

DERACIALISATION! WHAT DERACIALISATION?: THERE'S NO END TO RACE (Review article)

*Siyanda Ndlovu
School of Psychology
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Howard College Campus
Durban*

Reviewing **A race against time** (2006) 2010, four years after its publication, is perhaps a blessing in disguise. Such an accidental, critical distance is a significant opportunity to reflect, as one chapter in the book suggests, on “the role, nature, utility and longevity of race” (Bowman, Seedat, Duncan and Burrows, 2006: 91) in the landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. A landscape that once held so much promise and hope of something “new” and “better”, of a “rainbow nation” united in its diversity and unrelenting in its moral quest for human rights, equality, social justice and of course its national vision of non-racialism. So, we must, as the book attempts to, ask the question, how far have we come in achieving the promise of non-racialism and the dream of deracialisation? Since the book’s publication in 2006, there has been what Hall (1996) in his work on identity, refers to as, a “discursive explosion”, in the national, political and public imagination around “race” and all its varieties in South Africa. It is useful to briefly reflect on and take stock of some of the events and debates that have happened in the post-apartheid landscapes since the book first appeared on book shelves.

2007 saw the country being “plunged regularly into darkness” (Nuttall and McGregor, 2009: 9) as load shedding took its toll on this once “rainbow nation”. “2008 was a hard year for South Africans”, reflect Sarah Nuttall and Liz McGregor (2009: 9) in their astutely titled collection of essays, **Load shedding: Writing on and over the edge of South Africa**, and “[2008] seemed to be the culmination of a shift in the national psyche. It marked the end of the Mbeki era, with the president fired from office by the ANC, and the rise to prominence of Jacob Zuma, newly elected president of the ANC, a man with widespread support but whose populism, polygamy and political vision left many South Africans uncertain”. While Barak Obama captured the imagination of the world in the United States, 2008 was the year that black South Africans turned against black African foreign nationals resulting in brutal scenes of xenophobic violence around the country. The most dramatic and polarising national elections were staged in 2009. Smaller oppositional parties were almost completely obliterated from the political scene. Questions of who to vote for dominated dinner-table conversations around the country as many middle-class South Africans, black and white alike, pondered on how to vote strategically, disillusioned and yet united in and by the fear of being called “counter-revolutionary”. These elections also, momentarily, sought to significantly fracture the black vote as COPE, a new break-away oppositional party emerged. Its promise, however, was short lived.

And then there was (and still is) the belligerent Julius Malema with his rhetoric of race-talk – and what some consider to be “hate-speech”, inciting violence of different kinds - with his disconcerting call to take up arms and “kill for Zuma” and recently in 2010 songs about “shooting the Boer”. There was also the case of Caster Semenya that saw a clear “gender”, or more acutely “sex”, issue discursively hijacked and given a “race” flair and racist overtones. Who can forget the University of the Free State’s disturbing and racist video where white students subjected black cleaning staff to humiliating and dehumanising acts for their amusement? Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Jonathan Jansen’s decision in 2010 to re-admit the students to the university, in the name of reconciliation, further threw the spotlight on the wavering race relations in the “new” South Africa. 2010, it seems, has already had its fair share of drama. The news about the consideration for a presidential pardon for Eugene De Kock has reopened some old wounds imperfectly bandaged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While the country prepares to host the FIFA Soccer World Cup, revelations of Zuma’s twentieth child born out of his polygamous marriages have sharply put issues of “race” and “culture” on a collision path. This resulted in one of the most fascinating accusations by the leader of the Democratic Alliance against the ANC for playing, not just “the race card” but “the culture card”. It has not all been gloom and doom, this year also marked 20 years of freedom for the iconic leader, Nelson Mandela.

The question of “race” remains at the centre of our globalised, “postmodern”, multicultural, and seemingly post-race, world. There is perhaps no other more highly contested idea in South Africa than the issue of “race”. Like the many questions the book raises, Erasmus (2008: 169) asks the following questions about race in post-apartheid South Africa: “Why does ‘race’ remain central in post-apartheid everyday life and consciousness? Is a future beyond race simply a fantasy, or a real possibility? Answers to these questions lie in asking others first. How did the idea of race emerge? How do these ideas shape the ways in which most South Africans use the term ‘race’ today? What would it take to unmake race or, at least, to make it less central?”. While “race” seems to be *everywhere* in post-apartheid South Africa, there is, nonetheless, political and intellectual resistance to talking about, confronting, debating “race” in order to finally, as Mamphela Ramphele (2008) argues, “lay this ghost to rest”. Intellectually, the resistance to talking about “race” is premised on the idea that talking about race is to be “racist” (Steyn, 2001). To consider political resistance to talking about “race”, we can take the **Mail and Guardian’s Special Issue on Race** (2009) where the editor, Nic Dawes, argues that “there can be no question of whether we should confront the race issue or let it lie. Race confronts us and race-talk is unavoidable. The real question is how to talk about race”? What is most striking about the **Mail and Guardian’s Special Issue on Race** is the fact that it was published a month after President Jacob Zuma suggested that “a debate on race will take the country backwards” and he rather called for the embracing of non-racialism.

