

"The racial question and intellectual production in South Africa":

A critical response to Ivan Evans

Jonathan Jansen Stanford University

In this provocative piece Ivan Evans brings to attention the gross inequalities in the racial distribution of knowledge production in South Africa. In so doing he shifts attention from the much-belaboured writings on the racist nature of social research and the political obstacles to doing research under apartheid.¹ For Evans, "the central proposition [advanced in this paper] is that active steps have to be taken to reverse the subordinate and uninfluential role of black intellectuals in shaping the intellectual life of South Africa".² However important readers may judge Evans' contribution, I wish to identify five important limitations in his argument and simultaneously use these observations as a platform from which to point to a more critical agenda for research on intellectual production in South Africa.

The **first** problem is also the core of Evans' thesis, that is, an incorporationist argument in which he emphasizes, ad nauseam, black exclusion from the research corpus in South Africa. We are informed at length about the white monopoly over research skills and black non-involvement in shaping South Africa's institutional life. Perhaps unconsciously, his harping on this theme places blacks in the pathetic position of beggars for participation in the white academic world. There is, I would argue, a more dignified and incisive vocation for the black scholar, one which does not simply seek participation in an established structure, but seeks to redefine the *racial* terms and the territory on which research takes place! But more about this later.

The focus on race brings me to the **second** problem. I suspect that Evans came under fire from Marxist circles somewhere between the Sussex presentation of this paper and its appearance in *Perspectives in Education*.³ While the Sussex paper almost exclusively raised the "race" issue as a problem, in the published version Evans is at pains to problematize the "class" location of the black intellectual. In this task he largely fails, for here we are treated to yet another untidy theoretical treatment of the race/class dilemma. For example, after paying homage to the Marxist lexicon, Evans then proceeds to present a fairly conventional view of "the objective mechanisms which sustain racial domination" in social research.⁴ In so doing, he lays himself open to critiques from Marxist

scholars in South Africa who quickly point to the political construction of race and (surprisingly) therefore its invalidity as a pursuit of social science.⁵ Evan's vacillation on this score points to yet another problem: that radical Western theories have too often been consumed by black intellectuals in South Africa on the basis of their political legitimacy rather than as a result of a critical analysis of their premises judged within the third world/apartheid context.⁶ But the problem is significant for a more constructive purpose.

I have argued elsewhere⁷ that there are at least two reasons why race should be reclaimed in radical South African scholarship. First, we have reached a critical juncture in radical theory where the primacy of class can no longer be asserted.⁸ Second, the race-versus-class debate in South Africa has reached an analytical if not polemical dead-end.⁹ Despite this significant juncture in social theory at home and abroad, radical literature in South Africa persists in treating race simply by "stressing its links to the relations of capitalist exploitation".¹⁰ In this strategy two unfortunate moves are made: to dismiss the analytical focus on race as "liberal" discourse and to frame race as simply a reflexive form of supposedly more fundamental processes (that is, class relations).

I was hoping, rather, that Evans would take race seriously, not as a simplistic lens through which to view class relations (the old and most of the new Marxist critique), but as a powerful social system on its own terms. That is, to investigate the discourse and meaning of race as the creator of cultural-meaning systems, in its immediacy to the black experience, and in terms of its primacy in advancing and undermining political strategy in apartheid society.¹¹ Once such an understanding of race is pursued and, in particular, its expression through radical scholarship, then we are better able to judge its relational attributes to class and gender. Why is Evans silent on this oppression?

The relationship between race and scholarship brings me to a **third** problem in the article. What Evans misses in his incorporation model is that the problem is not simply one of participation but remains profoundly epistemological in nature. In short, black participation is no guarantee of progressive research. Time after time scholars have warned us that even when black intellectuals do research, they are saddled with very conventional conceptual and methodological tools of analysis, a problem often referred to as intellectual dependency.¹² As recently as 1990, I found in my review of research between 1985 and 1990 at the most progressive black university in South Africa (the University of the

Western Cape) that most work was often conservative (working within the apartheid policy framework), sometimes liberal (mildly critical of the moral and discriminatory aspects of apartheid), but seldom radical¹³. Given this situation, the focus of radical politics should be on preparing critical black scholars at the same time as we may wish to extend our degree of participation.

But why is race important? Here the signal contribution of post-structural thought is relevant, that is, the denial of the distance between knowledge and experience. For too long black people have had their stories told by white writers, foreign and intellectual, radical and otherwise. Contrary to the deep prejudices and pain which we experienced in growing up under apartheid, we woke up one morning to be told that we suffered from "false consciousness", that the real (sic) problem was class oppression, and that the psychological damage imposed by a history of racism could ultimately be traced to "the relations of production". Because this critique was "radical", we swallowed it! The result is that today there is very little radical analysis of race in South Africa, in contrast to theoretical developments elsewhere.¹⁴

Since the experience of racism and oppression cannot be divorced from the process and product of research, Evans would have been closer to home if the epistemological consequences of exclusion were stressed, rather than the modalities of access and participation. I believe, therefore, that we need to reclaim race as a radical analytical focus and political project. A new area of theory and research which draws on the black experience as *one* important way of knowing is vital if we are to move beyond the tenaciously structuralist treatment of the race/class dilemma in South Africa.

