Article

‘Broken down by race …’: questioning social categories in redress policies

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Abstract
Arguing that choices have to be made between forms of redress, on the one hand, and progress towards a non-racial society and social cohesion and avoidance of group-based social conflict on the other, I propose the ‘necessity of utopian thinking’ for debate. It is not redress (or ‘transformation’) that is at issue but the form that it takes. Redress, in its several necessary forms, cannot be constricted by a narrow focus on race. Nor can the consequences of such a near-exclusive focus be ignored: consequences of exclusion or marginalisation of certain factors such as class, ethnicity and gender; consequences of strengthening race thinking; consequences of failure in effectively addressing inequality and poverty; consequences of weakening moves to ensure social cohesion.

Introduction
The title to this paper is taken from the regular column written by StatsSA statistician-general Pali Lehohla (Business Report, October 23, 2009). The contribution was headed ‘The decent work issue has many variables’, and contains the sentence ‘Broken down by race we can observe that the white population group in the formal sector fare better with access to benefits than all the other population groups’ (emphasis added). Let me stay with StatsSA in this introduction. Some years ago I responded to the same column as is referred to above emanating from the statistics institution, querying the use of apartheid race categories in, for example, the census – with no apparent open debate previous to the decision.¹ The matter was responded to by Lehohla twice: the first time was on May 5, 2005, and I quote from ‘Inside Statistics’ (Business Report):
There has been some controversy over whether teachers should be required to record the ‘race’ or ‘population group’ of their pupils, as a means of measuring and monitoring transformation in schools. For the vast majority of people in South Africa, race remains an important indicator of access to resources. Without some reference to an historic notion of race, it is not possible to measure and monitor progress in eradicating the consequences of apartheid.

An immediate response could be that ‘race classification’ itself was one of the most pernicious ‘consequences of apartheid’, the legal basis upon which the rest of the edifice was constructed. A week later (May 12, 2005) Lehohla continued, responding to several specific points that I had raised. I quote extracts, indicating a more complex picture, one not often publicised:

Some identifier of population group is, at least for a time, probably required to measure and monitor progress in redressing the inequalities of South Africa’s past. However, population group or ‘race’ as a variable in statistical collection and analysis is inadequate on its own. …

… [I]t remains so that the majority of South Africa’s population, and by far the majority of those most disadvantaged by apartheid, readily identify themselves as ‘black’ or ‘African’. The tasks for statisticians, then, are to link this identification to other variables so that measuring, monitoring and analysis can be enhanced.

Lehohla then illustrates this process with reference to the labour force survey (LFS) and notes that ‘An increasing number of variables can be attached to the national profile of unemployment to obtain a more nuanced picture. Population group is one of these’ (emphasis added). Others, in this case as he presents it, are geography, sex, age, education, housing, access to services, etc.

What is not mentioned, however, is that ‘race’ trumps all others in terms of public and political discourse. And this brings me to another point I had raised in the brief interchange and which was acknowledged but not addressed in the response, namely the ‘social costs of maintaining a race identifier as the main basis for measuring changes’, to employ Lehohla’s own words. Here it is perhaps important to turn to philosopher Ian Hacking and his article on ‘Why race still matters’ (2005). The reference serves to introduce additional complexity to the use of statistical measurement, including here a discussion of statistics and race. Before Hacking turns to
this issue he refers to the genetic fact that humans are all of ‘the same Kind’ – there is ‘no biological basis for “race”’ (205:104). Even though we hold some pretty specific notions of ‘race’!

