

# TRANS FORM ATION

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTHERN AFRICA

47



## THIS ISSUE: Burden of Race?

- KEYNOTE ADDRESSES: FRANÇOISE VERGÈS, XOLELA MANGCU, PAUL GILROY
- DEBORAH POSEL ON RACIAL CATEGORISATIONS UNDER APARTHEID AND THEIR AFTERLIFE
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- PHUMLA GQOLA ON ANALYSING POWER, LANGUAGE AND REPRESENTATION IN METAPHORS OF THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

# TRANSFORMATION

critical perspectives on Southern Africa

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Critical perspectives on Southern Africa

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## Editorial

# Debating 'race' in South African scholarship

Deborah Posel, Jonathan Hyslop, Noor Nieftagodien

This edition of *Transformation* derives from a recent conference, 'The Burden of Race? "Whiteness" and "Blackness" in Modern South Africa', co-hosted by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) and Wits History Workshop, and held at the University of the Witwatersrand from 5 to 8 July 2001. Remarkably, this was the first academic conference held in the country focusing directly and exclusively on the issue of race, and it therefore marks an interesting moment in South African scholarship on the subject. In this introductory essay we offer a reading of the South African historiography of race prior to 1994, and situate the principal themes and debates of the conference in relation to it.

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the South African social order became one of the most thoroughly racialised in the world. By the time apartheid reached its zenith in the 1960s, every facet of life in the country was saturated with the effects of racial thinking and practice. It is paradoxical, therefore, that perhaps the most striking feature of South African studies prior to the demise of apartheid was the paucity of engagement with the subject of race. Several writers have made the point that 'there must be very few places in the academic community which has actively neglected the study of race to the same extent as in South Africa' (Greenstein 1996:5).

In some respects, this judgement is unduly harsh precisely because the effects of race under apartheid were ubiquitous, pretty much all of the academic literature on apartheid encompasses the subject of race in some way. So, lots has been written about the nature of racial discrimination in a range of spheres, institutionally and legally; experiences of so-called 'ordinary people' – particularly black people – have been documented; the growth, ideologies and politics of black resistance movements have attracted academic interest, and some of the ambiguities and complexities of racialised modes of power have been explored (even if the manner of that racialisation

was not itself the focus of discussion). Much of this work has made an enormous contribution in debunking official myths about apartheid propagated by the apartheid regime itself, as well as in stimulating further research and animating debate on many fronts.

Yet, if race is everywhere in these literatures, there were also some lingering silences on the subject – as both the focus and the context of academic study. With some significant exceptions, there was relatively little research into the social meanings of race under apartheid. Again with some noteworthy exceptions, much more could have been written about the politics of race on the left, where an ideology of ‘non-racialism’ became hegemonic. Nor did racial discourses as sources of power attract much research interest. And very few scholars of apartheid grappled with the theoretical issue of what ‘race’ is, so that long-standing themes in the American literature on race, for example – debates about biology, essentialism and social constructionist critiques – were not mainstream fare in the literature. Another powerful silence concerned the epistemology and academic politics of race, and their effects on the character of historical explanation and modes of evidence. Academic communities (largely white) were loath to confront the sense in which apartheid was not only the object of study but, in some uncomfortable respects, also the medium of it.

Why, in a society that has been so thoroughly steeped in the effects of race, has the issue been so frequently unspoken among scholars writing about apartheid itself? To understand this academic ‘repression’ of race, we argue, theoretical and historiographical debates about race in apartheid should be located in the context of the politics of intellectual production during the apartheid era. It is partly the changing politics of knowledge after 1994 (which have intersected in fruitful ways with new fields of theoretical debate) that have opened up wider spaces for an academic engagement with race, of the sort that was evidenced at the conference.

### **The ‘Race-Class’ Debate**

Students of apartheid are typically introduced to the academic literature on this subject by way of the so-called ‘race-class debate’, which dominated the historiography of apartheid throughout the 1970s and 1980s. For those in pursuit of a theoretical perspective on race in apartheid, it seems a promising route to go: the way the debate was construed suggested a head-on critical encounter with the subject. Yet one of the most striking features of this debate is the way in which it deflected attention from ‘race’.

The debate was constructed by Marxist historians and sociologists as a critical rejection of the then dominant approach to apartheid, which they named as 'liberal'. The immediate focus of contention was an empirical issue, about the relationship between apartheid and capitalism; but this was theoretically overlaid with a debate about the relative analytical salience of 'race' or 'class' in making sense of apartheid's origins, character and future.

