

The Expectations Gap: Race Relations and Naiveté in South Africa



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Were our collective expectations of moving 'beyond race' too high to begin with – and were the lessons waiting to be found from other societies, had we dared to look?

Race and ethnicity continue to dominate discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. This year alone, the acerbic exchanges flowing from so many latent racial minefields – from the racialised ramifications of the discourse on *The Spear*, or the use of the phrase 'economic refugees' by the Western Cape Premier, to the insensitive comments about the Coloured community by former cabinet spokesman Jimmy Manyi, and even the issue of affirmative action employment practices adopted by Woolworths – have thrown into sharp relief the hardening of racial attitudes in our society. For a country with such a tortured past, we seem perilously close to coming to war with ourselves again.

How different we had once hoped it would be. Eighteen years ago, our nation felt the hand of history on us as we attempted a new social contract – an experiment to move beyond racial lines as a source of division. It was a time when “hope and history rhymed” for us, to borrow a phrase from Seamus Heaney. Importantly, our leaders felt that the means to achieve this was legislatively rather than purely through social integration. And in the first few decades of our new democratic order, our society earnestly sought to move beyond the crude, hierarchical racial classifications of apartheid – White, Coloured, Indian and Black. We were imbued with a hope of fostering a permanent sense of nationhood in a race-scarred country; to move beyond race as an ideology, which kept us apart. At several points in our journey thus far, the edifices of racial and cultural hostilities were proclaimed as steadily eroding, with a new dawn of racial tolerance and integration imminent. Yet just under two decades after apartheid, its racial nomenclature stills stubbornly clings on and we seem to be as tormented by race as at many other times in our history.

This seeming inability to move beyond race is a real source of frustration for many South Africans. No one doubts its complex nature. Undoubtedly a great deal of the blame lies with the residuals of apartheid and the subsequent compromises and mistakes we – our government, our leaders and citizens – have made since 1994. But perhaps, too, part of the problem has been our unreasonably high expectations. South Africans tend to think of their problems as unique. Often they are, but more often they are not.

In the heady early days of reconciliation, as we tried to show the world that we were indeed a “rainbow nation”, perhaps we were guilty of deluding ourselves that we alone had the monopoly on institutionalised racial injustice; and as such that we could succeed

in racial reconciliation where others had failed. The long and bitter experiences of other societies, such as the United States of America, Malaysia or Singapore were not seriously considered by the architects of the new South Africa. The failures of those societies in successfully implementing many of the same socio-economic policies which we were about to attempt – affirmative action, economic empowerment, land reform – were not dwelt upon. Perhaps if they were, they would have served to calm down our initial eagerness – and to balm our subsequent despondency.

Were our expectations about racial reconciliation and our ability to redress racial inequality, through legislation, naive? Were the horrors of our fractured past really that unique that we thought we could succeed with reconciliation where others had failed? Was our utopianism of “beyond race” tempered by the right amount of realism?

Is race still what primarily defines us as South Africans in 2012? Is it what continues to cleave us apart? No clear empirical trend is discernible, and the evidence appears to be mixed depending on which academic article one reads. On the one hand, FutureFact’s data across the years reveals a strong move away from racial and ethnicity towards nationhood – confirmed at various points in 2000, 2004 and in 2011. In 2000, 44% of South Africans defined themselves according to their race, ethnic group or language. This figure dropped to 18% in 2004, and last year this dropped further still to 15%. Yet according to developmental indicators issued by the Presidency, the proportion of

us who believe that race relations are improving dropped 37.8 percentage points between 2000 and 2010. SAIRR’s “Rainbow Index” puts racial goodwill only at 50% – noting that “for the present ... the negatives continue to outweigh the positives.” More uneasy for me is FutureFact’s finding that 76% of LSMs 2-4 and 61% of LSMs 5-6 (the bulk of our population) do not have any friends from other racial groups – a proxy for determining social cohesion and integration. *Are* we indeed integrating – or are we merely enjoying the freedoms from racial restrictions alioematically i.e. alongside each other but not *with* each other?

This question appears to be more urgent as the fabric of South African society drifts ever more apart. I am not an academic, nor a researcher, and it is from these groups that perhaps the answer needs to be found. But I find myself seeking answers around different questions. Were our expectations about racial reconciliation and our ability to redress racial inequality, through legislation, naive? Were the horrors of our fractured past really that unique that we thought we could succeed with reconciliation where others had failed? Was our utopianism of “beyond race” tempered by the right amount of realism?

The Malaysia Social Contract and Ethnicity

The Malaysian experience offers an interesting parallel to our own, in that both countries have attempted a legislative approach to dealing with race. And their setbacks may be a useful tonic to put our progress into perspective.