Maybe not a biological fact, but as the statistician-general points out, and as is done regularly in the press or in academic articles, there are many aspects of the social world that show correlations with ‘race’ as an affective social construct, obviously also in South Africa with its history of deliberate racial discrimination. It is not necessary to go much further than income distribution, educational levels, health and life expectancy, and so forth. In brief, Hacking then asks the readers of his article to consider three words that he wishes to use with ‘statistical’: statistically significant, statistically meaningful, and statistically useful. What does he mean? Statistically significant is applied when the ‘distribution [of a characteristic] in one population is significantly different from that in a comparable population’ – he notes that the term ‘significant’ ‘relies on technical notions in applied probability theory’, and I will therefore leave it to the statisticians. Statistically meaningful applies ‘if there is some understanding, in terms of causes, of why the difference is significant’ (my emphasis); and then ‘a characteristic is statistically useful if it can be used as an indicator of something of interest in some fairly immediate practical concern’ (2005:105). Such ‘immediate concerns’ vary – is it racial representivity or is it equality and social cohesion – or both, for that matter.

It should be clear that if I wished to develop my arguments into exploring race-based redress and race-based measures to assess change, I need to explore each of these terms and their validity in and relevance to the way in which redress is effected in South Africa. There is little doubt that StatsSA argues that the ‘race’ characteristic carries all three these values.4

Where do I want this introduction to take the discussion? First, I want it to persuade us to consider, in inseparable conjunction, the social and moral demand for a society different from the one in which we live, and the need for utopian thinking in the path towards that. Second, I will reflect on the manner in which ‘race’ categories have remained at the centre of state policy, but now through being linked to the admirable and essential goal of addressing social and economic inequality. Apartheid used ‘race’ to create and effectively to maintain inequality; in a democratic South Africa the state and other bodies, and individuals, argue strongly that the use of ‘race’ is a necessary step towards a society of equality. Third, I advance the position, along with others who share and have shared these concerns, that not only
is this approach failing hopelessly in mediating, never mind eradicating, inequality, but that the deliberate continuation of race classification defeats the moral, Constitutionally-required, injunction to imagine and work towards non-racialism. Seventeen years later we remain ‘broken down by race …’.

What is meant by *racialism*, or in another term *race thinking*? Kwame Anthony Appiah succinctly captures it as a state of thinking, of making sense of the social world, that accepts:

That there are heritable characteristics, possesses by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into small sets of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racialist view, a sort of racial essence; it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the “Races of Man” account for more than the visible morphological characteristics – skin color, hair type, facial features on the basis of which we make our informal classifications.

Appiah then adds an important point, not to be explored further here, but the relevance of which should be immediately visible to the reader:

Racialism is not, in itself, a doctrine that must be dangerous, even if the racial essence is thought to entail moral and intellectual dispositions. Provided positive moral qualities are distributed across the races, each can be respected, can have it ‘separate but equal place’. Unlike most Western-educated people, I believe – … – that racialism is false, but by itself, it seems to be a cognitive rather than a moral problem. …

*Racialism is, however, a presupposition of other doctrines*, that have been called ‘racism,’ and these other doctrines have been, in the last few centuries, the basis of a great deal of human suffering and the source of a great deal of moral error. (Appiah 1992:13, emphasis added, 1989; also Maré 2000, 2001)

It is for reasons of its falseness, and because of the consequences of prevalent racialism in terms of human suffering that *non*-racialism as a societal goal is essential.

Such a commitment, oft-repeated, to non-racialism has to all intents and purposes become a ‘stark utopia’, but need not be such. What is the basis of the social and moral necessity, why a need for utopian thinking, and what is meant by a ‘stark utopia’ (is there any other kind?).⁵ Why bring in ‘utopian thinking’ in relation to such a question as material as corrective action in post-apartheid South Africa? These will be the questions to which I return in the conclusion.
Utopian thinking

The main reason for my first point, namely that South Africa has to move away from the common sense and deliberate maintenance of race categories in both thinking and policy, is that the continuation of race thinking makes available to politicians, with an obvious temptation, race-based populist mobilisation. The consequences of such mobilisation have been well documented by many – whether referring to the Holocaust, or more recently to the Rwanda genocide and eastern Europe. It leaves the notion of ‘minorities’ for deliberate scapegoating perpetually on hand (see Appadurai 2006, Maré 2011). Such a goal, of continually and deliberately undermining racialism through a variety of national initiatives, sets a major project in motion. Rick Turner confronted this four decades ago, as did black consciousness leader Steve Biko.

