Review


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*Race Trouble* is a troubling book for activists, academics and teachers in South Africa committed to anti-racist politics. For it questions the efficacy and usefulness of the very category ‘racist’ as a critical and analytic tool for making sense of particular social practices, identifications and relations in post-apartheid South Africa. While ‘racism’ as a concept served as a necessary rallying point for mobilising opposition to apartheid, the authors argue that it is no longer relevant or appropriate in the post-apartheid era because, with the emergence of a predominantly black democratically elected government and a rapidly growing black middle class, race/power relations and divisions are much less clear cut.

This is not to say that racism is a dying idea 17 years into democracy. In spite of a growing black middle class, there are still massive racial inequalities and, while segregation is no longer prescribed, living and recreational spaces are still racialised. Furthermore the memory of apartheid racism lives on. How do the material and cultural legacies of apartheid influence and affect social relations and identifications in a new society where people of different races must co-exist and interact and where they are expected not to be racist? This is a central question in *Race Trouble* which focuses on the proliferation of concerns about and accusations of racism which make race a constantly troubling preoccupation in the post-apartheid era.
The book ‘aims to understand how race and racism are reproduced in the post-apartheid context’ and advocates a research approach which explores how people construct, justify, explain, account for and make sense of their lives in a ‘troubling’ context in which race operates as an ever-present, if unstated, backdrop. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, the authors argue for research which makes *performativity* the central focus of concern, which questions the routine ways people present themselves and negotiate relationships in a context in which social inequalities, living, working and recreational spaces are still racialised, and which investigates the kinds of subjectivities people inhabit and which are produced by these practices.

They provide rich examples from their own research and observations which illustrate the kinds of methodological, conceptual and analytic approaches they advocate, and this makes the book particularly engaging and insightful. They draw, for example, on observations of beaches where contact ‘between races’ is ‘kept to a minimum’ with white people moving away, as black people fill the beach, as the day progresses, and venture towards the places where white people are located. These, they argue, are patterns of behaviour, structured by the legacy of apartheid, which produce new racialised subjectivities and troubling relations. Conversations with white and black beachgoers revealed how race came to operate in troubling ways as a source of identification and difference, with blacks attributing the movements of whites to ‘racism’ and whites complaining about blacks ‘crowding them out’.

The movement of black people into what were and, in many cases still are defined as white spaces, such as formerly white schools or particular suburbs, is, the authors argue, a feature of the post-apartheid era, which reflects continuing white privilege. But rather than drawing on concepts of racism to explain how, on an ideological level, such dynamics are maintained, the book focuses on the complex ways people negotiate their identities in such a troubling context.

One could argue, as many commentators do, that social class has become the source of division and inequality in the post-apartheid era, and that race is troubling only because it is discursively produced by, among many others, the authors of this book. Why did the authors look only at race and not class when examining beach movements and explanations and rationalisations of these? Do, for example, middle class black people on the beach withdraw from less affluent blacks who they perceive as encroaching on their space? But even if class is no longer tied to race, class relations, the authors argue, are
still racialised and racial subjectivities are produced through everyday discursive and material practices.

In a society which presents itself as the very antithesis of apartheid it is troubling that race continues to act as a lens through which people construct and interpret their realities and continues to signify and symbolise spaces, whether beaches or townships or suburbs or schools. But this does not mean that if people (including academics) no longer think and talk racially, race will cease to be of any significance, since discursive processes, the authors argue, are connected to material and structural contexts. It is hardly surprising if people think racially in a society where race and racial divisions are inscribed and habitually played out, as the book so powerfully illustrates, in a range of different spaces.