The idea of a single, homogeneous 'liberal' position on apartheid is to some extent an artifice of the debate, which tends to ignore a range of differences within the allegedly 'liberal' camp (Wright 1977:7). Nevertheless, a series of central themes emerged with sufficient regularity and consistency to warrant the use of the label. The ideologues of apartheid presented their preoccupation with racial purity as a divinely ordained mission undertaken by the Afrikaner nationalists on behalf of all their white brethren. Liberal scholars of apartheid were primarily concerned to debunk these ideas as nationalist myth-making by exposing the politics of racial discrimination. The liberal critique of apartheid emphasised the connection between racial discrimination and political power, invoking an understanding of power as a party political project (launched by the National Party) to use the apartheid state as an instrument for promoting Afrikaner interests within the framework of white supremacy (de Villiers 1971). According to Heribert Adam, this liberal critique ought to have included a 'sociological ... analysis of racialism [which] probes into the historical dimensions of racial attitudes, thereby explaining and elucidating racialism in its entanglement with the social structure' (Adam 1972:20). But in the main, liberal scholarship dealt less with the sociology of race and racism than with an analysis of the politics of Afrikaner nationalism, showing how the ideology of apartheid served as a tool of what Heribert Adam and Herman Giliomee called 'ethnic mobilisation' (Adam and Giliomee 1979).

This interest in exposing the *realpolitik* of race rapidly homed in on the relationship between apartheid and capitalism, as the nub of the issue. Like their Marxist critics, liberal scholars regarded the intersection of political and economic factors as the crucial vantage point from which to understand the apartheid system and assess its future prospects. For liberals, apartheid systematised and institutionalised racial discrimination to the point of economic irrationality (De Kiewiet 1956:47,65). In their eyes, apartheid had created a 'contradiction between the economy and polity' (Wright

1977:12). Intent on exposing the effects of this contradiction, liberal scholars tended therefore to concentrate their research and analysis on the problems of African labour in the country, which they saw as the heart of the contradiction. In their eyes, it was the efforts by the apartheid state to keep African labour 'cheap' – by imposing statutory job reservation for white workers and inhibiting African workers' access to skills – which lay at the root of apartheid's economic 'irrationalities' (Lipton 1985, Horwitz 1967). Apartheid's 'racist labour policies', argued Ralph Horwitz, were instruments of 'industrial retrogression, decay and atrophy' (Horwitz 1956:12), since their inevitable consequence would be increasingly crippling skills shortages, coupled with artificially constricted domestic markets for locally produced goods (given the limited purchasing power of those paid artificially low wages).

If apartheid and capitalism had inverse logics, for these liberal writers it was the power of the market that would ultimately prevail, bringing the apartheid state to its knees. John Lonsdale points out that while earlier cohorts of liberal scholars writing about segregation in South Africa (pre-1948) were more concerned with issues of 'political morality than economic efficiency', much of the liberal writing on apartheid was profoundly shaped by principles of modernisation theory then gaining global intellectual prominence (Lonsdale 1983:69). The liberal perspective assumed that the racist fetters imposed by apartheid on the country's labour markets would be eroded by the 'colour-blind' logic of economic growth. Exactly *how* this was expected to happen was not clearly specified. So, much of the liberal analysis of apartheid was more an expression of faith in the modernisation thesis than a demonstration of these forces at work within the society at that time.

The Marxist critique of liberal scholarship took varying forms, depending on the particular version of Marxism being espoused; but there was little variation in the approach to questions of 'race'. In much the same vein as Jack and Ray Simons' book on *Class and Colour in South Africa* (first published in 1969), a group of white political exiles studying in England initiated a new wave of Marxist scholarship intent on exposing apartheid's chief *raison d'être* as that of serving the interests of capital (understood generically). Whereas the first phase of liberal analysis took place against the backdrop of mixed economic performance in South Africa during the 1950s, this new surge of interest in a Marxist approach must be seen in the context of the exceptional economic growth rates sustained during the late



1960s, in tandem with the intensification of apartheid repression – a combination which seemed *prima facie* evidence of the falsity of the liberal case. 'Cheap' black labour, argued Rick Johnstone (1970), Harold Wolpe (1972) and Martin Legassick (1974), was the linchpin of apartheid, the point of effective fusion of political and economic interests. Where liberals saw a 'contradiction' between apartheid and capitalism, these Marxist scholars saw an essential complementarity, a unity of purpose. The mechanisms of racial discrimination, then, were to be understood as instruments of class domination – designed, promulgated and monitored with that basic purpose. Wolpe thus characterised apartheid's distinguishing and defining feature as one that 'provides the specific mechanism for maintaining cheap labour power through the elaboration of the entire system of domination and control and the transformation of the function of pre-capitalist society' (Wolpe 1972:425).

