

Response to Zimitri Erasmus

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Zimitri Erasmus' editorial essay follows from the position paper (Erasmus 2010a) she presented at the 'Revisiting Apartheid Race Categories' colloquium, at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2010. This essay largely complements her position paper and is ideally read alongside the latter. Given this, I respond to key elements in both pieces.

Erasmus (this volume) interrogates continued administrative use of 'race' categories developed and institutionalised during apartheid. Her integrative overview of and framework for contributions to this special issue skilfully knits together these substantively diverse contributions without diluting the complexity of the topic and of the individual articles. *En passant*, this ensemble of articles provides a fruitful point of reference for on-going discussions about the functions and desirability of the continued employ of apartheid racial taxonomies in post-apartheid South Africa.

Significantly, Erasmus (this volume) provides a timely engagement with the paradox of the current deployment of racial categories as a means of undoing the profound problems and inequalities engendered by the racism of apartheid racial categorisation. Some scholars (for example, Adam, in Lefko-Everett, this issue) argue for harnessing these categories to redress the strongly racialised configurations of privilege and exclusions institutionalised during apartheid. However, their continued use, as many authors in recent years have reminded us (for example, Alexander, in Lefko-Everett, this issue, Stevens et al 2006), could easily re-inscribe and further sediment these apartheid categories and their underlying assumptions, and also reuse them in new articulations of social occlusion and exclusion.

Several insights in the two pieces to which I respond here are useful for deepening current debates on the continued use of the old racial typologies virtually naturalised during the apartheid period. First, Erasmus correctly suggests that seeking to identify and offer easy solutions for the paradox

referred to above and its attendant problems is a fraught endeavour. Julian Rappaport, the community psychologist, argues, complex problems, such as those related to ‘race’ and ‘race’ thinking, call for equally complex solutions. In his seminal text, ‘In praise of paradox’, Rappaport (1981) observes that while social problems in contemporary society have complex causes and manifestations, the social sciences misguidedly tend to seek convergent rather than divergent solutions for these problems. Noting the futility of this tendency, he appeals (as does Erasmus in this volume) for greater creativity in attempts to solve social and political problems such as those related to ‘race’ (also see Erwin, in this issue). Furthermore, Rappaport argues that truly creative and ultimately effective solutions to extant social problems such as the ‘race’ conundrum have to engage with ways in which people most affected by these problems attempt to deal with them. In other words, effective solutions cannot simply be a function of theoretical ponderings and deliberations.

Second, of particular value is Erasmus’ (this volume) expressed commitment to venturing beyond orthodox social science’s explanatory frameworks and political explanations routinely trotted out in defence of, in opposition to, or to account for the continued deployment of ‘race’ as a social or administrative category. She challenges the reader to start thinking differently about ways of engaging with the paradoxes and ideological and social tensions posed by this practice. Third, also valuable is her implicit commitment, not simply to tackling the notion of ‘race’ but also to imagining (in much the same way as Frantz Fanon did in his *Black Skin, White Masks*) a future society in which ‘race’ can no longer perpetuate and mask social, economic and other forms of inequality to the extent that it currently does; a society in which a new humanity is possible (Fanon 1952). Fourth, Erasmus’s presentation of a *critical-race-standpoint* as a means of engaging with the effects of ‘race’ on people’s lived reality is critical to current debates on the on-going administrative use of race categories. This standpoint which draws on the precepts of critical race theory (Erasmus 2010b) argues for ‘resistance to both the effects of race *and* [within the context of the aforementioned colloquium] to the use of apartheid race categories for administrative purposes’ (pp9, 11). We should seek to challenge notions of race not simply because of the ways the imposition of ‘race’ ‘strait-jackets’ or restricts identities and associations, but also because of the ways that it inevitably privileges some at the expense of others. Thus, the critical-race-standpoint stresses the importance of analysing ‘race’ and ‘race’ thinking,

not simply as an end in itself but as a means of addressing the economic, political and social inequalities and injustices that ‘race’ conceals (also see Erasmus 2010c).

A fifth useful insight is the article’s allusion (albeit perhaps somewhat oblique) to the reality that ‘race’ positions people in ways that other systems of social and economic asymmetries do not. Specifically, ‘race’ structures how people are viewed and how they view themselves – in ways that for example class and gender do not. However, it must be acknowledged, as bell hooks (1995) so cogently illustrates in *Killing Rage*, that ‘race’ nonetheless is powerfully mediated by these other vectors of social asymmetry. Hence, racial categorisation affects poor people in significantly different ways than it does the affluent, and it affects women in very different ways to men. Even so, while the intersection between race and other indices of social asymmetries should be acknowledged and worked with, Erasmus cautions, they should not be conflated. Sixth, in a social context in which examining the impact of ‘race’ on people’s lived reality is increasingly proscribed or frowned upon (Stevens et al 2010), Erasmus’s assertion that ‘race’ still matters is apposite and important. Her argument that ‘race’ is a political matter is crucial. ‘Race’ assumed its centrality in pre-1994 South African society largely as a result of political processes and systems, and to a certain extent, it still derives currency from extant political processes and the aspirations of the politically powerful in contemporary South Africa (Duncan 2010). Moreover, our work on ‘race’, ‘race’ thinking and racism, if it is to address the problems caused by ‘race’ categories in any meaningful manner should constantly seek to illuminate the inextricable link between ‘race’ categories and politics.

