Response

Epistemic hyper-reflexivity in the face of the modern seduction of race: a response to Soudien¹

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Soudien’s ‘The modern seduction of race: whither social constructionism?’ provides a compelling philosophical argument that highlights how the potential for the reinscription of race in certain epistemic traditions has in fact become realised in everyday practices, especially in the contemporary academy. In particular, he suggests that the increasingly uncritical and widespread utilisation of social constructionism as a framing for our analysis of race as a social construct, has begun to fold in on itself, resulting in a decline in the criticality of these analyses, and in fact an inadvertent return to more essentialised notions of race as a social marker and category of difference. Here, he points to antithetical ways of thinking embedded in dialectics, more static conceptualisations of history, the reification of difference in the turn to language, as well as newer technologies – all as some of the contemporary knowledge counter-weights to the potentially progressive influence of social constructionist perspectives that have historically shaped the nature of critique in the humanities, arts and social sciences. The article is particularly pertinent, given the influence of the academy on broader social discourses that are consumed and reproduced in everyday life outside of the academy, or in more commonsense contexts of deployment. On the one hand, the academy as a space of elite discourse production, reproduction and articulation has often lagged as it has described everyday articulations of race in all its mutable forms (eg symbolic racism; aversive racism; rhetorical strategies, lexical registers and interpretative repertoires associated with the denial and reproduction of race and racism; the culturalisation of racism; the ethnicisation of racism; etc). On the other
hand however, this is by no means a unidirectional process where the academy simply responds to everyday discursive uses of terms and labels, as it is also instrumental in co-constructing these phenomena through the very naming, labelling and production of it as an object of study. Clearly, elite discourses that are produced in particular places and spaces also directly and indirectly shape the commonsense use of certain terms and understandings within the public domain more broadly. Van Dijk (1993:4), when referring to the issue of elites and their discourses, notes that:

> [a]lthough this notion is notoriously vague […] [it serves] to denote those groups in the socio-political power structure that develop fundamental policies, make the most influential decisions, and control the overall modes of their execution: government, parliament, directors or boards of state agencies, leading politicians, corporate owners, directors and managers, and leading academics.

Of course, this debate on the potential reinscription of race in the very work that attempts to disavow and undermine its existence is by no means new, and certainly people like Bowman et al (2006) have examined the contradictions in the use of race categories in data that focused on redress in the social and health sciences; Ellison et al (1997) conducted work on health statistics and the problematic implications for their ongoing racialisation in post-apartheid South Africa; and, of course, Taylor and Orkin (1995) have written on the problems associated with the racialisation of social scientific research in and on South Africa; to mention but a few. However, what this does raise is a phenomenon that we have been increasingly aware of in the era of mass and instant communication, and that is that elite discourses are perhaps more easily and readily accessible, apprehended and consumed by a public and integrated or reconfigured into everyday commonsense discourses in sometimes contradictory ways. This of course immediately raises the critical question about the role of intellectuals in knowledge production processes (and in this case, in relation to race and racism) and the fundamental Gramscian (1982) question about the importance of the relationship between the intelligentsia, ideology and/or its critique, as well as their relationship to the political project of transformation itself.