As Marxist theories came increasingly to dominate scholarship on apartheid during the 1970s and early 1980s, the primary focus of debate shifted somewhat. With the liberal position pretty well flogged to death – at least within the 'radical' camp – the principal points of contention now corresponded to controversies within western Marxism, particularly the contest between structuralist and humanist readings of Marx (Bozzoli and Delius 1990, Deacon 1991). Structuralist versions of Marxism attempted to produce more nuanced accounts of the workings of capitalism, emphasising – à la Poulantzas – the differentiated, fractured nature of capital itself (Davies et al 1976, O'Meara 1983). But the instrumentalist treatment of apartheid's race policies as a tool of class interests, remained unchanged.

Social historians, inspired by EP Thompson's study of the English working class, disputed the version of 'class' embedded in these structuralist accounts, proposing to analyse 'class' as a set of social relations that were more actively crafted, in ways which already exhibited the traces of political, cultural and ideological factors (Bozzoli and Delius 1990:21). 'Race' – its meaning unspecified – was *de facto* included in this mix but without unpacking its place in the range of non-economic processes.

As waves of resistance broke over the apartheid state during the 1970s, Gramscian notions of 'an organic crisis' besetting the society were invoked (Saul and Gelb 1981) to produce a Marxist version of the idea of apartheid's contradictory effects. While the applicability of the Gramscian conception to the South African case can be disputed (Posel 1983), this line of argument did draw attention to the shifting racial strategies of the apartheid

state. But, as was the case in other 'radical' writings, the politics of race were understood as an essentially class-based set of processes.

As the 'race-class debate' lingered and the issues seemed to grow stale, it became increasingly fashionable to pronounce its epitaph. But its imprint remained clearly visible within the conventional wisdom of the 1980s, in the conviction that apartheid was essentially a system of 'racial capitalism' – capitalism of a particular ('racial') type. With race thoroughly infused in the trajectory of economic development, it seemed that research at the coalface of 'class' would simultaneously serve to illuminate the workings of 'race'.

This assumption is not without some merit; a reading of the 'radical' literature on apartheid would retrieve a lot about the effects of racial discrimination and surveillance in the workplace and in the economy at large. Yet, the 'race-class debate' also produced a series of theoretical and empirical closures on the subject of race, as a focus of research interest and analysis in itself.

The focus on the relationship between apartheid and capitalism signalled the consensus that lay at the heart of the debate, that the key to understanding apartheid lay at the interface of political and economic processes. So, the research generated by this debate tended to say little, if anything, about racist institutions and practices that seemed more remote from the capitalist nexus. Even if the 'relative autonomy of race' was acknowledged (and, at times, stressed), there was little interest or effort made to unpack it. Due note was taken of the formidable battery of apartheid laws and regulations concerned directly with the official construction and surveillance of racial differentiation and segregation: the Population Registration Act (1950), which classified all South Africans according to officially designated racial 'population groups', the Group Areas Act (1950), which created residentially segregated 'group areas' along racial lines, the Immorality Act (1950), which prohibited sex across racial lines, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), which segregated access to a range of public facilities. But, typically, these mechanisms of control were regarded as descriptive features of the political landscape, the backdrop against which analysis took place, rather than a focus of research interest (eg Greenberg 1980, Lipton 1985).

The theoretical terms of debate created other forms of closure. Constructed in essentially 'either-or' terms, the analytical choice to be made was whether class trumped race as the fundamental category of historical

explanation, or vice versa. The possibility of a more complex notion of social causation – premised on multiple and contingent versions of the interconnections between race and class – was excluded by theoretical fiat (Posel 1983).