In 2009, as South Africa struggled to come to terms with the combustible xenophobic racial attacks which had spread like wildfire across the country, the newly installed Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak decided to scrap a decades-old policy stipulating that 30% of all Malaysian businesses had to be owned by people of the “indigenous”, or Malay, race. At the same time, his education minister attempted to set aside race-based educational privileges which had resulted in “indigenous-only” universities. In protest against the government’s attempts to reverse race-based socio-economic policies which had been in existence for decades, street protests

erupted throughout Kuala Lumpur and many other states by Malays adamant that as bumiputra – or ‘sons of the soil’ – they be accorded special rights.

To most outsiders, Malaysia is thought of chiefly as an economic success story – an Asian Tiger whose state-orientated economy has mushroomed over the years in comparison with African countries, which were granted colonial independence at roughly the same time. Those unfamiliar with it would probably also assume that all Malaysian citizens were Malay; the etymological root being the same. Whilst it is true that Malaysia’s economic record has certainly been one of Asia’s best, perhaps less well known is the fact that it is an incredibly diverse country racially – and that there is far more to Malaysian ethnicity than just Malays. As the street protests showed, while the country fiercely protects its image as an ethnically harmonious society, the reality is quite different. For more than sixty years, Malaysia has had its own inner turmoils over race and ethnicity, which constantly bubble to the surface and threaten to undo its social fabric.

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Malaysia’s economic growth experience may be vastly different to post democratic South Africa’s; the one sustained, the other anaemic. But racially, both countries share a common fracture which runs through their respective societies. They both have broadly similar racial demographics, as well as a similar history of racial injustice. In response, both their respective governments have tried socio-economic legislative policies to address these inequalities, and equally both governments met with the similar failures of these policies. A chief difference has been that Malaysia has been trying, unsuccessfully, to remedy race and build a more equal society for much longer than we have been. Is there perhaps a lesson here, for us to set our expectations for moving beyond race to a more reasonable level?

Malaysian society is made up Malays (61.4%), Chinese (23.7%), Indian (7.1%) and a melange of other races (7.8%) such as Portuguese, Japanese and Arab descendents. Various Malay kingdoms flourished on the Malay peninsula between the 12th and 17th centuries. The earliest kingdoms had been influenced by Hindu culture, but with the spread of Islam, the Mallaca Sultanate became a dominant regional power. During the rise of the British Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, the British were able to exploit infighting between the various aristocracies and establish colonies and protectorates over the kingdoms, similar to what they were doing on the Indian subcontinent. And as they did on the subcontinent with the different Indian groups, so too did they adopt a divide-and-rule approach which segregated along ethnic lines the indigenous Malays from labouring Indians whom the British brought over as indentured labour, and the Chinese class who came in search of mercantilist opportunities. Malays were largely relegated to peasant and agrarian roles and faced restrictions in their movement, their economic enterprises and in education. The Malay colony was dissolved in 1946 as part of British reorganisation of its South - East Asian dependencies at the end of the Second World War, (formal independence coming in 1957) but not after serious racial distrust had been cemented.

One can broadly equate the period of colonialism in Malaysia with apartheid in South Africa in terms of racial segregation, lack of political representation and

differing patterns of economic development between races. In response, the ruling nationalistic United Malays National Organisation or UMNO (which, similarly to the ANC, has ruled through various alliances, unchanged, since the new dispensation came into effect) chose to entrench a system of priority – *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay Dominance. It argued this on two bases proposed by the policy’s ideological father, the former Prime Minister Mohamed Mahatir – namely a historical primacy of Malays, as indigenous people of the country, and secondly because of their “special needs” arising from their economic disadvantage compared to the minority Chinese and Indians who had benefitted from colonial rule.

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After disastrous race riots in 1969, these policies crystallised into the UMNO’s New Economic Path – an affirmative action policy for the poor to balance the country’s wealth and help Malays achieve a proportionate share of it. The policy included quotas favouring Malays over Chinese and Indians in education, in employment in the public sector, in housing and in home loans. Economic empowerment

imperatives were also introduced in terms of government tenders and in corporate shareholdings. During the heydays of the NEP in the 1970s and 1980s, *ketuanan Melayu* became an accepted way of life. What should be most striking for South Africans are the unintended consequences which Malaysians found themselves faced with because of it. By 1986, after a decade and a half of attempting to redress racial inequality through legislation, a length of time roughly equivalent to where we find ourselves in 2012 – the government faced up to the realities of political corruption flowing from its economic empowerment policies. The practice of awarding public works contracts mainly to bumiputras was criticised as stifling Malay competence by providing little incentive to improve. Many unskilled Malay contractors who won tenders on the basis of their race simply outsourced the contracts to skilled Chinese – an early rendition of our subsequent experiences with “fronting”.

There was also a realisation that economic empowerment had led to the emergence of a small politically connected elite, who weren’t interested in spreading the wealth. Ultimately, the NEP became to be seen as actually reducing Malays’ self confidence, despite its aspirations of building a Malay business class who could serve as role models for poorer Malays. And as disturbingly, it led to a hardening of racial attitudes.