Turner died in 1978, in his own home, in the immediate presence of his two children, at the hand of an apartheid assassin (http://www.turner.ukzn.ac.za). Six years earlier his book The Eye of the Needle: an essay on participatory democracy was published as part of the Spro-cas programme. The essay style suited Turner with his attempt always to involve all readers and listeners in thinking through, puzzling over, any problem that may seem, at least initially, to be insurmountable. He would often challenge, bring up short, those who came with common sense, seemingly obvious statements, with the simple question ‘Why?’. Apartheid dominance, in 1972, seemed to be irremovable, at least in the short-term. Neither the Durban strikes of 1973, nor the Soweto uprising of 1976 had occurred when Turner wrote his essay.

And yet the utopia he was asking the readers, all South Africans but especially those who benefited from having been classified ‘white’, to consider was that of a world beyond racist and racialist apartheid, beyond the exploitation of a capitalist system too. Turner asks his readers to accept that there are two kinds of ‘impossibility’ – the absolute impossibility, and the ‘other things being equal’ impossibility (1972:3). The former he illustrates with the futility of trying to teach a lion to renounce meat and eat only vegetables. This is what Polanyi (2001:3) refers to as a ‘stark utopia’:

Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man [sic] and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness.
Turner asks that we stop asking only for the apparently possible concessions of the apartheid system, and ‘instead explore the absolute limits of possibility by sketching an ideally just society’ (1972:3). This means continuously and imaginatively to investigate a world beyond ‘the implicit assumptions’ that shape and guide our social behaviour. These ‘implicit assumptions’ approximate what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as ‘common sense thinking’ (1997:13). Such a task is essential because institutional change, Turner notes, seems impossible, especially at the time and in the context he was writing. It needs that disruption, demanded through engaging in the challenge of utopian thinking. Institutions, by definition, depend for their reproduction on their acceptance by and the complicit behaviour of the vast majority – ‘If I give away my property I do not thereby abolish private property as an institution: I only abolish my private property’ (1972:4-5).

But there is a second, a moral reason for utopian thinking, and not just institutional change, namely to imagine a world very different from our own in order to question the values of the world in which we live: ‘Unless we can see our society in the light of other possible societies we cannot even understand how and why it works as it does, let alone judge it’ (1972:5). To illustrate this point Turner uses ‘thinking about race’! There is a common sense about race (this was the case in 1972 and unfortunately in many and pervasive ways this is still the case today), but ‘commonsense thinking obscures reality’, writes Turner – as would Bauman later. He, Turner, continues:

… unless we think in Utopian terms about South African society we will not really come to understand how it works today. We will take for granted its inequalities, power relations and behaviour patterns which need to be explained. Nor will we be able to evaluate the society adequately. We will not understand on how many levels there are alternatives, and so the possibility of choice, and so the possibility of moral judgement. (1972:6-7)

I would like us to think, even if just for a moment, beyond the taken for granted, the common sense, and instead to explore alternatives, choice, and to consider applying moral judgement in that process.

**Fixing ‘race’, fixing inequality?**
The second major point of argument in this paper relates to the manner in which attempts are being made to use the very categories for which apartheid was condemned in order to ‘correct’ the past. The apartheid system, the way
in which it was explained and justified, the way in which it functioned, the institutions it created to realise that vision, and the implications for all members of the society – albeit in enormously different ways in most instances – have been researched and reflected upon by many a researcher and theorist. Much of that work no longer features in our thinking and even less so in the preparation for the everyday world of a new generation of South Africans. The members of the new generation have their own dreams, promises, setbacks, and tragedies to confront. The past is most often presented in terms of ‘the legacy of apartheid’. But what is that legacy, how was it created, towards what ends? And, importantly, how do we overcome it?

