should the gender or the urban-rural divide not form the first measure of suitability for attention? For example, how urban is the intake into tertiary institutions? Adam (2000:7) notes that 'South Africa may well be the only country where the demands for restitution stemming from a racist society may be met through an exclusive emphasis on class'. This position was argued for by several members of the SACP, ANC and COSATU until the mid-1990s, voices that have, in some cases, not only been silenced in public discourse, but in some cases been absorbed into the (black) bourgeoisie. What is interesting to look at are the number of state interventions in the field of redress that are not, in the first instance or not at all, based on race – water and electricity supplies, for example.

What we have to find, then, are responses that undermine bio-cultural notions of race. We have to face the challenge of critical thinking on this issue of the place of race in society. However, this is not sufficient unless we simultaneously address the complexity of inequality and suggest solutions to the gross imbalances that exist in our society, inequalities that follow the axes of 'race' (but not 'race' itself, as though this construct mechanically determines society), but also the axes of gender, of age, of health and ill-health, of class, of the urban-rural divide and so on. Placing the political universe into two (or four) simplified camps denies the

complexity of causal relationships, of corrective action, and even of description accurate enough to allow meaningful involvement in the world – 'to qualify people for conscious social action', as Göran Therborn writes. The social world is too rich, too complex, too intricately intertwined to allow simplifying notions of difference to do more than offer lazy solutions.

Census categories, and the reports based on them, serve neatly to confirm what we already know. But is what we already know the 'real' picture? Such an approach has implications for social scientists too. As Gilroy writes, we need a 'radical and dramatic response. This must be one step away from the pious ritual in which we always agree that "race" is invented but are then required to defer to its embedded nature in the world and to accept that the demand for justice nevertheless requires us to enter the political arenas that it helps to mark out' (1998:842).

There is another important (the most important?) argument for noting and examining banal race thinking, the common sense of racism, namely that such thinking forms the basis of racism. Racist incidents and language are the sunspots, the flares of the taken-for-granted everyday stories shaped by race thinking. We cannot be racist (or xenophobic, in cases where the overlap makes them indistinguishable) without sharing ideas about race – our own race, and that of the other. As Billig argues, incidents of nationalist fervour, of what is usually exclusively called 'nationalism', is seen to occur only at the periphery of banal nationalism, and are seen to come only 'in small sizes and bright colours' (1995:6). Here he refers to the intensity of what we recognise to be nationalism and the duration of such moments. Similarly the banality of race thinking relates to the small and bright colours of racism.

If we changed our focus somewhat we would also find the remarkable fluidity in this society, despite its race-obsessed past. Banal race thinking, especially in its bureaucratic form and its existence in over-simplified and sometimes cynically manipulative political discourse, tends to eclipse that aspect and blind us to the pressing necessity of finding innovative ways of thinking the alternative.

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