But if Evans ignores the intellectual dependency of blacks within the universities, the **fourth** dilemma in the article is that it overestimates the degree of domination of whites in the contemporary research environment. Significant challenges to dominant (both conservative and radical) research traditions have surfaced more than ever before in the writings of young black scholars like Dabi Nkululeko, Christina Qunta, Shaun Whittaker, Blade Nzimande, Buti Thlagale, Lionel Nicholas, Mokubung Nkomo, Barry Erentzen, Ziyad Motala, Mzamo Mangaliso, Vincent Maphai and others, to mention but a few. While I understand that numerically the scale is tipped in favor of whites, ideologically we should not underestimate the degree of challenge and creativity emerging from black South Africans inside and outside the country. An assessment of this scholarship, or at least

recognition thereof, would have brought Evans' argument into sharper focus.

The **fifth** problem is that Evans' external (the black community) versus internal (the South African academia) dichotomy is inadequate if we are to more fully comprehend and challenge local inequalities of knowledge production. It is clear that the white/Western domination (as well as resistance and dependency) in knowledge production is a global phenomenon within which South Africa is simply a particular case. More directly, the social research distribution (as well as capacity and content) of South African scholarship has historically been influenced strongly by the flow of knowledge and information from the West (Europe and the USA).¹⁵ Regnant ideologies have been (and continue to be) determined to a significant degree by foundation-directed research support (such as the work of the Carnegie Foundation in South Africa during this century), by scholarship support (the Rhodes and Fullbright awards, monopolized by whites) for study overseas, by faculty recruitment from overseas, and by the direct importation of ideas through textbooks and dissertations (until recently, largely through University Microfilms International in Michigan). The way in which these (and other) international agencies have enabled the entrenchment of white domination in academic life is not dealt with, and thus Evans by-passes a most significant dimension of black/white inequality in academia and, consequently, appropriate strategies for its undoing. And just to make this picture a little more complex, what would Evans have to say about the impact of the now distinctive number of returning black *graduate* (or post-graduate in South African terminology) students from research universities in the United States and elsewhere on local imbalances in the racial production of knowledge?

To summarize. Playing the numbers game is dangerous if we are to successfully challenge white domination and limit intellectual dependency in progressive research in a liberated South Africa. Blacks may indeed be located on the margins, but merely increasing their numbers within the white-dominated core of intellectual production is insufficient for emancipatory politics and practice. Whether Marxist and mainstream, our paradigms have to be re-defined from a black perspective as we rediscover the Afro-centricity of our heritage, rearticulate the experience of racial oppression, and re-set the agenda for politics and research. That represents a very different goal for the black intellectual, and one which is presently generating exciting and ground-breaking research.¹⁶

Notes and References

1. See, for example, the collected works in J. Rex (ed.), *Apartheid and Social Research*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1981).
2. I. Evans, "The Racial Question and Intellectual Production in South Africa", *Perspectives in Education*, 11,2 (1990): 21-35.
3. See I. Evans, "Intellectual Production and the Production of Intellectuals in the South African Racial Order", (Paper presented at the Conference on Economic Change, Social Conflict and Education in Contemporary South Africa, held at Grantham, United Kingdom, 29-31 March, 1989).
4. Evans (1990): 23.
5. See N. Alexander, "Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Social Science in South Africa," in his *Sowing the Wind: Contemporary Speeches*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Press, 1985). While I certainly do not argue with Alexander's position that race is a social construction, I do take issue with his presentation of class as if it had some a priori significance as a construct to explain "the way things really are" in South Africa.
6. This point is demonstrated in J. Jansen, "Curriculum Policy as Compensatory Legitimation? A View from the Periphery", *Oxford Review of Education*, 16, 1 (1990):29-38.
7. See chapter one, "Knowledge and Power in South Africa: An Overview and Orientation", in J. Jansen (ed.), *Knowledge and Power in South Africa: Critical Perspectives Across the Disciplines*, forthcoming.
8. See Michael Apple, "Facing the Complexity of Power: For a Parallelist Position in Critical Educational Studies", in Mike Cole (ed.), *Bowles and Gintis Revisited: Correspondence and Contradiction in Educational Theory*, (London: The Falmer Press, 1989), 112-130.

9. For one of the latest rounds fired in this either/or debate see D. Posel, "The Race-Class Debate in South African Historiography," *Social Dynamics*, 9, 1 (1983): 50-66.
10. Taken from the article of I. Evans, "The Racial Question and Intellectual Production in South Africa", *Perspectives in Education*, 11, 2 (1990): 21-35 under review here.
11. This view is inspired by, among others, M. Omi and T. Winant in their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).
12. For notes on the conservative intellectual work of radicalized students see Anon (1981), (ed.), "Social Research and the Black Academic in South Africa," in J. Rex (1981) and N. Gwala, "State Control, Student Politics and the Crisis in Black Universities," in W. Cobbett and R. Cohen (eds.), *Popular Struggles in South Africa*, (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1988).
13. In my "radical" category I included the range of Marxist, feminist and radical racial theories.
14. Perhaps the most provocative scholarship on race is M. Omi and H. Winant's, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1986); and C. McCarthy's, "Slowly, Slowly, Slowly the Dumb Speaks: Third World Popular Culture and the Sociology for the Third World", *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 8, 2 (1989): 7-21.
15. See chapter two, "Knowledge and Power in the World System: The South African Case", in J. Jansen (ed.), *Knowledge and Power in South Africa: Critical perspectives Across the Disciplines*, forthcoming.
16. See, for example, the papers in the following edited collections: M.Nkomo's *Pedagogy of Domination: In Search of Democratic Education in South Africa*, (New Jersey: Africa World Press 1990), Christina Qunta's, *Women in Africa*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Press, 1987) and Jansen, forthcoming.