However, the book under review poses questions regarding the (im)possibilities of deracialisation in South Africa. The subtitle of the book (“Psychology and challenges to deracialisation in South Africa”) would have us believe that it is as much about “race” as it is about the discipline of psychology. I am, however, unconvinced and this is one of the criticisms which I shall turn to shortly. Like most disciplines in the academy, what psychology has had to say about “race” historically is not only embarrassing but also an untruth. The discipline has, for example, provided “scientific evidence” that served to

maintain the modern hegemony of race and fuelled ongoing scientific racism. This history is one that the discipline would rather forget. One of Derek Hook's (2006: 171) chapters (*Psychoanalysis, discursive analysis, racism and the theory of abjection*), reminds us that psychology has been "an instrument of both racist practice and knowledge". In some senses, I see this book as a corrective attempt to rectify and rescue the discipline of psychology from its own racist history. At first glance, this is a psychological book and the editors (Stevens et al, 2006: 4) suggest that the main objectives of the book are to "... explore the contemporary status of race in South Africa, and the conditions of possibility that exist for deracialisation, from perspectives within psychology, and in a manner that views history as present and running forward". Though I mostly enjoyed reading this volume, I found, disappointingly, that the book fails, with the exception of a few chapters, in its objectives in two regards: Firstly, *all* chapters, with the exception of one (Brett Bowman, Mohamed Seedat, Norman Duncan and Stephanie Burrows' chapter - *Race, social transformation and redress in the South African social and health sciences*), *do not* in any real and explicit way explore the challenges and prospects to deracialisation in South Africa. In fact only three chapters in the book even mention the word "deracialisation" in the text (the editors' introductory chapter - *Changing contexts of race and racism: Problematics, polemics and perspectives*; Bowman et al's chapter – mentioned above; and Garth Stevens' chapter - *Truth, reconciliation, reparation and deracialisation in post-apartheid South Africa: Fact or fiction?*), and only one chapter has the word "deracialisation" in its title (Garth Stevens' chapter – mentioned above). Some might contend that this is a petty issue, but I disagree and see this as a significant oversight and shortcoming. Secondly, despite the fact that all the contributors to this volume are themselves psychologists of various kinds and therefore draw on different psychological theory and concepts in different and uneven ways, it is unclear, to me, how the book is *psychological*. Hook's (2006) chapter, above, is one of the few chapters that engages the issue of "race" psychologically. Before I get ahead of myself, let me first say a few things about what the book does manage to do.

The fourteen chapters, excluding the introduction, are organised into four parts, namely i) Race and signification; ii) Race, self, subjectivity and personhood; iii) Race and social location, and iv) Race, nation-building and citizenship. Together, the different chapters in the book successfully navigate the different post-apartheid landscapes of contemporary South Africa and explore the status of "race". The introductory chapter draws a useful intellectual, cultural and political map that contextualises the book as a whole. The post-apartheid context demands that we re-look, re-think, re-conceptualise "race" and race relations. But more importantly for psychology, that we consider how this complexly changing context impacts on subjectivity; on how "race" is reconfigured, rearticulated, remade, maintained and/or subverted in the social constitution of racialised subjects in the new South Africa. The work of Melissa Steyn (2001) on whiteness is instructive here as she similarly argues that the post-apartheid context requires a re-negotiation of racial identities, both white and black (and of course not forgetting the "grey" in between).