Let me give some content to my own understanding of what that legacy could be based on, or at least the questions we need to answer to create an understanding on which to base plans for the future. What were the foundations created by apartheid ideologues and practitioners, supported by a large majority of people classified ‘white’ and some people classified ‘Bantu’ or one of the politically-driven subsequent synonyms? What were the continuities from the prior segregationist period into the post-1948 South Africa? Where did the new government in 1994 start building totally afresh, and where did they adapt what was there? The most abstract concepts that can be used in understanding and explaining apartheid are those of ‘class’ and of ‘race’ (with a perpetual and complex articulation with gender). With an influential communist and socialist movement in the country – nearly as old as the African National Congress itself – it is little wonder then that the ‘class-race debate’ should be central to the most critical of thinking about the society in which we lived, to shaping strategies to drive social change, giving form to an envisaged future society beyond apartheid. The literature is full of articles and books that carry those two words in the title or in the content: ‘class’ and ‘race’. Deborah Posel, exploring the ‘making of apartheid’, notes ‘a framework of debate about the relationship between Apartheid and capitalism’. She continues, arguing that there are two dimensions in the debate: first, to examine ‘the impact of capitalist development, and dominant class interests, on the design and objectives of Apartheid’; and, second, to question ‘the degree of compatibility between capitalism and the ways in which Apartheid policies are administered in practice’ – in summary, has apartheid ‘hindered or advanced capitalist interests’ (1991:9).
Dan O’Meara was one of several who brought them together in his Volkskapitalisme: class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism 1934-1948, an exploration of how an ethnic-capitalist society was deliberately created by advancing the interests of Afrikaner would-be capitalists. But these arguments also had strategic implications, best captured in the debate around the ‘O’Dowd thesis’ (see for example chapter 2, ‘The O’Dowd view’, in Schlemmer and Webster (eds) 1978). Some of the liberal protagonists in the debate around how apartheid was to be overcome, argued that the free development of capitalism, unshackled from the sometimes bizarre chains that white racism and later apartheid put on both labour and capital, would in fact create a much more equal and thriving society. Capitalist growth, in itself, would end apartheid racism, which then also served as an argument for greater foreign investment. Anglo-American’s Michael O’Dowd came to typify this approach in his public arguments. Utilising the then frequently employed ‘stages of growth’ approach (popularised by WW Rostow in the early 1960s), O’Dowd writes that:

… I believe that South Africa will follow the normal pattern of political, social and economic development [the ‘stages of growth’] from minority rule, through a liberal era, to a welfare state, and that in the process the ‘race question’ will be solved. (1978:37, also see the ‘Rejoinder’ by Kane-Berman 1978)

On the other hand left-leaning and marxist analysts vigorously argued that if capitalism was taken for granted in the struggle against the racist system, then much would be left unchanged in SA, despite changes on the issue of ‘race relations’ and political representation. A capitalist economic and social system is maintained through a range of institutions, practices and the state, and those institutions and practices are structurally founded on and reproduce inequality of power and resources. Through private property and individual consumption the effect is ‘the frequent contrast between “private affluence” and “public squalor”: television sets in slums, shiny new cars on dirty, polluted city streets’, as Turner so graphically described it (1972:51).

Most analysts, however, accepted that it was in exploring the interaction between ‘race’ and ‘class’ that understanding apartheid lay, and in addressing that articulation that the process of social change would occur and a new ‘post’ apartheid democratic South Africa would come to be (see, for example, Fisher et al 1978, Webster 1977). This does not mean that such theorists did not favour one ‘side of the equation’ or the other in their approach and in
their suggestions for change (see, for example, all the contributions in Adler (ed) 1977).

