

## Review

### Gerhard Maré (2014) *Declassified: moving beyond the dead end of race in South Africa*. Auckland Park: Jacana

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Gerhard Maré's book *Declassified*, published 20 years after South Africa's democratic transition, takes an exploratory approach to the question of race in contemporary South Africa. In his own words, this approach 'is filled with "what if" questions, deliberately to explore, to see where they take us if we discard, even if just for the moment, the limits set by acceptance of race as a given, the limits to our thinking and to our sense of our own agency' (173).

*Declassified* provides strong cause for academics and other public intellectuals to question the otherwise unquestioned bedrock of 'race' in South Africa as a self-evident aspect of South African society. The book's intention is to compel a rethinking of South African society, disrupting the notion that this is 'just the way things are' (56). Maré argues in his book that the racialised context of South Africa does not reflect reality, but creates reality. The book seeks to critique race as the process of classification and identification that permeates every area of South African life, where even demographic information becomes laden with meaning, judgment and patterns of belief (51). This racialised template operates in South Africa in both everyday and institutional ways. It allows the continuity of group claims and social attitudes (54) and gains perpetual analytical meaningfulness because it is used and 'guarded' by the state (28). Maré argues that race-thinking guides everyday cognition, sense-making and behaviour, it facilitates race populism (mobilisation on the basis of race), and it serves power.

The book begins with a personal reflection of the reach and insidiousness of race-thinking. He tells the poignant story of his mother's burial and the instance of cemetery staff that she be classified 'correctly' for appropriate ceremonial purposes. For Maré, race-thinking is so pervasive that it proves difficult to escape even when one dies. The rest of the book follows his considered conviction that racialisation is morally indefensible and an anathema to human dignity.

The book makes a number of important contributions. The first is the definition of non-racialism as a complete rejection of the existence of races and the discursive consequences of this self-evident racialisation. While the author does not deny that there have been real social consequences of racial classification, he makes the point that another consequence of racialisation has been an ongoing demand for these categories to be maintained. He also argues that the current meaning of non-racialism, as put forward by the African National Congress, has fallen short since it focused on undoing the consequences of race-based policy without rejecting race as a 'valid category of human distinction' (79). Instead, that version of non-racialism leaves those categories intact, despite the fact that they have been challenged, disrupted and refuted in a myriad of ways. He also astutely points out that when non-racialism is used as the rationale for redress and racial justice it only entrenches difference based on race since it relies on and maintains racialisation.

The second contribution of the book is in its analysis of 'statecraft' and how racialised templates form an integral part of bureaucratic practice. Racialisation, Maré argues, has continued long after the political transition in South Africa in 1994. He details how the democratic South African government retains and recreates systemic racialisation in the present day. He argues that the state template of race is, in addition, morally indefensible because it also exonerates capitalism as a system of injustice, making racialised redress an acceptable evil. Maré's explication of the institutionalised machinery of race in the South African state presents a vexing problem in the democratic era especially since it is employed to fix the very legacy of classification in the first place, and is implicated in the way capital and race privilege mutually reinforce each other.

The third contribution of this book is in its critique of equality as a notion of demographic redress where a greater number of black South Africans see sustained economic gain. While Maré acknowledges that this is an important goal, he argues that this notion of equality only pits the

claims of one group over another, making redress an issue of justice only through classification, ie, ‘though accurate representations of demography’ (79). As a result social conflict between groups is inevitable. He continues that this version of seeking equality also misses the legacy of our social condition which is far deeper than access to jobs. As a result, the book argues, there has been no other approach to affirmative redress than to rely on racial categorisation of individuals, and in effect, absolves the capitalist system from responsibility for inequality and fundamentally fails the poor.

The book’s discussion of the effect of racialisation as eroding a sense of humanity and dignity is another significant contribution. Maré describes racialisation as fundamentally dehumanising. He also argues that the machinery that maintains racialisation is responsible for the continued control, discipline and essentialisation of bodies and this in turn related directly to the creation of the idea of a hostile other interweaved with notions of surplus populations and minorities. He suggests that there are untold and immeasurable effects on a shared sense of humanness by asking ‘what dangers are being incubated in the continuing maintenance and recreation of minorities?’ (102).

These intersecting effects of racialisation present an ethical and moral challenge in which the individual becomes a specimen in a category and categories become predictors of social behaviour. Both social identities and antagonisms are located and locked within these categories. To escape these prescriptions, individuals can claim agency to ‘choose which aspects of “groupness” are valid’ to themselves, which ironically only entrenches the idea that there are ‘prescriptions of the group that define what exists, what is desirable, and what is possible for all members of the group’ (144).

*Declassified* acknowledges the predicament in dislodging racialism for the following reasons: racialism has been employed to deal with the social ills associated with racism; it has become a self-evident discourse in society with incredible explanatory power; and there is wide public acceptance of racial categories. Nonetheless, the book urges scholars, activists and citizens alike to pursue the impossible goal of non-racialism as an exercise in utopian thinking. The last section of the book outlines what this would entail.

The end of racialism would require the progressive rejection of racial categories and racialisation, and disturbances of race-thinking and categorisation of people everyday, in ordinary ways. The final chapter

also suggests how we follow this utopian pathway. First, it would require that there is consistent admission that we do not live in a post-racial society. Second, there is a need to investigate the obstacles to critical non-racial reflection. Third is to propose new imaginaries so that people can conceive of alternative ways of being, and consider meaningful categories of social difference other than race. Maré suggests that young people have the potential to embrace utopian thinking since they explore different ways to self-identify.

The contribution of *Declassified* as academic provocation, and as a conversation on how to truly achieve a non-racial society is clear. However, a critique can be offered to the moral standpoint of this book. The book concludes with a compelling argument for non-racialism as the rejection of race and race-thinking as a moral imperative – it is cast as an honour code of sorts (cf 153). Yet student protests, the #rhodesmustfall movement and other public debates on decolonisation taking place across South Africa, suggests that their honour-code lies opposed to the kind of honour code *Declassified* argues for. In these movements, embracing blackness has become a morally defensible pursuit. Affect and lived experience of black African South Africans are distinguished from other forms of social existence that seeks to erase blackness or racial difference. It is not a latent, unintentional, race-thinking, but deliberative race-thinking to subvert racial hierarchy. The concern here is less about anti-racism, but disrupting racial power through re-appropriating and giving power to the racial category of ‘black’. Of course Maré does consider the Black Consciousness movement and its vision of shared humanity, from which this current movement derives some inspiration. However, the current South African movement that seeks to decentre whiteness and re-centre blackness, links its discourse to decoloniality (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) not only a revised consciousness of humanity. In this discourse a shared sense of humanity is important, but not central. The central idea is a discourse in service of blackness, for the benefit of the black African person. There is no doubt that the work of scholars of race, racism and non-racialism will be significantly enriched both by this discourse and by debates presented in Maré’s book.

*Declassified* brings a necessary nuance to current debates on race, racialisation, and non-racialism in South Africa. It contains a fascinating wealth of evidence and detailed argument of how racial categories, though problematic, serve particular agendas and are continually maintained.

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While race-thinking seems normal in many aspects of life in South Africa, the arguments contained in this book are useful in efforts to continually critique, disrupt and question the banality of race.

## **Reference**

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S (2013) 'Why decoloniality in the 21st Century?', *The Thinker* 48.