

Theorising Race

Imagining Possibilities

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This special issue emerges from a concern with academic practice around researching and theorising race, racialism and racism; particularly within the current theoretical climate in which race is, in the majority, accepted as a social construct. In public thinking and discourse, however, acceptance of the biological existence of races continues to dominate in many societies. Racial classification also continues in many state practices in South Africa such as the collection of racial demographics through the national census, and through countless private and public officials reporting towards government-stipulated race-based employment acts. These classification practices raise contradictions for the constitutional goal of non-racialism in South Africa. South Africa has also signed and ratified the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>), which aims to eliminate racial discrimination in member states. The convention, to which member states are legally bound, raises a number of pressing issues that, to date, are not present in a wider national debate on the continued use of race in South African state policy. For example, there is little recognition by the state of the difficulties associated with identifying a targeted group based on race, nor clarity as to whether these groups are identified through markers based on phenotype, or socio-economic or cultural differences. Nor is there open discussion on the use of terms such as fair and unfair discrimination and how they relate to terms such as distinction and differentiation (see Bossuyt 2000), and the legal consequences of using such terms.

These tensions and contradictory practices are also evident in some scientific research. Whilst the social and biological sciences have actively dismantled, most vigorously after the Second World War (Stepan 2003: 334), the scientific racism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there remains in some social science writings a desire to use racial naming devices to explain complex social interactions and relations. In some studies in the natural sciences, including those in medicine and genetics, race continues to be linked, albeit in fuzzy ways, to biological difference. Why do these research practices continue? In a large part this is because race matters, in everyday inequalities and sense-making, and in a wide range of discriminatory practices and abuses



of power. The impact of racial classification and the identity politics enabled by it, on the livelihoods of people – however varied – should not be underestimated. The recognition of race in social theory, and continuing in different forms in some fields in the natural sciences, is often motivated by reparative rather than punitive objectives. Yet there is seldom a critical reflection on *how* and *why* racial categories continue in scientific research, especially when groups of people are presented as bound together through some form of unexplained, yet seemingly obvious, racial thread or totalising experience. Whilst scientific knowledge may not play as large a role in the construction of racial discourse as it did prior to the Second World War, residues of racial naming and essentialism can be found within pockets of present scientific practices.

In its simplest form this special issue was an invitation to focus on, rather than avoid, the inherent tensions of asserting that race is a social construct on one hand, and then continuing the messy process of identifying participants by ‘race group’ or making claims about ‘blacks’, ‘Indians’, ‘coloureds’ or ‘whites’ (to use apartheid racial classification categories, as an example) on the other. How then do we as theorists and researchers understand these tensions in our own work? How do we make sense of the ‘visual hunches’, which closely parallel the classification practices of apartheid (Alexander 2007:100), within our own work? In a way this special issue was asking, ‘Social construction, what then?’ For many authors, especially in the social sciences, their acceptance of the constructedness of race has been through the use of quotation marks. Posel et al. capture the complexity of the dilemma when they write that the distancing use of inverted commas ‘flagged’ the ‘ambiguities of [the apartheid race terms] ontological status’. They add that, nonetheless, ‘within the space of these inverted commas, the raw nerve of “race” is exposed and then sealed: on one hand, the association of racial categories with the discourse of apartheid, imposed on the country [...] rendered them aberrant; on the other hand, these categories could not be erased since they were also constitutive of the lived experiences of South African people’ (2001:vii).

The challenge lies not in the statement, but with what is subsequently done in the critical integration of it into research questions and research implementation. Perhaps some of these tensions are attended to, or at least made visible, when we pay attention to the focus of investigation, for example as Vron Ware eloquently puts it, if there is something worth analysing here, where ‘[i]t is not about *being* a white women, it is about *being thought of* as a white woman’ (1992: xii, emphasis in original).

Acknowledging this requires a focus on scientific ontological and epistemological underpinnings. This special issue focus is not unique per se in this call, but it is critical that the issues addressed in it remain within the focus of debates on race, race thinking and racism. Amongst other questions we are interested in is how theoretical reflections on the concept of race engage the aforementioned social constructivist dilemma of researching/writing about race. How theorising about power, injustice and inequality in society, both

contemporary and historical, opens up new spaces for dismantling/superseding racial classificatory practices.

In this special issue call we also, ambitiously, asked contributors to imagine alternative ways of conceptualising issues of power, justice, democracy and equality, identity, difference, class (and capitalism), that help disrupt a problematic continuum of race thinking. To the credit of the contributors there are some signposts suggesting possible paths into this seldom explored territory. However, on the whole the contributors reined in their focus to take issue with the continued crafting and construction of race in current scientific knowledge and practice. In hindsight this is exactly the strategic starting position for these debates. Michael Banton and Crain Soudien focus on these biases within social sciences, and Zimitri Erasmus and Rasmus Winther and Jonathan Kaplan examine the molecular and taxonomical race crafting in some of the biological sciences.

All these authors call for accountability from academics and researchers to recognise our own complicity in shaping and reproducing ideologies of race, within scientific fields, as well as in the popular imagination more broadly. They illustrate the seduction of race in shaping not just our personal identities but our scientific output; outputs that hold a specific position of privilege in a diverse web of societal knowledge. The credibility and legitimacy placed on scientific research carries with it a sense of responsibility. A rich literature exists linking scientific constructions of race prior to and during the Second World War and its role in justifying social differentiation, inequality and genocide. Saul Dudow's *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (1995) and Nancy Leys Stepan's 'Race and gender: the role of analogy in science' in *Anatomy of Racism* (1990) would be but two examples. But what of present scientific constructions of race and difference? Here we would strongly advocate Crain Soudien's request in this issue for a 'forensic sociology' of the present; one that matches the detailed historic accounts leading up to and including the twentieth century. This is not to suggest some form of benchmarking about the right and wrong way to research race, or to enter into polarised arguments for and against racial categories in research. Instead it is hoped that the articles in this special issue strengthen reflective thinking that moves us towards more nuanced understandings of social identities in general, in their historical and locational specificities and change, and opens spaces for grappling with the complexities of social justice. Ultimately it asks of us to think carefully about the work that we wish race to do both theoretically and in our research, and importantly situates the academic debates within the 'context of the politics of intellectual production' (Posel et al. 2001: ii).