In the process of moving into a new South Africa, hardly ever was a glance cast away from capitalism – despite the fears of those who had presented *apartheid* South Africa as a bastion of Western capitalism, on one side, and, on the other, the ANC as a communist organisation. The old and the new elites seemed to breathe a sigh of relief that ‘socialism’, never mind ‘communism’, after the collapse of the USSR was generally perceived or confirmed as an outdated ‘stark utopia’. What then was left of the ‘legacy of apartheid’? ‘Race’. It left, mainly, the task for a firm link to be established between (capitalist) growth/development, on the one hand, and on the other racial ‘transformation’ of the extreme inequalities that existed. Of course there were some intervening steps that could be argued about: for example, was it growth through redistribution (the initial position), or redistribution through growth? (Gelb 2006). In 1994, already, Adelzadeh and Padayachee came to the following conclusion on changes that had by then been suggested and made to the RDP (Reconstruction and Development) policy that was the ANC’s first election manifesto:

An essentially neo-liberal strategy, which is what we are left with, may well generate some level of economic growth: should this happen, the existing mainly white and Indian bourgeoisie will be consolidated and strengthened; the black bourgeoisie will grow rapidly; a black middle class and some members of the black urban working class will become incorporated into the magic circle of insiders; but for the remaining 60-70 per cent of our society this growth path, we venture to predict, will deliver little or nothing for many years to come. (1994:16)

On the one hand there was the growth path chosen for creating greater equality in South Africa, and there was the path of race-based redress, specifically in the spheres of employment, of ownership and control of capital, and of land redistribution (largely) under the social relations of capitalism. There were, of course, many other steps aimed at redirecting infrastructural development towards those people grossly neglected through *apartheid* policies (housing, roads, water and electricity), extending and improving social welfare allocations and their delivery, as well as restructuring educational facilities and increasing access at all levels. In all of these measures, however, the process has, unfortunately, been extremely uneven – the best intentions have often been thwarted through corruption (in most cases hitting the poor hardest), poor control, and administrative and
infrastructural lack of capacity. These critical comments come from across the spectrum of society, and from all political parties. On the positive side, and with many rewarding consequences, the most immediate and massive change remains that of establishing an inclusive citizenship and the democratic rights and protections that come with that, under a generally accepted Constitution. Here, too, lies the potential for mobilisation and organisation towards greater equality. However, my concern in this paper is with affirmative action and black economic empowerment, the two directly race-based policies of redress, and the ones that receive by far the most publicity. There are other studies that have cast their net much wider and with detail to which I can’t even allude here (such as that by Seekings and Nattrass 2006).

So what has happened? Has the race-based approach to creating a society that would no longer be second from the bottom – Brazil, for many years, being the lowest – in terms of inequality, even if not of poverty, worked? The word ‘fixing’ in the sub-title for this section carries two meanings: the first is to mend or repair; the second is to ‘secure from change’, ‘give constancy’, as the OED puts it. There are several arguments to be made, whichever way we read either of the ‘fixings’.

That we continue to have inequality, and that there is strong evidence that it is growing, has been repeated many times over the past ten years. Terreblanche first put the growing inequality cat amongst the proverbial political pigeons with his book, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (published in 2002). In 2006 Seekings and Nattrass followed the same issue with *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (2006: especially chapter 9). It cannot be stressed enough, arguments for debate on and policy and practice towards non-racialism does not take place instead of redress! This seemingly obvious statement is made also because arguments advanced in effect against working towards non-racialism are frequently based on a false and malicious assumption, a claim, that proponents for a process towards non-racialism call for a ‘colour blind’ society, or even that they claim that it already exists.

There are two issues that are confused in any discussion of redress in its race-based form: the first is the ‘correct’ numbers within a ‘race demographic’ analysis of the hierarchical workforce; the second is socio-economic inequality in society. Race-based redress nearly always gets away scot free only because the two elements are most often conflated. But that conflation is based on false premises.
Gerhard Maré

Failure to achieve equity and social cohesion; success in giving constancy to inequality and apartheid race categories?