The NEP was officially abandoned in 1990, but unfortunately its legacy remains. According to John Malott, a former US Ambassador, almost half a million Malaysians left the country between 2007 and 2009, more than doubling the number of Malaysian professionals who live overseas. “It appears that most were skilled ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians, tired of being treated as second-class citizens in their own country and denied the opportunity to compete on a level playing field, whether in education, business, or government.” Blaming the country’s obsession with race and consequently giving it priority over merit, he goes further:

“these minorities increasingly feel that they have lost a voice in their own government. The Chinese and Indian political parties in the ruling coalition are supposed to protect the interests of their communities, but over the past few years, they have been neutered. They stand largely silent in the face of the growing racial insults hurled by their Malay political partners. Today over 90% of the civil service, police, military, university lecturers, and overseas diplomatic staff are Malay. Even TalentCorp, the government agency created in 2010 that

is supposed to encourage overseas Malaysians to return home, is headed by a Malay, with an all-Malay Board of Trustees.”

Malaysia’s example, then, is one of a failure to deal with race effectively despite decades of trying to do so. Rather than unifying citizens as Malaysians, the government’s policies, much like our own administration’s, have served only to bring race to the fore as a determinant of patronage. Instead of ending racism, its policies seem to have perpetuated it.

The American Dilemma

Earlier this year, just before the American spring, a 17 year-old African-American boy, walking back home one evening, was fatally shot in Florida by a neighbourhood watch volunteer who mistook him for a thief. The gated community had had several break-ins in the recent past and with the boy wearing a hoodie in the dark and walking irregularly, the over anxious volunteer became suspicious. The boy in turn realised he was being followed and ran. Eventually, a fight ensued and shots rang out. Trayvon Martin was dead.

The American experience of overcoming racism also throws up some unsettling questions for South Africans to consider. Would Trayvon have been stopped had he not been black? At the heart of America’s persistent racial divide is a fundamental disagreement over the frequency and severity of discrimination against African-Americans. 150 years after the official end to slavery, a reason for this divide may be traced to the fact that, according to *Newsweek*, “most blacks know how it feels to experience racism; most whites do not”. According to their poll in 2012, “74 percent of blacks have personally felt they were being discriminated against because of their race; only 31 percent of whites have ever felt the same way. 45% of blacks, meanwhile, sense that other people fear them some or all of the time; only 10% of whites can empathise. Blacks are four times more likely than whites to say they have been unfairly stopped by police, and twice as likely to say they have been insulted, threatened, or attacked because of their skin colour.”

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In many ways, the dogged question of race represents the false dawn of hope for America. The complicated nature of race and racism has meant that despite great strides in recent times, this issue has never fully been absolved from American consciousness. For more than 150 years, race has been the fault line which has riven America.

The social stratification theory, according to sociologists, holds that the problems of race relations arise when colonists employ a conquered people, either of their own soil or elsewhere, to exploit the resources which they’ve acquired through either conquest or discovery. Under these circumstances a structure emerges in which members of different racial groups constitute separate classes – a dominant class and a labouring class. For one group to fully exploit the other, a clear demarcation is required, the most obvious being racial difference.

What is so interesting for South Africa about the American experience is not so much that it is a prime example of the stratification theory, but of how long it takes to change something as ingrained as institutional racism – and how circuitous the

path is. American racism has a long and complicated history. While it stems from the institution of slavery, it was further poisoned by institutionalised segregation and the ‘Jim Crow’ state and local laws which were in existence as late as 1965. While substantially denuded of its potency by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, American race relations have similarly been set back through controversial policy efforts such as affirmative action, as well as by racial profiling, the dynamics of economics and persistent social constructions such as what led to the tragedy of Trayvon Martin.

Perhaps, in time, we will come to see the presidency of Barack Obama as a watershed moment too, and the beginning of America finally entering its “post-racialistic” period. For the moment of course, that seems too premature to proclaim. If anything, more Americans seem to feel that his ascent has done little to speed up racial progress or soothe racial tensions. As the Obama re-election campaign rolled into town in Durham, North Carolina – once a railway hub for 19th century slave labour – septuagenarian Liz Wills still remembered the days when separate bathrooms and schools were a common occurrence. “It’s not supposed to be segregated now,” she says, “but there’s a lot like that still here. Racism is alive and well and thriving.”

Lessons for SA

While racism is prevalent in every society to a greater or lesser extent, institutionalised racism in any form – whether designed to end the inequalities of the past or to simply maintain an unfair system of racial privilege based on a notion of superiority – is problematic. The continuing tensions we suffer from in terms of racial cohesion underline how great the distance we still need to travel towards achieving national healing and reconciliation is. But perhaps this is unsurprising given the experiences of others. The lessons we can draw from Malaysia are that societies which attempt to redress racial injustices through well intentioned but invasive legislative attempts, can often perpetuate racism rather than ending it. And the American dilemma demonstrates how long and tortuous the path to racial healing can be – and that it is not something that can be overcome in a single generation.

Armed with these insights, we may very possibly have *still* continued down the same legislative path we had chosen – but, at the very least, we might also have been imbued with a little more pragmatism about the setbacks we were likely to experience along the way.