Soudien makes several important points in his paper, the first of which suggests that within the collective social imaginary it is difficult to extricate ourselves from a world that is raced, even when we are committed to such an imagined future time and space. He suggests that there is a tendency to constantly reinscribe race, even if in deeply inadvertent ways, and draws on
the well-established epistemic tradition of social constructionism as an exemplar. While noting its critical stance to attempt to understand social phenomena as inventions of particular social groups in specific social, political, economic and historical circumstances, he also focuses on how it has become mutated, has lost its criticality, and has been seduced into a dilution and neutralisation, thereby resulting in a disclaiming of race in our writings, textual productions, research and teaching, but a simultaneous reinstatement of it as a social phenomenon or constructed artefact that has increasingly become essentialised, and even naturalised. Of course, Hacking’s (1999) earlier seminal text titled, *The Social Construction of What?* (to which Soudien alludes), already noted how the uncritical use of social constructionism in loose and generic ways has resulted in its ‘looping effects’ which facilitate the unwitting and reflexive enactment of the very objects which are said to be socially constructed. Foucault (1980) also pointed to this tension when he theorised the relationship between knowledge and power, and argued that in the production of certain knowledge domains, that social subjects invariably become constituted through such processes as well. This epistemic implosion, or folding in on itself, in some way speaks to Žižek’s (2009) reflections on Althusser’s understanding of ideology, where he notes that it is precisely when we believe that we have subverted or critiqued ideology, that we have frequently become interpellated and are therefore in its tightest grip. Here, any perusal of popular texts will reveal how frequently, as South Africans, we can utter disavowals of race, but then simultaneously utter the inevitability of race as a social phenomenon that is a fait accompli that we have to manage in our social lives (see, for example, Ryland Fisher’s (2007) *Race*). Despite these extremely valid concerns about the deployment of social constructionism today, this should not detract from the liberatory potential of social constructionism in exposing those forms of inequality that have been historically premised on notions of ineluctable and naturalised differences (eg in the politics of race and gender). Importantly, Soudien also correctly points out that social constructionism is acutely aware of the politics of its own production and reproduction, and that many of its apparent internal contradictions have resulted in highly reflexive epistemic offshoots. Here, the veritable industry surrounding the application of Foucault’s ideas (see, for example, Butchart 1998) as well as Butler’s (1999) work on performativity and embodiment are but two such exemplars that have introduced more complex analytic spaces through which to engage the issue of social difference in manners that transcend the boundaries of social constructionism’s original focus.
The article also points to the first counter-weight to social constructionism by referencing the seduction of the dialectic, and implicitly refers to the Hegelian master-slave paradigm, or the centrality of antithetical Othering that can be found in a philosophy that has partly underpinned much of the critique embedded in the humanities, arts and social sciences today. Of course, even early writers on the colonial project relied heavily on this, with Mannoni drawing directly on the master-slave paradigm and reflecting on the so-called dependency and inferiority complexes of black subjects in these contexts, while the much revered Fanon also relied on a binaried conception of the raced colonial context in his understanding of it as a Manichean world (see Bulhan 1985). While such a binary no doubt potentially contributes to an epistemic foreclosure that reproduces racial difference as inevitable, it is again critical to note how the juxtaposition of social differences, and an exposure of how these differences are fundamentally and integrally related to each other as a binary, have been central to revealing the partial mechanics of pervasive forms of exploitation, disparity and inequality based on socially constructed markers of difference. That being said, it has to be noted that this binaried Othering has certainly been critiqued and addressed by those writing in both the modernist and post-modernist traditions. In the 1990s, at the peak of the debates surrounding modernism and post-modernism and the analytic spaces between binaries, Bauman (1991) suggested that post-modernism was a reflection of modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility, while Giddens (1990) argued that this debate reflected a radicalisation of modernity. In any event, both stressed the necessity for emergent epistemic super-reflexivity if we were to address shifting phenomena such as race in global contexts where institutional configurations are constantly changing (Stevens 2003), and where we are able to recognise the structural and ideological bases for race and racism, but also to transcend the modernist dichotomies/binaries in order to creatively explore the alternative, ambiguous and ambivalent manifestations of race and racism (Eagleton 1996). To this end, Rattansi and Westwood (1994:62) noted that: racialised power relations [...] cannot be conceptualized as working and reproducing through a small number of tightly knit sites, such as those of state and capital, aided and abetted by a capitalist media supposedly interested only in dividing black and white workers, as set out in some influential Marxist works. Instead, racialised power relations may be seen more usefully in neo-Foucauldian terms which do not deny the importance of state and capital, but see these as far more fragmented and internally divided, together with a multiplication of sites for the
operation of racisms – playgrounds, streets, classrooms, doctors’ surgeries, mental hospitals, offices, etc.