Two themes seem to tie the different chapters in the book together. First, all chapters (and the editors make this explicit from the beginning) are caught in the profound paradox and dilemma that confronts everyone who works and researches race. In this way, the editors and contributors are caught in, what Radhakrishnan calls "the treacherous bind", of working with and against the imperfect and potentially dangerous

categories of “race”. This is because the possibility of re-inscribing, as the editors argue, “racialised subjects, categories and asymmetries” (Stevens et al, 2006:xix), is almost unavoidable. Gunaratnam (2003:28) suggests that when we continue to deploy the concept of “race” we are in a “treacherous bind” in that we are “working with and against racial categories”. Most of this bind is because we are, using insights from Derrida (1981: 29), “thinking [with the concept] at the limit”. Hall (1996) argues that we need to understand the nature of deconstructive critique of many essentialist concepts such as “identity”, and following Hall, obviously “race” for this book. On the issue of questioning our concepts, Hall (1996: 1-2) argues that “[u]nlike those forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with ‘truer’ ones, or which aspire to the production of positive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts key concepts ‘under erasure’. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable – ‘good to think with’ – in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated”.

Similarly with the concept of “race”, we can no longer think of and use the concept of race in its original emergence and modern production, that is, as an essentialist and deterministic category. Since all of us, working with the concept of “race”, recognize, and here paraphrasing Hall (1996), that there is no “truer” concept to be supplanted in the service of the concept of race, we have no choice but to continue to deploy the concept of “race”, albeit strategically and “under erasure”. We continue to deploy the concept of “race” in Hall’s term, in a “detotalized” form. As we use the concept of “race”, we do so with the recognition that when we use the concept “race” we are immediately thrown into the “treacherous bind”. For Derrida (1981: 29), using a concept “under erasure” precisely means using “a concept that can no longer be and never could be, included in the previous regime”. Therefore, we need to continue using the concept of “race”, however we need to be mindful of the fact that we can no longer use it or think of it in “the old way” (Hall, 1996); or “in the previous regime” (Derrida, 1981) or in its original emergence and production. This is where one of the theoretical shortcomings of the deracialisation project or the post-race discourse lies: how can we counter different kinds, forms and variations of racisms without the concept of “race” - in some detotalized or deconstructed form? As flawed as the concept of race is (and might be); as tainted and perhaps even dangerous, we have *no* choice but to continue to use the concept of race, albeit as a strategy, that can be deployed in various ways for emancipatory and political mobilization; as a source of personal identity and identification; as a site for re-articulation, subversion, and resistance. The editors themselves eloquently capture this dilemma of working with concepts under erasure in that “[t]he approach consistent throughout the contributions is *a priori* to dismiss race and racial categories as valid entities as deployed in scientific racism, but nevertheless to utilise the terms in recognition that they are socially constructed features that have historically reflected and impacted on the nature of social relations in South Africa and across the world continue to do so” (Stevens et al , 2006: xix).

The second parallel theme is about the persistence of the continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid landscapes in terms of racialisation and the stubborn role race continues to play in shaping “relations, subjectivities and configurations of personhood” (Stevens et al, 2006: 4). Race refuses to go away. Its refusal at erasure is

despite the “damning” deconstruction critiques of “race” as a social construct, nothing more than a political fiction and illusion (Donald and Rattansi, 1992; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Gunaratnam, 2003; Stevens et al, 2006), “a myth of modernity” (Nayak, 2006: 411), and “a flawed scientific construct” (Bowman et al, 2006: 92). Race, nonetheless, remains salient and central in post-apartheid South Africa in a variety of domains of life, such as access to social and economic benefits.

Let me now turn my attention to the criticisms of the book I alluded to earlier. My criticisms are contained in the editors’ objectives in the introductory chapter, which are succinctly captured in the subtitle of the book, **Psychology and challenges to deracialisation in South Africa**. An immediate question I asked myself as early as reading the preface and introductory chapter, no doubt a question triggered by the word I find problematic, “deracialisation”, as what do the editors and contributors actually mean by “deracialisation”? This question led me to ask subsequent questions. I must also say that I ask these questions as a “black” South African whose own work is an attempt to understand and question the changing and multiple social constitutions of black identities. More personally, I ask these questions as a “racialised subject” with enormous psychological investments in the concept of “race” generally and in the construct of blackness as a source of and marker for identification and difference specifically. Is, and should “deracialisation” be, the logical outcome and progressive project following the demise of apartheid? Is deracialisation the editors’ and contributors’ theoretical endeavour and political pursuit? What is the relationship between deracialisation and non-racialism? Can either of these ideals ever be achieved in a place like South Africa, with its far too recent racist and racial history? How is deracialisation similar to or different from, what Daniel (2000) refers to as “deconstructive postcolonial thinking” or the post-race discourse, chiefly exemplified by the work of Paul Gilroy’s (2000) call for a move beyond “race”. How is deracialisation similar to or different from colour-blindness? Or does deracialisation mean, what Bowman et al (2006) in their attempt to engage the issue of deracialisation suggest, “the dissolution of race” – that we stop using the concept of “race” all together? While a few chapters impressed me, I was left with the same question after reading all the chapters (except for Bowman et al’s (2006) chapter): so what are the actual challenges and prospects for deracialisation? The book leaves this question unexplored in a direct way. Much is left to the reader to infer that the deracialisation project is difficult, if not impossible, given the re-inscription of (re)racialisation processes post apartheid. This is a profound limitation of the book. With this limitation in mind, I now offer my own thoughts on the deracialisation project.