Finally, my argument has been simple. Both affirmative action and black economic empowerment depend on race classification – the old categories live on, defended as a necessity (see, for example, Lehohla, above), and firmly present in post-apartheid legislation and bureaucratic practice (Stone and Erasmus 2008, and in this issue). The reasons for this overwhelmingly accepted state of affairs, even though in effect contradicting the Constitutional commitment to non-racialism, and simultaneously and continuously demanding reproduction of the very fictitious (although by now, after centuries of seeing and creating and maintaining difference, very real) categories of ‘races’, is that apartheid based its discriminatory policies on the Population Registration Act. It follows then within this argument, that it is common sense that redress, similarly, should be based on those categories. Past discrimination, through its creation and/or confirmation of groups, created race-based ‘historically-disadvantaged individuals’ and, therefore, present redress must follow the same route – with the understanding that each individual benefiting does so as a member of the (‘race’) group, a specimen of a race.

The present, and the unforeseeable future, is thus based on the past. It is, therefore, legitimate to ask what ‘past’ is being redressed and how is it understood with the apparent clarity of hindsight? It has become, nearly exclusively, the past of race discrimination. Such an approach demands ignoring individual capitalist beneficiaries and wholehearted political collaborators within the previously disadvantaged ‘groups’. Such an approach asks for the obliteration of a range of social and political locations, because of the group-based legislative infrastructure of apartheid. It also demands ignoring, in effect, the articulated enmeshing of capitalism and class exploitation, within the race-discriminated against groups and racially privileged group.

This is how Bentley and Habib frame the issue in the conclusion to the book on ‘race’ and redress, one they also edited:

South Africa’s democratic experiment is confronted with a central political dilemma: how to advance redress in order to address the historical injustices while simultaneously building a single national cosmopolitan identity. (2008: 337)

When the authors then reflect on solutions to this quandary they immediately reject what I would think is an obvious (but straw) target, namely
a ‘colour-blind’ solution, one which it is said at the same time rejects ‘affirmative action and redress’ (2008:337, my emphasis). While I certainly have not deliberately or extensively searched for such a farcical and insensitive position, I have not come across it yet. They come closer to what may offer a different approach, to redress, when they refer to a chapter in the book that shows that ‘racial transformation’ (in other words, a head count of those who fall into previously disadvantaged ‘races’ that collectively account for some 90 per cent of the population) in the civil service has been ‘successfully implemented’, whereas gender and disability lag behind (2008:338).

Second, Bentley and Habib then summarise an argument that appears in ‘Almost all the chapters, … [which] demonstrate(s) that redress as it is currently constructed, tends to advantage more privileged sections of historically disadvantaged communities’ (2008:342). This finding relates directly to the failure to make SA a less unequal society, discussed above; and also draws attention to what Seekings and Nattrass argue at the end of their book, namely that whites continue to benefit from the acquisition, and reproduction, of what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’. They (Seekings and Nattrass) note that ‘Much of the public expenditure on the poor is not efficient at present’, especially when it comes to education (2006:396):

The rich pay for this in that their taxes are soaked up in paying salaries to underperforming teachers. But the poor pay an even higher price: their children are denied the opportunity to get ahead, and the rich resist calls for more money to be spent on social policies. (2006:3978)

Bentley and Habib add that ‘race’-based affirmative action ‘has in some cases compromised service delivery to the poorest and most marginalised of the citizenry’ (2008:342). It seems, from these arguments, that existing policies exclude the previously disadvantaged (defined as a socio-economic and not ‘race’ category) and, at best, ‘compromises’ the delivery of services that will alter their condition so that they can compete for ‘race’-based advancement!

Let me stay with Bentley and Habib because they take me to the final point I wish to make in this contribution, namely the effects of ‘heightening racial consciousness’ through AA and BEE (2008:344). The authors refer to the obviously (as it is a ‘race-based approach) small number of South Africans who voice the opinion that these forms of redress have damaged a sense of ‘nationhood’. I would ask what people believe the ‘nation’ to be. My argument is one that is wider, and that questions the continued use of race
classification in a country that was expected globally, and is Constitutionally-committed locally, to provide an alternative to a viciously ‘race’-based society.