While Erasmus’s stated opposition to racial classification as a social and administrative practice because of its patently “*discriminatory, divisive, violent and totalizing discursive and power effects in the past, in the present and for the future*” (2010a:4, emphasis added) is both pertinent and shared by other scholars (eg Stevens et al 2006), it is not without tensions. I briefly turn my attention to three such tensions in the two pieces at the centre of my response. First, an apparent contradiction, not evident in the preceding article, emerges from two juxtaposed arguments in her position paper. On the one hand, she rejects out-of-hand (and correctly so) the continued uncritical use of racial classifications; while on the other, she rejects positions that eschew “*voluntary racialised identifications which do not amount to perpetuating [epistemic and physical] violence and inequality*” (2010a:3, emphasis added). This tension is significant because

of its salience in discourses currently circulating in South Africa.

I am cognisant of the author's wish, in her position paper, to emphasise the distinction between imposed categorisation (which is correctly presented as patently undesirable) and voluntary self-classification/identification (which is presented as something less undesirable). This, however, is the important challenge. Various theories in social psychology (such as social identity theory proposed by amongst others Tajfel 1978) show that self-classification ineluctably and by its very nature leads to categorisation of the Other (often against the will of the latter), and inevitably opens the possibility for stereotype formation and prejudice (also see Tajfel and Forgas 1981). In other words, while the act of self-classification along racial lines may appear innocuous, its consequences invariably are not. Erasmus may therefore wish further to scrutinise the value of this distinction.

Second, the implicit distinction made by Erasmus (this volume) between common-sense and scholarly conceptions of 'race' is problematic. Admittedly, common sense understandings of ideological phenomena such as 'race' are often disjointed, uncritical and quite unreflexive, and should thus not be overly romanticised or engaged with uncritically. However, common-sense understandings of social phenomena are not just simply disjointed, uncritical and unreflexive. For Gramsci, the basis of common-sense

is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over (Gramsci 1971:627).

This begs a question: might there be value in engaging with elements of common-sense understandings of 'race' in contemporary South Africa? If we want to think about and engage differently and creatively with race it might be useful to engage critically with the understandings of people from all walks of life and from all vantage points. In her contribution to this special issue, Erwin (in this issue) argues for the importance of researchers' engagement with how 'people in this new democracy [are] experiencing, responding to or challenging' (p3) 'race' and its consequences. Along similar lines, Rappaport argues that the best starting point for engaging with the difficulties in living experienced by marginalised groups is to examine 'the many diverse local settings where people are already handling their own problems in living, in order to learn more about how they do ... and to make [this] more public' (1981:15).

Various writers recently remind us of limits to a sole reliance on academic understandings of ‘race’ and solutions to its attendant problems. The key limit being that academics are often exposed to and sensitised by very different sets of ‘race’-related experiences than are other groups of people. More specifically, academics come to the ‘race’ debate with an understanding of ‘race’ that would be somewhat limited if it is not also informed by the experiences of other sectors of society, particularly impoverished black South Africans who in significant ways continue to bear the brunt of the damaging ways in which ‘race’ and racial categorisation impact people’s conditions of living.

Finally, the following statement by Erasmus (this volume) warrants comment:

My argument against continued administrative use of apartheid race categories is not an attempt to diminish the historical significance of anti-apartheid struggles that drew on racial identifications to achieve their goal.

The impression created here is that all sectors of the anti-apartheid struggles drew on these categories in an instrumentalist and unreflective manner to advance political goals that may or may not have heeded the politically, socially and psychologically destructive consequences of ‘race’. Yet, large sectors of anti-apartheid movements were to varying degrees committed to anti-racism and non-racism. Indeed, their very *raison d’être* was to subvert the race inspired logic of the apartheid order. The *Black Consciousness* movement endeavoured to undermine the apartheid system of racial classification by referring to so-called ‘Indians’, ‘coloureds’ and Africans collectively as Blacks (Biko 1988). Uncritical use of apartheid ‘race’ categories was proscribed in large sectors of ‘struggle’ circles prior to 1994. Paradoxically, it was after 1994 (and particularly following the first democratic in South Africa in 1994) that use of old apartheid ‘race’ categories appeared to gain increasing currency (cf Stevens et al 2006).

Erasmus (this volume) is valuable for challenging us to dare to think in new and even unorthodox ways about the problem of ‘race’ categories and their use in administrative processes. My hope is that this special issue provides another platform for us to rise to this challenge. Fanon, in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, appositely and poignantly captures one of the key lessons I draw from Erasmus’ paper and the contributions of various speakers at the ‘Revisiting Apartheid Race Categories’ colloquium: ‘[F]or ourselves and for humanity’, he argues, ‘... we must turn over a new leaf, we

must work out new concepts', new analyses, new solutions, in order 'to set afoot a new [social order]' (1963:255).

References

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