Indeed the authors characterise race-denial as a feature of post-apartheid discursive practices, and present this, along Freudian lines, as a form of repression, an unconscious and habitual way of dealing with troubling emotions, which keep surfacing. This is illustrated in their analyses of the accounts of black domestic workers and white employers, interviewed individually about their respective roles. The authors argue that domestic work, still highly racialised, provides a powerful material and symbolic link with the apartheid past and is troubling for both employers who want to present themselves as liberal and not (racially) exploitative, and workers who want to be seen as equal participants rather than victims of racism. In the interview extracts presented in the book, race features like the ‘proverbial elephant in the sitting room’ as each seeks to rationalise features of their domestic worker–employer relationship which are troubling by evading the question of race. For example, not sharing tea breaks or locking the domestic worker in the house and not giving her the key when the employer goes out are attributed by the domestic worker or employer to things other than race and rendered insignificant (and not troublesome).

This book continually seeks to remind us of the significance of race as a source of identification (or rather dis-identification) and as a dimension of power and inequality in the post-apartheid era, yet also questions the usefulness of racism as a conceptual category (however nuanced and complex contemporary theories of racism may be). But can we think critically about race in the post-apartheid era without drawing on some notion of racism?

How should academics interpret the findings of the Ministerial Report, published in 2008, that ‘racism and sexism’ are ‘pervasive’ in higher education
institutions in South Africa? If we critique the use of racism (and perhaps sexism as well) are we doing justice to the concerns expressed by black students and staff who complained of forms of discrimination in racially mixed universities? Ironically, one of the authors of *Race Trouble* indicates, in the blurb on the back cover, that ‘she is actively involved as a member of the Anti-Racism Network in Higher Education’. Is it possible to reject racism as a theoretical category but hold on to it as a political category?

If we reject the concept racism can we make sense of incidents such as the infamous one at the University of Free State, in 2007, which precipitated the Ministerial enquiry, mentioned above, on ‘social cohesion’ in universities? This was when a group of white students parodied the University’s (slow) attempt to ‘integrate’ the formerly white residences, by creating and videotaping a mock initiation ceremony which involved black cleaners participating in degrading rituals. In terms of the analytic approach advocated in *Race Trouble* we might explore how and why the event was so troubling for different people, and the ways they were dealing with this, as well as contestations about whether the act was racist or motivated by ‘high spirits’. But can we not, at the same time, define the actions of the students as racist?

Not according to the authors of *Race Trouble* who argue that it is not the place of critical academics, investigating race in contemporary South Africa, to take sides, when it comes to deciding whether some people or institutional practices are racist or not, and to participate, thereby, in the ‘race trouble’ they are studying.

But does this not imply intellectual relativism and a failure to address race-power relations? The authors refute this, arguing that particular claims and denials of racism, whether they are made by black people about continuing forms of stigmatisation and marginalisation or white people about being labelled as racist or about being victims of ‘racism in reverse’ are not equivalents and that we need to remind ourselves of the colonial contexts in which discourses of race emerged and how these have been invoked to promote power relations which serve white interests.

What are the implications for a politics of social change of focusing on *race trouble*? This does not receive much attention in the book. The authors acknowledge possibilities of alternative discursive practices which do not reproduce the stereotypical and segregated patterns as witnessed, for example, in the study of beach behaviour. But there are no textual examples of such practices nor is there any discussion of how and why these might occur. Take, for example, cross racial friendships and as expressed through
forms of socialising on the beach or elsewhere. These may be uncommon even, as the authors say, in many racially mixed institutions such as schools and universities, may be forged in predominantly ‘white’ and middle class spaces, and may provoke ‘race trouble’ through reactions of disapproval or surprise from others. But more attention might have been given to discussing the potential of particular social practices, such as these, for subverting and challenging habitual patterns of racialisation.

But this is a ground-breaking book which makes an important contribution to contemporary national and international academic debates about race and racism. Engaging critically and comprehensively with classical and contemporary theories on a range of pertinent themes - discourse, subjectivity, performativity, and repression, as well as race and racism, it makes a powerful case for developing an analytic approach which addresses cultural and discursive processes, emotional investments in these, and the social, material and historical contexts which inform these. One of the hallmarks of this book concerns the clarity of expression and how it weaves complex ideas with powerful illustrative examples and applications. This makes the book both engaging and accessible for a relatively wide academic audience and also particularly powerful as a text for re-imagining and researching race in post-apartheid South Africa.