Response

Race classifications, indicators and praxis: a response to Ruggunan and Maré, Lefko-Everett, and Erwin

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The three articles by Shaun Ruggunan and Gerhard Maré, Kate Lefko-Everett, and Kira Erwin all focus in different ways on the irresolvable paradox at the heart of the South African constitution and, by extension, the moral order it seeks to bring into being. The Bill of Rights enshrined in the South Africa Constitution promotes non-racialism and prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, gender, etc, while simultaneously sanctioning legislative and other ‘discriminatory’ measures taken to redress the legacies of apartheid and the injustices suffered by those disadvantaged by unfair discrimination in the past. This is a typical instance of an internal contradiction that breaks down the logic of certainty.

Philosophers and literary scholars are familiar with this kind of intellectual perplexity usually designated by the term ‘aporia’. In the book *Aporetics: rational deliberation in the face of inconsistency*, the philosopher Nicholas Rescher describes the aporetic situation as ‘any cognitive situation in which the threat of inconsistency confronts us’ (2009:1); inconsistency that tends to lead to an impasse. The three articles that I comment on below focus on the continued use of race classifications in a supposedly non-racial, post-apartheid South Africa. Though they do not explicitly explore it as an aporia sanctioned by the Constitution, they attempt to explore its consequences by examining the manner in which it plays out in a specific institutional site, in theory and in the practice of social life, and in academic research, respectively.

The article by Shaun Ruggunan and Gerhard Maré focuses on race
classification as practised at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Using semi-structured interviews and a sample of documents and forms which require people to classify themselves along racial lines, the authors examine, first, the purpose and, then, the processes followed in identifying and classifying people in this manner, the challenges involved, and the effects on both classifier and classified. They identify legislation and the need for redress for historical wrongs as the reasons why classification according to apartheid racial categories has continued in the post-apartheid moment, and distinguish between the ‘benign’ use of racial categories in this instance and their more malevolent use in the apartheid era. All the same, they find that the processes adopted are uncannily close to those followed in the past – from the racial categories used to the lower level bureaucrats who operate the system – and note this as an instance of what Gerhard Maré is quoted as calling ‘the everyday banality of race classification [that] permeates South Africa’.

Within the limits it sets itself, the paper achieves its objectives of showing through empirical study the way in which racial classification works/is conducted at UKZN, the effects of classifications, and the largely unexamined dilemmas that arise from these. It does not set out to study the philosophical-epistemological issues of racialisation and racial identities, and the role that race classification plays – whether as cause, impetus, symptom or consequence – in maintaining, essentialising, or deconstructing racial categories. In fact, the paper claims that the practitioners of racial classification in this institution are often surprised when objections are raised to such classifications because they are lower level administrators who, unlike their more senior colleagues, have not been trained ‘in the critical social sciences’ where questions about the complexities of social identities are often raised rather than taken for granted. Though there is the suggestion here that higher level officials who, presumably, would have had some training in the critical social sciences will be less comfortable with these practices of classification, the article does not further investigate or elaborate this suggestion.

Kate Lefko-Everett’s ‘Beyond race? Exploring indicators of (dis)advantage to achieve South Africa’s equity goals’ conducts an overview of the debates on the continued use of race categories in South Africa – drawing upon some opinion from outside the country. In the main, she discusses the positions taken by Neville Alexander, Jonathan Jansen, Zimitri Erasmus, Kristina Bentley and Adam Habib, on the South African side, and briefly aligns their
views with those of Yehudi Webster and Anthony Appiah, for an international dimension. It is a pity that Albert Mosely’s more intellectually sophisticated view on the subject is squeezed in here without indicating or elaborating the fundamental difference between his opinion on the question and those of the other academics mentioned.

After this review of academic debate, the paper proceeds to examine the views of the general South African public on the question of identity, equity and race categorisation, drawing upon statistical surveys conducted by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) known as the South African Reconciliation Barometer. The views of the citizenry, the paper suggests, need to be taken into consideration especially because they have implications for policy formulation and implementation by way of public support and legitimation of new policies.

A study of this kind that places intellectual opinions on an issue alongside the attitudes and opinions of the populace drawn from statistical evidence is instructive and enriching not only for the reasons of democracy and legitimation which she advances but also for opening a space for dialogue between positions constructed from the space of logical deliberation and those arrived at from lived experience of the social world. This places, as it were, the abstraction of the logic of reason beside the imperative of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the ‘logic of the body’. The article ends with a look at other suggested indicators of disadvantage that may replace the use of race categories or be used in conjunction with race. The concluding remarks thus highlight the prospect and the promise that reside in developing more complex indicators for measuring disadvantage while also accepting that ‘doing away with race categories at present will not eliminate racism or lived experience based on race’ (Lefko-Everett, this volume, p87).

Kira Erwin’s article ‘Race and race thinking: lessons in theory and practice for South Africa and beyond’ turns attention to an examination of how research practices ‘interact with, solidify or challenge the meanings attached to race’ or, more specifically, ‘how our current research epistemologies and methodologies are writing future understandings of race’ (this volume, p94). It is all well and good, it argues, for academics and researchers to ritually intone the truism that race is a social construct, but what does this mean for the protocols and practices of research? Does this understanding inform, orient and guide the research process or is it simply a throwaway acknowledgement that ends just there? Since race permeates the everyday and the ordinary lived experience of the social world in racialised societies,
how do researchers respond to this in their research – especially when their research deals with human subjects acting in a social world saturated with race? In short, how does our understanding of the biological ‘unreality’ of race reflect epistemologically and methodologically in our research when faced with the reality of raced subjects in racialised contexts?

These are the questions that Erwin’s article explores. It opens with some of the theoretical debates on the issue, noting the liberalism and universalism that informs some of the cosmopolitan positions and the role of class and wealth in accessing the ‘identities without borders’ that some advocate, and proceeds to discuss the capacity of science to impact on social attitudes and its power (or lack) as a tool for erasing racial thinking. Building upon this background, she discusses the research process and critically reflects on the pervasive challenge that race and race thinking poses through the entire process from the ways we select participants to reflect certain (racial) collectivities, through the ways we frame the questions asked, to the identity of the researcher herself. This process of critical reflexivity, the paper suggests, is a complex and continuing one that should pervade the research process, questioning disciplinary orthodoxy and categories often taken for granted. The need to justify choices made rather than taking them for granted is part of the ethical responsibility of the researcher as a social scientist working in this field. The work does not focus on providing alternatives to race categories; rather it highlights the complexities, challenges and ethical dilemmas of researching race and why these challenges should be taken seriously.

Taken together, therefore, these three articles cover impressive ground; moving from the localised, empirical study detailing the practice of race classification and its effects in a specific institution, through an exploration of the possibility of using other indicators either in place of or in combination with race at a national level, to reflections on research and academic knowledge production and the place of race and race thinking in this disciplinary/academic labour. Earlier in this response, I referred to the internal contradiction within a particular document, the South African Constitution. But from these articles, it would appear that the ‘ordinary’, legally and institutionally sanctioned practice of classification is as dogged by paradoxes, contradictions and disjunctures as the process of researching the subject as the Constitution itself. It would appear that there is no escaping these aporias.

The lesson we should take from this is the importance of critical reflection;
that we understand that it is crucial always to ask questions, to be alert to the underlying objectives of various institutional, national, and academic projects on race that capture us with a sense of their banality and ordinariness.

References