Perhaps the most remarkable theoretical feature of this debate was the failure to engage the question of *what 'race' actually was*, either in general theoretical terms or as an historical reality under apartheid. On the Marxist side, the concept of race was never explicitly defined. But, tacitly, it became the signifier of all that was 'not class', in a debate that in fact confined itself both empirically and theoretically to a cluster of concerns about 'class'. On the liberal side, scholars of apartheid tended overwhelmingly to take the realities of race and racism as given, the burden of analysis falling on showing how the features of the apartheid system supported Afrikaner nationalist political causes and ambitions. In these ways, the historiography of apartheid tended to sidestep what became one of the most significant issues in literatures on race elsewhere in the world: the critique of biological essentialism by way of different varieties of social constructionism.

If partly the product of a theoretical lack of interest, these silences were also associated with a discursively demonstrable discomfort with the issue of race. Many a preface to an historical or sociological study of apartheid comments on the use of racial 'nomenclature'. Announcing a distaste for official apartheid racial categories, yet recognising the impossibility of dispensing with them, many scholars have resorted to inverted commas to deal with this dilemma: apartheid racial categories were used but the ambiguities of their ontological status were flagged by means of the inverted commas. But 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 by a repressive regime, 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.

The discomfort with the issue of 'race' was also closely bound up with the politics of intellectual production during the apartheid era. Research and scholarship is surely never wholly politically or ideologically neutral but this is particularly striking in the case of the apartheid literature. Theoretical emphases and priorities have been thoroughly embedded in political and ideological concerns. As Norman Etherington points out, the

'efflorescence of scholarship' on South Africa from the 1960s to 1980s was directly related to the intensification of apartheid oppression: 'in the years between the tragedy of Sharpeville and Mandela's triumphant emergence from prison, historians of many different tendencies saw their research as a useful political tool in the fight against injustice' (Etherington 1996:10).

Academic modes of analysis were closely aligned, therefore, with the politics and discourses of opposition to apartheid. If the power of the apartheid state derived in large measure from its capacities to 'normalise' race in the discourses and experiences of South Africans, Marxist theories that displaced race with class as the most fundamental cleavage in apartheid became instruments of intellectual and political subversion. The experiential ubiquity of race became the reason exactly to shift the primary focus of analysis to its material underpinnings.

The tendency to steer clear of the subject of race was also intertwined with the politics of non-racialism on the left. With the language of race being the language of the apartheid state, the dominant tendency among apartheid's critics was to position themselves as advocates of non-racialism. Theoretically, of course, an academic interest in questions of race does not preclude a political or ideological commitment to the principles of non-racialism; but in a context in which non-racialism was as much the dominant 'etiquette of power relations' (Scott 1990:8) on the left as an ideological doctrine, this seems to have been a difficult position for most academics (predominantly white) to entertain. Given the realities of apartheid oppression, the issue of race was politically highly charged, and often the subject, therefore, of intense conflict. Perhaps for this very reason, the ideological commitment to non-racialism was also a tool of organisational discipline to prevent the emergence of deep racial fault lines on the left. Within the Congress movement (of which the African National Congress was part) and the non-racial trade union movement, these strategies were largely effective: one of the most striking features of opposition ideology and politics in South Africa has been the resilience of its commitment to non-racialism.

Yet, along with this, has been a tendency within opposition movements and the intellectuals associated with them to speak relatively rarely on the subject of race, at least in the domain of public debate and discussion (barring the occasionally open and heated exchanges when the issue was more directly exposed, such as in the conflicts on the left triggered by the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s

(Hemson 1995:188).

Indeed, an engagement with the issue of race confronted white intellectuals on the left with 'an essential dilemma', which was perhaps most clearly articulated within the left-wing student movement, in the aftermath of the breakaway of the Black Consciousness-aligned South African Students Organisation (SASO) from the non-racial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in 1969. As soon as the realities of race were confronted, the fragility of non-racialism became painfully clear. As student leader Clive Nettleton put it,

The major problem facing NUSAS as a non-racial organisation existing in a society based on discrimination and racialism is that, while preaching the ideal of non-racialism, the members of the organisation are unable to live out their ideals. The fact is that, while it is possible for white and black students to hold joint congresses and to meet occasionally at social events, *they live in different worlds* (Nettleton 1972:12, our emphasis).

He acknowledged that, for this reason, SASO 'realistically rejected the non-racial concept on which NUSAS's ideal rested' (1972:129). Yet, racial separatism was simultaneously deeply problematic, particularly for whites on the left, because it reproduced the political and intellectual logic of apartheid: 'in a racially sensitive country like ours, provision for racially exclusive bodies tends to widen the gap that already exists between races' (1972:129).

