

The Meaning of Race in Modern South Africa



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Introduction

Likely the most powerful driver of race awareness is when the state takes an interest in and funds the counting of its citizens along lines of appearance and descent. Racial bean-counting fosters heightened awareness, particularly of skin colour differences, by giving undue and unearned value to an inherited and unalterable human biological characteristic.

We are a nation with a history of categorising ourselves racially. In this respect, we are little different to other countries with colonial histories. When other African colonial territories became independent, in a wave that begun in the 1950s, we went in the opposite direction, elaborating a vast racial architecture that made apartheid globally notorious.

In the pre-apartheid era, racial categories were loosely used to draw boundaries protecting status, class privilege and political rights along lines of appearance and ancestry. Below I tell the story of what happened under apartheid, when a much more rigid, organised and unforgiving system of racial classification was introduced.

In the post-1994 democratic period, the same system of racial classification was used to do something diametrically opposite. That was to measure the progress people who were defined as ‘disadvantaged by apartheid’ made, or did not make, in response to corrective action policy opportunities.

After Nelson Mandela’s term as president, the rights-basis of ‘corrective action’ (Mandela’s preferred terminology) was modified by Thabo Mbeki’s African nationalism – an inclination few saw before he became President; and perverted further by President Jacob Zuma’s ethnic social Darwinism.

But, based on some survey results, it seems as if South Africans are still loyal to Mandela’s democratic ‘Rainbow Nation’ idea. Although the level of enthusiasm it evokes today is markedly less, South Africans still wish to belong to one nation and most remain committed to redress and reconciliation. South Africans today lead, rather than trail, sentiment.

Race under Apartheid

In *Nature’s Gifts* I tell the story of the perversity of racial classification under apartheid.¹ Under the guidance of apartheid’s first home affairs minister Eben Dönges, the Director of Census, Jan Raats, used racial classification to exclude as many South African citizens as possible, on the grounds of skin colour, from the state’s largesse.

In order to herd racial groups into group areas, Dönges needed Raats to define the ‘races’ of South Africans in the Population Registration Act of 1950, and he proceeded to do so along lines of appearance and social recognition: Europeans (meaning whites), Asian, ‘coloureds’ and ‘natives’ (meaning blacks).

The challenge to Dönges was what to do with those who did not fit neatly into his boxes, or with those who wanted to alter their classification once it had been set down, or with the thousands of light-skinned, coloured individuals who quickly moved into white neighbourhoods and made white friends before the law was passed.

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The task was left to Raats. He had to prepare a detailed system of racial classification in time for the 1951 census, the urgency for which was not simply the need for a population count, but for government departments to know to whom they ought to pay state pensions and at what rate; and, furthermore, to define the victims of apartheid's ethnic cleansing.

Raats came up with the following definitions:

- Asiatic means, a person whose parents are, or were members of a race or tribe whose national or ethnical home is Asia, and shall include a person partly of Asiatic origin living as a Asiatic family, but shall not include any Jew, Syrian or Cape Malay;
- Bantu means a person, both of whose parents are or were members of an aboriginal tribe of Africa, and shall include a person of mixed race living as a member of the 'Bantu' community, tribe, kraal or location, but shall not include any Bushman, Griqua, Hottentot or Koranna;
- Coloured means any person who is not a white person, Asiatic, Bantu or Cape Malay as defined, and shall include Bushmen, Griqua, Hottentot or Koranna; and
- A white person means a person both of whose parents are or were members of a race whose national to ethnical home is Europe, and shall include any Jew, Syrian or other person who is in appearance obviously a white person unless and until contrary is proven.

The law required the Governor-General to sub-divide coloured and 'native' people. For 'native' people this sub-categorisation put down the demographic basis for ten 'homelands', to which they would, in time, be relegated, and then stripped of the few rights they had, including those that came with the Cape's qualified franchise.

What to do, though, with the classification of marginal cases? Most of the people – and there were many: close to 100,000 individuals – fell between the definition of whites and that of coloureds. Raats complained that in his attempt to develop a line of racial division, sorting out the marginal cases proved to be an enormously task.

Raats cited the instance of Anthony Jooste, a coloured teacher from Krugersdorp, whose mother's death certificate indicated that she was coloured; her father's race unknown. His marriage certificate had him and his wife as coloured, but her death certificate said white. Their three children were classified as white and they attended white schools.

Raats and his colleagues decided that a rigid racial line should be drawn around whites as the dominant group and that 'blood-mixing' with coloured people should not be allowed to further 'corrupt' the already impure white race. However, coloured people who looked like whites posed a problem.