What does continued and pervasive ‘race’ classification do to the dignity component of the Constitution as a document of solidarity, one that envisages a new social order, one that rejects apartheid as never to be repeated? What repeated message of human difference is given to the next generation, when those differences with their pervasive biological roots have had and continue to have such horrific results? How do we, as individuals brought together through historical processes and now a shared citizenship, escape the entrenched ways of seeing each other as ‘specimens of the category’ (Bauman 2000:227) when we are being required on a near daily basis to name ourselves, or have others name us, as belonging to a ‘race’? What dangers are carried with concomitant notions of ‘minorities’ within the formally shared citizenship?

But, and these two questions also need to be confronted, how do we address the hurt of racism, degradation and discrimination (past and present) – what Cheng refers to as ‘grief’ (2001) – without ‘race’ categories; and, second, can we respond in a sensible way to the statistical correlations between ‘race’ and ‘disadvantage (what Cheng names ‘grievance’), and build on these additional concerns in more complex alternative ways of corrective action? Here a reflection on Ian Hacking’s ‘statistically significant’, ‘statistically meaningful’, and ‘statistically useful’, introduced earlier, may provide grounds for challenging debate (2005). Such a debate could also be informed by Paul Taylor’s injunction for complexity: ‘monitor your attitudes and ideas, cultivate the habit of thinking about things from multiple perspectives’; note the ‘interpenetration of the many aspects of social reality’; and, finally, take into account that such ‘interpenetration’ ‘has shaped the flow of power in our social world’ (2004:183).

How do we redress without ‘race’, or at least with a perpetual question mark hanging over our use of such an approach when it seems appropriate to acknowledge the constructed reality of the category? Several authors have engaged in this debate. Seekings and Nattrass (2006) conclude their book with a chapter on ‘Transforming the distributional regime’, indicating where they see priorities lying. Kanya Adam (2000:180), earlier, concludes:

One of the greatest inherent risks of affirmative action lies in nurturing the same racial divide which underpinned apartheid. One of the disadvantages which emerged from the U.S. experience is that an
emphasis on group characteristics has perpetuated race consciousness. Using race-based affirmative action to benefit blacks as a group, without distinguishing between the relatively privileged stratum and those who are ‘truly disadvantaged’, detracts from those most in need, particularly in a society in which the target group forms the numerical majority.

Neville Alexander, writes – ‘I believe that we should rethink the way in which we are trying to bring about what we refer to as historical redress such that we do not unintentionally perpetuate racial identities’ (2007:104), and at the same time initiate a way past capitalism and its ravages. Thandike Mkandawire (2009:154) suggests that:

Egalitarian redistributive struggles to deal with the social question will require different social coalitions and different agendas [from those required by the goal of addressing the ‘national question’]. They will involve decoupling struggles for recognition (Black Empowerment) from struggles for redistribution and equality.⁹

Lehohla, in his column on May 5, 2005, referred to Anthony Holiday – ‘philosopher, journalist and anti-apartheid activist’ (he had been a member of the underground SA Communist Party) as The Guardian described him in an obituary (August 18, 2006). Holiday, in a column in the Cape Times (‘Death of race classification overdue’, August 11, 2004) discusses the absurdity of continuing classification of people according to a putative race-belonging for purposes of redress. He recalls that the Population Registration Act was the ‘legal lynch pin which synthesised and facilitated the entire apartheid mechanism’. Holiday refers to Mosiuoa Lekota’s attempt at the time he was writing to re-open debate on this practice: “When will we cease to be Africans, coloured, Indians and whites, and merely be South Africans” – now there is a bit of utopian thinking! Lehohla had selected a specific reference in Holiday’s column, and I quote from the original:

I well remember the late Joe Slovo saying to me at a clandestine meeting: ‘Once we are in power, I would favour, at least for the immediate future, making it illegal to make any reference whatsoever to a person’s race.’