The politics of Black Consciousness, and particularly the mutual suspicion between its exponents and 'white leftists' (Nolutshungu 1983:158) in turn resonated in academic circles, the political rift being mirrored in theoretical terms. As David Hemson points out,

There [was] a curious disjuncture between the flowering of class analysis – a peculiarly creative intellectual epoch among white intellectuals building common cause with African workers – and the theoretical explorations of black consciousness. Black consciousness never attempted to appropriate this line of theory and the proletarian resistance it espoused. The lines of departure were absolute, and the theoretical gulf very broad (Hemson 1995:204).

Sam Nolutshungu's book *Changing South Africa* (1983) was rare in engaging with the liberal-radical debate through the lens of an analysis of the Black Consciousness Movement.

## Other Voices, New Trends

The debate about apartheid and capitalism wound down from the late 1980s with the publication of works which challenged the terms of debate, producing more nuanced versions of the nature and effects of class, together with more complex and uneven versions of the relationship between apartheid and capitalism (eg Greenberg 1987, Wolpe 1988, Posel 1991, O'Meara 1996). This period also saw the fruits of a more diverse research agenda, with a more explicit interest in the subject of race beginning to feature more prominently (eg Bozzoli 1991, Dubow 1995, Mamdani 1996, Marks 1994, Norval 1996, Van Onselen 1996).

The more assertive and controversial interventions on the subject of race, however, came from a new cohort of young scholars, many of whom are black, who began to draw attention to the racialised politics of intellectual production in South Africa. In the wake of postmodern and postcolonial preoccupations with the effects of a researcher's/writer's positionality in the production of knowledge, Windsor Leroke (1996), Tshidiso Maloka, Christine Qunta (1987) and others questioned the extent to which white scholars can effectively and legitimately document the experiences of black people. Maloka, for example, accused 'radical' social historians of reproducing stereotypes of black people as Other, in their less politically organised and sophisticated form – an approach which is tacitly informed by a Eurocentric sense of superiority. Of course, Africans do feature as workers or peasants (or as 'class'), as well as women (or as 'gender'); but they are generally 'crowds', 'rebels', 'gangs', runaway wives or prostitutes. In as far as their level of development is concerned, Africans feature in the 'formative', never as organised and sophisticated actors [but] as the unsophisticated 'many'. Not only is the history of Africans subdued, neocolonised and appropriated in this way, but 'radicals' also want to position themselves as the spokespersons and representatives of these 'many' on the front of history (Maloka nd:7).

This suppressed epistemology of race was seen as inextricably linked to the structure of academic production within South Africa, in which whites shaped the historical research agenda and enjoyed preferential access to research skills and resources (Evans 1990). One of the effects of racially segregated education under apartheid was the 'virtual absence' (Maloka nd:1) of black scholars in an academy dominated by white scholars (Evans 1990). That this trend was changing very slowly was itself the subject of fierce debate, as academically powerful communities were accused of

having failed to promote effectively the development of black academic scholarship (Saunders 1991, Worger 1991).

### **Post-Apartheid Debates about Race**

A new discussion on race opened up in the early stages of Thabo Mbeki's Presidency. The Mandela years had seen a muting of overt discussion on the topic. In a sense this was a necessary part of Mandela's heroic attempt to generate cohesion in a chronically fragmented society, and particular readings of the idea of non-racialism provided an intellectual and political rationale for this lack of discussion. But at the level of the politics of daily life, all sorts of tensions, spoken and unspoken, had simmered.

With the beginning of Mbeki's tenure in office, the President's Africanist agenda allowed some previously restrained notions around race to come to the surface. Two separate but related developments fuelled this trend. One was a degree of discontent with the outcome of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. While much of the attack on the TRC was unfair in setting impossibly high goals for that initiative, there appeared to be a widespread feeling that the issue of the responsibility of whites for the apartheid system had been avoided. However problematic notions of collective responsibility may be, the result was a sense that the TRC had not brought the kind of resolution of differential understandings of the past that it had promised. Second, the Human Rights Commission's hearings into the media dramatised the lack of consensus in South African society as to what constituted racism, its effects and how to counter it.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the Commission's conclusions, their effect was to provoke new efforts at public debate about race. By the late 1990s it was increasingly common to read articles and letters in newspapers enjoining an open engagement with issues of race and racism in South Africa: their workings in ordinary experience, the place of race in the new political dispensation and its role in the politics of the past. Along with these calls went a recognition of past silences on the subject, borne of a reluctance to tackle a demonstrably sensitive subject head-on.