Fearing that if members of this group were not allowed into the ranks of the whites they might, given their high fertility rate, become an unwelcome competing white group, Raats stated that it would be better to classify as white all marginal cases where the individuals involved looked white. Dönges accepted the argument.

If one factors in those who slipped into the white community before apartheid came along with those who were made white by the stroke of Dönges pen, about 10 per cent of the white population in the early 1950s consisted of 'coloured' individuals. Dönges and his state officials made it that way.

Raats came into his own with the Indian population. He said he found their distinctiveness, social aloofness and endogamous marriage practices threatening. Indians, he observed, kept their 'race pure', but the men were promiscuous with coloured and African women and left their offspring in those communities.

He recommended that the state deliberately break down Indian cohesiveness by classifying the mixed offspring as Indian and not as coloured or African, as was typically the case. Even his colleagues thought he went too far, but his thinking reveals something about the mad purpose of racial classification.

The guiding principle of social apartheid was in-group mating which, continued for some decades, its designers believed, would result in the emergence of racially distinct populations where clearly, they admitted, there were none. It was 'racial hygiene' and 'population engineering' on a national scale.

Much of our 20th century history can be written around the story of the homelands.² The Reserves or Homelands provided the single consistent justification for the elaboration of racial inequality under successive white regimes. The 1913 Native Land Act restricted black Africans to 7% of South Africa's superficial land area. By the 1970s it grew to 13%.

The Land Act has rightly been seen as a watershed for the country, both symbolically and in concrete terms. In the famous words of Sol Plaatje, an eyewitness to these events, '[A]wakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.'³

Hundreds of thousands of African dwellers were evicted from white-owned land without any compensation. People were forced to surrender tenure of land based on various arrangements ranging from outright renting to sharecropping to labour tenancy in return for the unasked right to occupy land in the homelands.

The Land Act set a pattern of dislocation that was to characterise all succeeding decades until the 1990s. It left untouched the 300 or so small freehold areas owned by black Africans outside the homelands but these 'black spots' (as they became known) disappeared after 1948 because of the persistent assault of successive apartheid governments.

The Land Act set in train processes that led to the destruction of both informal land tenure in the white rural areas and to the further overcrowding and degradation of the land held by Africans within the homelands.⁴ Furthermore, the 1936 Land and Trust Act placed all new acquired land in the hands of the state rather than individuals.

After 1948, ruthless efforts were made to turn the homelands into consolidated areas with some measure of geographical integrity and to move about 2,7 million black Africans to live there. People were moved from urban areas and from white-owned farms, the latter being the largest category of forced removals.

Measures affecting black Africans overshadowed the life and times of coloured and

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Indian South Africans under apartheid, but removals and dispossession affected them too. Indian residence was already restricted in 19th century Transvaal and Orange Free State, but Jan Smuts' government upped the stakes in the 1940s.

The Pegging Act of 1943 and the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946 sought to prevent an increasingly prosperous stratum of Indian traders and professionals from buying land in central business districts and traditionally white-occupied suburbs. The measures brought immense harm to those communities.⁵

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Smuts also established a model that the post 1948 National Party used to malicious effect against the people Eben Dönges classified as coloured. The Group Areas Act of 1950 began a drawn-out process of dispossession and relocation that, by the 1980s, had forced 860,000 South Africans, most of whom coloured, out of their homes.⁶

The Group Areas Act was also used to move 80,000 Africans from areas where they had real, if tenuous, urban status. For the people affected – owner-occupiers, traders and tenants alike – the measures brought personal disaster whose consequences are still with us today. Many white property developers bought cheap and sold dear.

The sharp edge of apartheid began to blunt by the 1980s. In land and settlement, the reversal of apartheid began under apartheid as a result of changing facts on the ground. In 1991 the F. W. de Klerk government repealed the most important land segregation laws with the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act.

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Restitution was also paid to victims of the group areas policies, though the amounts were piddling and distributed inconsistently and slowly. Major projects of restorative justice, such as District Six in Cape Town, are still in process because of an unholy alliance between an incompetent national government and an unhelpful and self-interested beneficiary trust.

Redress and Race

The ANC-dominated GNU took over holus-bolus the system of racial classification bequeathed by apartheid. They subsequently used it without much thought to measure the effect of redress initiatives in land restitution and employment equity under Mandela and black economic empowerment under Thabo Mbeki.

Abandoning its quasi-socialist rhetoric, the ANC had settled on affirmative action in the 1994 settlement. Many South African firms had already adopted such policies as a form of 'anticipatory socialisation'. But the policies seemed to have little effect in the private sector, which is why the ANC focused first on the public sector, as its officials could more easily regulate a domain under its control.