In the preface Vourc’h (2006: xv) writes: “[i]n reading the chapters in the volume one takes cognizance of how difficult it is when embarking on a process of deracialisation to do away with the illegitimate categories of apartheid”. He then immediately poses the poignant question: “*Who are we if we are no longer blacks, coloureds, or whites?* It is neither simple nor evident how to implement a policy that *wipes clean the slate of racist ties without affording the victims of this odious system the opportunity to be vindicated for their oppression and to gain recognition for extreme prejudice endured in an all too recent past.* “Yes” to deracialising social relations and ties, but for whose benefit?” (Vourc’h, 2006: xv; emphases added). Vourc’h’s (2006) question, “for whose benefit” is a critical one. Who does deracialisation benefit? Who benefits from non-racialism or colour-blindness? Who reaps the discursive, material and psychological benefits for not talking about race, for not calling a thing by its name? For me, Steyn (2001: xxxii) offers

us insights of this dilemma by pointing out that “[t]he construction of race has been used to skew this society over centuries. If we banish [race] from our analytical frameworks, we serve the narrow interests of those previously advantaged, by concealing the enduring need for redress. To deal with the expressions of power, we have to call [race] by its name”.

Let me capture my own resistance against the theoretical and political calls to move beyond “race” or what I take the deracialisation project to mean with a play on words and ideas taken from this edited volume. The Introductory chapter opens with a famous quote from Justice Harry Blackmun (1978): “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race”. This means that we need the concept of “race”, no matter how flawed and how dangerous it might be, in countering racism and all of its varieties and manifestations. And here I am talking in Hook’s (2006: 179) terms of “unmediated or pre-discursive varieties of racism” and not simply institutional forms of racism. It is only then, that we can even begin to imagine a world unstructured by “race” and race-thinking. But as long as different kinds of inequalities and racisms are insidiously and structurally embedded in our social world and relations with and between each other, non-racialism, post-race and the deracialisation projects will remain forever an elusive possibility, and an unattainable utopia.

Rather than deracialisation, there is an urgent need to deal with race and its obstinate nature. Rather than wishing race away, we have to find ways of confronting race and talking about it intelligently and seriously. Without the concept of race, we are left blind to its disguised and latent forms and expressions. This is Freud’s insight of the *return of the repressed*. What is repressed will haunt us because it has to come out sooner or later - in some indirect forms until it finds some resolve. Gilroy’s work and the deracialisation project are of course important in imagining possibilities of the demise of race. However, that theoretical work is difficult to translate into lived realities and experiences, as we live in a historically racialised world, and we ourselves are racialised subjects - whether we like it or not. The hegemony of race is such that we cannot undo the past. We need creative ways of dealing with, talking about and engaging “race” that are not simply apologetic and confessional (as much of whiteness studies has tended to produce); ways that do not appeal to some nostalgic and mythical ideas of blackness (as much of the Afrocentric scholarship and black consciousness imagine); and ways that do not problematically reinforce and reify essentialised notions of “race”. But, we need critical and pluralized ways of continuing to talk about “race”; to engage “race” and its continual residual power. We therefore must look elsewhere, to other people and not only this book, to understand the prospects and challenges to deracialisation in South Africa. One such person we can look to is Thabisi Hoene, who in November of 2004 published an article, *Closing the race debate - no way to resolve tensions*, in the **Sunday Independent**, where she argues that “[t]he challenge is to recognize that a yearning to have a non-racial society should not detract from persistent engagement with race. Otherwise reality is distorted”.

With that, I consider the second criticism in a form of another question I posed to myself while reading this book. In what ways is the book psychological? I am aware that asking *this* question in *this* way runs the risk of falsely positing rigid, strict and yet arbitrary boundaries between disciplines. By psychological, I also do mean to return us to that problematic traditional and abstracted conception of the individual. However, I do not yearn for an inward turn into the intra-psychic realm of the individual.

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