Yet, overall, the intellectual results of these calls for more open public discussion of race were rather meagre. In the main pejorative rhetoric prevailed, with little empirical knowledge or research being brought to bear. The substantive debate around media racism triggered by the report of the Human Rights Commission was a case in point. With attention focused on whether or not particular media were or were not racist,

accusations were hurled back and forth, with very little effort to grapple with the more fundamental question of what constituted racism, as much as what to do about it. The conceptual opacity around what constitutes racism was manifest, too, in the failure of the reconciliatory campaign for a white apology for apartheid mounted towards the end of 2000. The campaign floundered, being caught between those whites who felt that they had opposed apartheid, were not complicit in any racist practice and therefore had nothing to apologise for, and those who refused to recognise as racist the political system that they had supported.

The limitations of the discussion, we argue, were symptomatic of – and rooted in – the strange history of discourse about race in the country. The fundamental issue of what people meant in using the term ‘race’ had never really been addressed. Given the limited intellectual engagement involved with the social practice of ‘race’, it is not surprising that much of the debate in 1999-2000 did not get beyond ‘grandstanding’.

### **Themes and Debates at the Conference on ‘The Burden of Race? “Whiteness” and “Blackness” in Modern South Africa’**

The ‘Burden of Race’ conference was planned with the aim of stimulating primary research and critical analysis on the issues raised by the new race debate. It seemed to us, as the conference organisers, that the dearth of research (for the reasons identified earlier) was a factor in the limited range and depth of much of the public debate, and that original, rigorous research was one way in which academic work could make a contribution in the public arena.

Our thinking was to a great extent stimulated by the American work of the 1990s on the social construction of race, and especially of ‘whiteness’. But we saw the questions raised by this work simply as a point of departure; we did not intend a conference with a single intellectual agenda or theoretical position. Although the conference was seen as primarily an academic one, we also aimed to connect with the broader public debate by inviting prominent political and trade union activists to participate in a series of panel discussions based on their experience of race in the public sphere.

The conference assembled participants from a wider range of institutions and research communities than has often been the case in the past. The temper of the conference was intellectually animated and engaged yet discussions remained respectful of differences and reflective. It seems that



intellectuals and political activists – or at least those who attended the conference – are at a point where there is a felt need for measured, open and self-critical discussion around race.

The tone and intellectual direction of conference debates were set, to a considerable extent, by the three keynote speeches – reprinted in this edition. Provocative for their differences of approach and analysis, it was nevertheless interesting that all the keynote addresses engaged with the silences identified earlier, in respect of past scholarship on race in this country – particularly, the question of what 'race' is, how it works, and the meanings of 'non-racialism'.

Paul Gilroy, author of several leading texts on race including the highly influential *The Black Atlantic*, and, most recently, *Between the Camps*, opened the conference. His argument contends that it is necessary to abandon the kind of thinking which he called 'raciology'. He advocates instead a utopian humanist project aimed at transcending the impulse and habit of thinking in racial categories altogether. What Gilroy confronts is the way in which much current critical discussion of race advocates at an intellectual level the view that race is socially constructed, while acting in practice as if it is an essential reality. Gilroy's concern is to find ways of acting politically which put non-racialism into practice. In doing this he looks back for inspiration to social movements, notably the battle against fascism, which based themselves on an inclusive human solidarity.

Controversially, Gilroy's thought also hints at the exclusionary and chauvinist dangers contained within all nationalisms, even those which arise from social oppression. The implications of Gilroy's approach for South Africa are extremely challenging. His ideas emphasise the need for both theorists and political actors to define exactly what they mean by the term 'race'. They also imply the need to question the South African practice of affirming non-racialism in principle while acting in a way that would imply essentialist assumptions about race. South Africans have tended to pose non-racialism as an alternative to apartheid, but not to address the issue of what a non-racial society would look like. Gilroy's work implies that we need to develop a positive vision of an ethically and politically desirable future. The utopian question of what we ideally would like society to look like is an important one to ask.