To conclude I return to Turner: what kind of impossibility is a ‘non-racial’ South Africa – ‘stark’ or absolute impossibility, or an ‘all things being equal’ impossibility? If the former, do we wish to turn the clock back to scientific racism? If the latter, how do we envisage that utopia, that world beyond the one into which we were born and in which we live and act at present? One of the first steps, as I have indicated, is to revisit the kind of world which we are attempting to create, even if it is beyond our reach as individuals. Such
an attempt to imagine a world that does not, but should exist, has been attempted on a large scale in South Africa at least twice. That was, after all, the purpose of the Freedom Charter in 1954 (see Suttner and Cronin 1986, 2006), and the interim (1994) and final (1996) Constitution (see Andrews and Ellman (eds) 2001). Then we have to have the courage to question the existing policies, practices and visions, and recognise that there may well be necessary, if not essential, engagements that challenge power as it is exercised, challenging power towards an alternatively envisaged future.

Notes
1. Research on debate prior to the first post-apartheid census would reveal which of conflicting claims – extensive debate/ a decision but no real debate – is accurate.
2. Lehohla refers in the column to the scrapping of the Population Registration Act in 1991, and mentions the difficulty of subsequent race classification, but claims that the vast majority of South Africans had no difficulty in self-defining in race terms during the 2001 census. This does not answer his introductory remark in this specific column (Business Report, May 5, 2005 ‘Debate over censuses not peculiar to SA’) on how teachers have to tackle such an issue with young children – this example, and myriads of such other-, and not self-classifications take place across the country every day, demanding decisions from a very large number of agents (on the traumatic process in relation to teachers, in April, 2007, it was reported that a teacher in the Eastern Cape, upon enquiring about the ‘race’ of a child (as required for the completion of an Education Department form), was told “‘Miss, I’m mixed, so just call me black’”. This occurred in Graaff Reinet. The teacher ‘wondered if the department could provide guidelines on how to go about classification. “How back is black? And when is a pupil a coloured?” … A teacher at Uitenhage says if she can’t tell the race of pupils from their skin colour, she looks at their surnames, “failing that, I ask the pupil”’ (Weekend Witness, April 14, 2007).
3. For one personal experience, see the film ‘Skin’ and the documentary ‘Skin Deep: the true story of Sandra Laing’ that was shown on The History Channel, January 24, 2010.
4. A qualification that Hacking introduces relates to the May 12, 2005 Lehohla column: ‘Unlike statistical significance, the idea of being statistically meaningful is a hand-waving concept that points at the idea of an explanation or a cause. Imprecise hand-waving concepts are dangerous when they are given fancy names. They can be put to wholly evil ends. But if we do not give them phony names and are well aware of their imperfections, they can be useful when we need them’ (2005:105).
5. I am indebted to Ronaldo Munck (2010) for reference to Polanyi’s notion of ‘stark utopia’.

6. Common sense – ‘that rich yet disorganized, non-systematic, often inarticulate and ineffable knowledge we use to conduct our daily business of life’ (Bauman 1997:13).

7. Then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, noted in her introduction to the debate on the education budget, 2007: ‘I know some people will be angry when I say this … Nevertheless it must be said. The defence of mediocrity is supported by unfounded arguments. Some cite apartheid. I acknowledge that the legacy of apartheid continues to affect us, but it no longer serves to explain continued failures on our part. Others cite inadequate resources. Yet this is also no longer a persuasive argument’ (2007:3-4).

8. A quick search through my newspaper archives found more than 20 press reports on increasing inequality over the past decade.

9. In this regard, the discussion by David Bilchitz, of the status of socio-economic rights ‘alongside civil and political rights’ (2007) may be a good place to start.

References


'Broken down by race ...': questioning social categories in redress policies