Michael Banton's piece offers an important departure for thinking about the desire to name things in the social sciences, and the political agendas attached to these processes. What Banton clearly illustrates is how the meanings we attach to race profoundly shape our theoretical arguments and epistemological practices. Here he warns against an 'ethnocentric vision' that seeks a singular

dominant racial explanation, erasing the particularities of specific contexts and interactions in which racial meaning may be very different, or possibly not present. This desire to interpret findings through a racial framework most comfortable with the researcher robs us of the multiple ways in which race is entangled in society. For Banton experimental research methods on ‘whether and which categories are significant’, rather than imposing a racial lens, offers a more productive methodology through which theorists may better explain the meaning attached to naming devices in everyday talk.

Crain Soudien also reminds us not to lose sight of the importance of different historic and contemporary contexts in the construction of race. Embedding an analysis of race thinking within the social context demands recognition of specificity unmasking the mechanisms of powers supported by racialism. Here he provides a sensitive examination of the particular experiences and challenges of South African academics in dealing with race in scholarly research. Soudien unpacks the inbuilt contradictions and moral dilemmas within racial realism and redemptive realism positions. In short he argues that no matter the political will for justice and equality these positions inevitably are used to diminish one’s ‘human complexity’. Soudien places the responsibility for the vigilance against harmful ideological reductions in the realm of the personal. He calls for a consciousness that enable us to live better, ‘more knowing lives’. Part of this is alertness to the temptations of race thinking and its ability to disguise its work ‘without losing any of its essential biological features in a range of *alibi* concepts – ethnicity, nationality, culture and community’ (Soudien this issue). Flirtations with various types of racial imaginations continue in contemporary science including, as Banton and Soudien highlight, that of racial biology.

Zimitri Erasmus extends the focus on racial biology. Erasmus examines the enchantment of racialisation in interpretations of the human genome and genetics; an enchantment that re-mythologises the body as the ultimate genesis for differentiation and history. Here the science of molecular variation and the politics of identity are sewn back into the flesh to reconstitute ‘biogenetics as a home for meanings of history, of humanity and of belonging’ (Erasmus this issue). Erasmus’ article questions why ‘bio-centric meanings of “race”, social identification and belonging are so resilient’. This questioning reiterates the value of breaking our own illusions of the reliability and credibility of scientific knowledge, and be more reflective and critical of its emersion in social relations of power. A refusal in part of the self-importance attached to scientific data, which blinds us to our own politics. She offers pertinent examples of how genetic knowledge is claimed in giving credibility to the biological existence of groups marginalised in South Africa. Like Banton, and Soudien, Erasmus is highly critical of the processes of reducing a human to a racial unit. Erasmus develops the concept of sociogeny as a ‘heuristic device’ that enables ‘thinking about specific meanings and uses of “genes” and “genetic ancestry”, in particular localities, within the current global bio-economy and its dominant

epistemic regime'. Through this ontological restructuring, we are then better equipped to understand, and challenge 'how and why a single bio-imaginary – in the presence of a range of other imaginaries about belonging and interconnectedness – happens to be the prime choice for framing ideas about belonging in this DNA age'.

The last article in the special issue, by Rasmus Winther and Jonathan Kaplan, unpacks four sub-disciplines in the biological sciences and explores their concepts and aims in building classificatory frameworks. It is in this detailed localised analysis of the internal disciplinary struggles of creating orders and labels that 'racial ontologies are constructed conventionally, rather than discovered' (Winther and Kaplan this issue). It is in the uneasy tensions between stressing continuity and a propensity for structuring difference, in the 'irreducible disagreements' that science is, as Erasmus requested, demystified. Scientific knowledge or, more precisely, its interpretation and use are always a product of its social context. As Winther and Kaplan illustrate, scientific knowledge in the biological sciences is open to interpretation by those who wish to refute the existence of race, and those who wish to verify/solidify it. After all, as they state, 'to pretend that such arguments are about population structure when they really concern particular views about our moral responsibility to those currently severely disadvantaged in our society seems misguided' (Winther and Kaplan this issue).

Erasmus, and Winther and Kaplan point to how the biological continues to reside in explanations of social, cultural and economic disparities. Banton and Soudien draw attention to some of the theoretical, epistemological and methodological practices in the social sciences that continue to utilise and feed into racial naming devices. What we hope is apparent from this special issue is the need for serious confrontations with a range of complicities in constructing and maintaining racial difference in scientific knowledge, both social and natural – confrontations that intend to undermine the certainty of racial constructs, build theory and research practices that engage with rather than reduce complexity, and openly address the fear of the 'vast ... discursive void' left by the absence of the term race (Appiah 1989: 41). Building on the detailed forensics of past scientific knowledge and its impact on varied livelihoods, a reflective gaze towards the how, what and why of present producers of scientific knowledge and its impact opens possibilities. One such possibility is a more conscious and involved space in which to tackle the nexus of classifications and related practices that reproduce and enable multiple social injustices premised on social differentiation. A more immediate and practical change would be to dive into the 'discursive void' and transform our own theoretical language and naming devices to better describe and explain multifaceted forms of human interaction.

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