Françoise Vergès issued her challenge to conventional thinking about race in Africa through an exploration of the history of slavery. She suggested that that history is a much more complex one than is suggested

by a conventional counterposition of 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. The complicity of some Africans in the slave trade means that such a binary opposition is an inadequate foundation for thinking about race. She thus also placed a question mark over current notions of 'innocence' and victimhood, of the sort which have informed recent global enthusiasm for the idea and practice of truth commissions. This, in turn, implies an interrogation of the notions of reparation and historical apology, which have become a central part of contemporary political culture in many parts of the developing world, including South Africa's post-1994 nation-building project.

Xolela Mangcu's position constitutes a view of race, and of its place in a desired form of society, which would seem to be diametrically opposed to Gilroy's. For Mangcu there is nothing necessarily undesirable about 'race thinking'. In fact, in his view, in a non-racial society (understood as a society in which race is not the basis of discrimination or unequal treatment) 'race' should be celebrated as the basis of positive social and cultural identities. Mangcu's work may be seen as an attempt to reassert the value of the Black Consciousness tradition, while at the same time redefining its relevance in the post-apartheid situation.

This edition of *Transformation* includes a cluster of articles from the conference that dealt with issues of racial 'naming' and 'classification'. Especially because of the recent focus of historical scholarship on racial 'science', it is often assumed that apartheid functioned through biological racist ideology. However, in her study of the racial classification process under apartheid, Posel shows that apartheid bureaucrats used much more explicitly social criteria, along with bodily markers, in which race frequently functioned as a criterion closely connected with class. The article thus looks at the practice of 'making' race, and poses the question of race and its relation to class in a more constructivist way than in the bulk of previous literature, and with an eye to the workings of race at the interface of state formation and ordinary experience.

Posel's article also points toward the question explored in Gerhard Maré's paper, namely the persistent state use of apartheid racial categories in the post-apartheid period. Much of the legislation of the post-1994 years has been based on assuming that, in order to correct social injustices, it is necessary to use the categories of past injustice. However, it needs to be asked whether this practice in fact simply reinforces the racialisation of society. Drawing on international scholarship on the role played by

bureaucratically deployed categories in the construction of social identities, Maré argues the need to question socially 'given' racial categories. In Maré's view, current acceptance of such categories reinforces racial readings of the past, foreclosing other perspectives on social reality. Notably, it prevents issues of class and gender inequality from surfacing.

Phumla Gqola's paper investigates the construction of the 'New South Africa'. She interrogates the metaphors that have defined the new dispensation's attempts to create national unity, especially the idea of the Rainbow Nation, or what has come to be called 'rainbowism'. The paper examines the ways in which language has been mobilised in pursuit of nation-building objectives. She suggests that the nationalist project has silenced other discourses of identity. All of these papers, then, demonstrate the political imperatives, as much as the academic interest, in a re-examination of the nature of race and its imprints in both state practice and the routines of everyday life.

We also include in this special edition extracts from the panel discussions of the conference. These interventions by political activists reflecting on their experiences were enormously stimulating. It became apparent that many of the theoretical silences identified in the early part of this introduction had been paralleled by similar evasions in the arena of political action. A number of the contributions suggested that the idea of non-racialism had often been a technique of organisational discipline, a means of avoiding an otherwise complex, sensitive and potentially divisive issue, more than a conceptually clear and comprehensive ideological position.

Vincent Maphai echoed the views of many when he remarked, during one of the panel discussions, that he did not know exactly what 'non-racialism' meant – a point that also underscored the salience of Gilroy's injunction, during his keynote address, that we need to know what we want. Jane Barrett provided a remarkably honest insight into her experiences in the labour movement, which related closely the experiential dimension of racial politics to its macro-politics.

Speaking as a veteran ANC activist, Raymond Suttner recognised omissions and silences in the ANC's engagement with race. But, he argued, in the circumstances of apartheid political action often required an outward mimicking of some of the prevailing social assumptions and conventions about race and racial difference.

Neville Alexander suggested that the ANC's version of non-racialism was in fact a politically inadequate multiracialism. This argument is linked

to Alexander's critique of the liberation movement's inability to indigenise its political thought and practice through a 'cultural revolution'. Alexander felt that the left had failed to come to terms with race and especially with the related questions of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Overall, the conference showed that there was a great deal of current interest in questions of race as identity, reflecting the powerful recent influence of post-structuralist and postcolonial thought. Yet, interestingly, many of the papers also illuminated race in relation to more structural social features of class and gender. The implication would seem to be that it is in the overlap of these two approaches that the most fruitful future explorations of race are likely to take place. We see this conference as a first step toward such an exploration.

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