The 1998 *White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service* introduced affirmative action programmes for all civil service departments. It mandated plans that set numeric targets for the increased employment of the 'historically disadvantaged groups' – African,

coloured, Indian, women and physically challenged people.

The *Employment Equity Act* was a similar scheme, but for the private sector. Considered to be the first major piece of race-based legislation on the democratic South Africa's statute books, the idea sought to achieve employment equity for the 'designated groups' in all private firms that employed more than 49 workers.

When Thabo Mbeki became President he went further and, wanting to nurture a black capitalist class, introduced what became known as Black Economic Empowerment. Anyone doing business with, or obtaining a licence from the state, had to help incentivise black-owned businesses with equity or procurement opportunities.

It soon became clear that the complexities of the regulations meant that well-heeled black businesspersons and consortia were the best partners for established businesses. This resulted in the empowerment and re-empowerment of a selected few super-rich individuals – and those with ANC political connections to boot.

In response, the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Bill is coming before Parliament towards the end of the 2012 session. It proposes an incentive architecture to encourage small business development, to prevent re-empowerment of the already empowered and to criminalise what has become known as 'fronting'.

The approach of the Democratic Alliance is to use the opportunity presented to reform B-BBEE to create more economic opportunities for everyone, more education and training opportunities for everyone and to give the small businessperson, regardless of their so-called race, the engine of job creation, a real chance for success.

We are, however, not blind to our history and recognise that a special effort be made to draw black entrepreneurs left out of the economy by apartheid and 18 years of ANC policies, into the economy. Accordingly, we offer proposals to create opportunities, contribute to training, support small business and include the excluded.

B-BBEE is subject to review in 2017, when a rigorous assessment of progress should be made. We would furthermore suggest that the system be managed down and out over a defined period of time after which everyone ought to compete equally in the marketplace. B-BBEE cannot be a blank cheque for eternity.

Employment equity in the public and private sectors should similarly be managed down and out over a defined period. This must be accompanied by ramping up educational quality on a wide scale, such that everyone is capable of competing equally in the marketplace. Quality education is the best long-term strategy of affirming talent.

Conclusion

The end of affirmative action and black economic empowerment, over a defined period of time, will bring an end to the use of tax-payers' money to bean-count race and thereby remove one of the most compelling drivers of race consciousness in South Africa. Race may still matter privately for many, but the state ceases to take an interest.

But that is not enough: asked by the *Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR)* whether they speak to people from other 'race groups', 38% of the respondents said 'often or always', 20% said 'sometimes' and 42% said 'rarely or never'. 60% said they do not socialise across lines of colour.⁷

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Yet, there is a feeling that things are not bad. 47% of the respondents felt that there has been an improvement in race relations since 1994, 30% feel that things have pretty much stayed the same, and 21% believe that life has gotten worse, that there has been regression. The neutral-to-positive constituency provides grounds for hope.

There is also a new consensus emerging. A majority agreed, by far, that government should spend more money on poor people, that jobs and education are the nation's highest priority and that all South Africans should feel at home in the country of their birth or domicile.

Inter-racial integration goes down well among a critical mass of South Africans. 53% of the IJR respondents said that they would support – some strongly – a close relative marrying someone of another race, 67% of living in multi-racial neighbourhoods and 76% of having integrated school classrooms.

DA internal research indicates that there is a widespread desire for South Africans to be part of an inclusive nation. Asked whether more effort should be made to bring all South Africans together, 98.9% of black African, 98.9% of coloured, 85.6% of white, and 88% of Indian South

Africans said yes.⁸ The numbers indicate a ringing endorsement for inclusivity.

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Are political parties following or leading the voters? The African National Congress, which plays the race card at every turn, does neither. The DA believes that its approach will lead towards building the real non-racial majority in the country, leading voters who are inclined to move away from the strictures of race thinking.

NOTES

- 1 Wilmot James, *Nature's Gifts: why we are the way we are* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010).
- 2 This section draws from Wilmot James & Jeffrey Lever, 'The Second Republic: Race, Inequality, and Democracy in South Africa' in Eds. Charles Hamilton et al, *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa & the United States* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001) pp. 29-62.
- 3 Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), p.21.
- 4 Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (Cape Town, David Philip Publishers, 1996).
- 5 B. Pachai, *The South African Indian Question, 1860-1971* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1971) p.1971.
- 6 John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); Wilmot James, 'Group Areas and the Nature of Apartheid', *South African Sociological Review* 5, no.1 (1992), pp.41-57.
- 7 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), *South Africa Reconciliation Barometer 2010* (Cape Town, 2011, IJR).
- 8 Democratic Alliance (DA). Sample n=1249. 2012.