The second seductive argument that the article refers to suggests that conceptualisations of history as continuous, linear, static, uninterrupted, predictable, and invariably coming to represent the evolution of a people, a nation, a race, inadvertently reinscribe the fixity of race and nation and the authenticity of such categories. But again, this understanding of history has not gone uncritiqued, and we have frequently seen robust challenges to these linear conceptualisations of history. In these instances, grand narratives that reflect the whiff of Whig histories have been challenged by the importance of personal histories, oral histories, and historically occluded voices (eg Nieftagodien 2009) – all in attempts to show that social experiences are much more complex and diverse than archives or official histories, and that the predominance of certain conceptualisations of history are a function of the prevailing conditions of possibility and are thus not an inevitability (Stevens et al 2010).

The third seduction that Soudien refers to is that of science, and the accompanying forms of pseudoscientific recreation of race as a fixed biological entity. A notable illustration of this was the publication of Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve*, which essentially re-articulated the argument in favour of the racial basis for intelligence, and occurred on the heels of technological advancements in genetics, computerised research methodologies, and bio-industry developments in relation to the human genome project. What this fundamentally resulted in was a re-insertion of the classic position of intelligence being racially inherited, into the public domain, and therefore highlighted the insidious ways in which our propensities to turn to science as definitive can lead to our unwitting acquiescence to race as a fixed biological entity. However, pseudoscientific reductionism has historically always accompanied advancements in science and technology, but far from foreclosing debates, has frequently been the basis for fuelling critique. While we need to be aware of the seduction of science and pseudoscientific claims, we also need to be mindful of the fact that scientific reductionism has most frequently been responsible for its own downfall, given that it has re-invigorated critique on many social issues. As Foucault (1977) has noted, where there is knowledge, there is also the exercise of power, and where there is the exercise of power, there is the manifestation of resistance. While scientific advancements need to be considered thoughtfully in relation to their social implications, we
should perhaps not be avoiding science, but interrogating it for spaces to engage in further critique. Finally, it is of course important to note that science itself was also fundamentally responsible for debunking scientific racism, and thereby to avoid the implicit notion that science is homogeneous in its potential ideological appropriation.

Finally, Soudien’s reflections on the deconstructive turn were particularly insightful, and here the article suggests that difference has not only become possible, but even reified. However, within the deconstructive turn to language (eg in discursive studies) feminist writers such as Wilkinson (1996) have engaged with this conundrum in the political project of naming the very object in the service of disavowing it, and noted how this tension needs to be reflexively managed in the service of a given political project on the one hand, but also to recognise the limitations that can unwittingly compromise such a political agenda on the other hand. Furthermore, the deconstructive turn to language has also resulted in critiques directed at the reduction of social reality to language itself, thereby refocusing us on epistemic trajectories such as critical realism as a possible alternative (eg Collier 1994, 1998, Willig 1998), but has also prompted the resurfacing of the classic debate on the relationship between race and materiality, and especially the relationship between race and class in South Africa.

In conclusion, Soudien argues for thinking about the anti-racist project as a fundamentally political endeavour. The importance of this point should not be lost, as a failure to grasp the import of this message may lead us down the road of a form of fatalism and jaded cynicism about the inevitability of race as a social cleavage. However, beyond forms of critical pedagogy, the academy itself needs to consistently embrace forms of critical, epistemic hyper-reflexivity to avoid the modern seduction of race that Soudien correctly refers to. More importantly, in the context of what has emerged under the broad umbrella of post-race theory (eg Gilroy’s (2000) Against Race) there is perhaps an increasing need to be hypervigilant of the potential ideological appropriation of these ideas to suggest that race is inevitable and therefore less critical to engage with in a deliberate manner, or that race is more diffuse and therefore less visible, or that race is no longer an important proxy marker of social inequality (albeit perhaps a lazy proxy). While Gilroy’s (2000) vision of a post-race society based on planetary humanism is not suggested to be without new formations of Others and new forms of discrimination, the conditions of possibility for such a realisation in South Africa are perhaps not evident, given the continued and complex
manifestations of race within the social formation. Perhaps what needs to be done is to explore and interrogate the conditions of impossibility that stymie the creation of a new or different social imaginary where race will no longer be the central scaffold on which South African society is organised.

Note
1. This response was first presented at the University of the Witwatersrand, 13-15 October 2010, at the colloquium titled, ‘Revisiting Apartheid Race Categories’.

References


