



AN INTRODUCTION

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In this volume, we are happy to present the third and final group of essays emerging from the discussions of the Effects of Race (EoR) Project at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) that occurred in 2016 and 2017. The EoR Project is part of the “Being Human Today” initiative, one of the longer-term theme projects sponsored by STIAS since 2013. The primary goal of the EoR Project was the development of new scholarly research bearing on the disturbing continuation of race-thinking and racism, and of antagonism towards fellow human beings caused by racism. The EoR Project sought to address the roots of the “everydayness of race” in South Africa and elsewhere by exploring widespread misconceptions about visible and cultural human diversity, the linguistic infrastructure of racialism, and the complexity of multiple identities. The contributors to the EoR Project have, over the years, wrestled with the question of how race ideologies have become tradition and “common sense”, and are no longer recognised as self-conscious belief systems (Swidler, 1986). They have recognised that the “everydayness of race”, when viewed from a structuralist perspective, is best understood as a set of

assumptions about the nature of the world that has become so unselfconscious as to seem a natural, transparent, and undeniable (Geertz, 1975; Swidler, 1986). If the contributors to the EoR Project and this volume had any single goal, it could be best expressed as achieving further understanding of the complex and perfidious assumptions surrounding race and race-thinking so as to further dismantle the belief in race as common sense.

Meetings of the EoR Project took place at STIAS from 2014 through 2017, and involved a diverse body of scholars, thinkers, and educators from different constituencies in South Africa along with several scholars from Europe and the United States. As described in the introduction to *The Effects of Race* (Jablonski, 2018), the “core group” comprised a group of well-established senior scholars who engaged in theme-oriented discussions, and the “projects group” of mostly younger South African scholars and educators involved in specific, goal-oriented projects. This volume represents contributions developed from the discussions at EoR core group meetings held at STIAS in July 2016 and July 2017. The members of the EoR core group present at STIAS in 2016 were, in alphabetical order: George Chaplin, Zimitri Erasmus, Nina Jablonski, Gerhard Maré, Njabulo Ndebele, Barney Pityana, Crain Soudien and Göran Therborn. Those present in 2017 were: Zimitri Erasmus, Nina Jablonski, Gerhard Maré, Njabulo Ndebele, Barney Pityana, Crain Soudien and Göran Therborn.

Prior to meeting each year, core group members decided together on a theme that would provide focus to their discussions. In 2016, the theme was “Turning points in the history of race and racism in South Africa” and, in 2017, the theme included three conjoined questions, “What do you wish to change with regard to race, racism and racialism?”, “Why?” and “How would you bring this about?” These were big themes, and core group members conceived of them and developed them according to their own intellectual backgrounds and personal experiences. In both years, preliminary discussions focused on clarifying the topic at hand. In 2016, for instance, discussions opened with a fruitful exchange about different members’ conceptions of what was meant by a “turning point”. These were not sterile or hair-splitting discussions of semantic points; they were conversations that warmed up group members to engage with one another’s thought processes and reintroduced them to the nature and complexity of the topics at hand.

The dynamics of the core group meetings held at STIAS bear importantly on this volume and on the totality of the EoR Project. During meetings, core group members trusted and respected one another, and recognised that each person brought a valued body of learning and experience to the group. This mutual trust and respect made it possible for group discussions to develop naturally and without rancour, and mostly without defensiveness of individual intellectual territories.

This made for an extraordinarily constructive and elevating atmosphere, even when the most sensitive and difficult topics were being considered. The spirit and nature of the discussions were aptly summed up by Njabulo Ndebele in conversation at the end of the 2016 session, “The elephant is in the room and we are petting it”. The 2016 and 2017 discussions revealed the deep thoughtfulness of core group members and their willingness to listen carefully to one another and explore bodies of knowledge with which they had little familiarity previously. The psychological flexibility and learning abilities revealed were impressive and heartening, and conduced to a higher level of sophistication and integration of thinking about race than we had previously achieved. The whole was much more than the sum of its parts.

This volume is divided into two sections, which roughly map the group’s 2016 and 2017 discussions, respectively. In the first section, “How the Stage Was Set”, the authors explore some of the reasons why the concepts and practices of race, race-thinking, and racism continued to exist and be reinvented in South Africa and elsewhere in the face of legislation and scientific knowledge. Taking inspiration from the theme of turning points, the authors refer in their chapters to local or global events or movements which influenced these processes in South Africa. The contributions reflect clearly too the diverse intellectual backgrounds and professional training of the authors. Here we see phenomena examined through the lenses of many disciplines: sociology, history, geography, anthropology, and writing.

Crain Soudien sets a courageous and sobering tone for the section and the volume in the first chapter, “Racism’s workshop: Explaining prejudice and hate”. He explores the cognitive dimensions of racism, prejudice and hate, examining how these attributes are acquired and become part of the consciousness of individuals and groups. The turning point which catalyses Soudien’s investigation is the conclusive amassing of scientific evidence demonstrating the non-existence of human races. Why should prejudice and hate persist when the reasons for their existence have been eliminated? What Soudien thus excavates in this chapter are the reasons and mechanisms for the development and persistence of prejudice and hate in the absence of “evidence”. His chapter not only explores the phenomenology of the transmission of negative emotions through seemingly trivial expressions and gestures, but also how social scientists over the last half-century have sought to interpret this troubling phenomenon. This chapter addresses and effectively dismisses the contention of many sociobiologists, including Van den Berghe, that race is best understood as a manifestation of preferential kin selection, advantageous in the evolutionary process (Van den Berghe, 1987).

In the next chapter, “An unlikely turning point: Skin bleaching and the growth of colourism in South Africa”, Nina Jablonski considers how racism and negative attitudes towards dark skin colour, especially during the apartheid era, propelled the development and use of skin lighteners in South Africa from the mid-twentieth century onward. Jablonski shows that one of the ways in which some South Africans responded to crises of identity during apartheid was by attempting to change their personal appearance. Because skin colour was the most physically obvious manifestation of difference, and because preferences for light skin were blatant, skin lightening became extremely popular in South Africa when products were introduced and widely manufactured in the country beginning in the 1950s. Jablonski shows that skin lightening remains popular since the end of apartheid because preferences for lighter skin remain and the psychosocial pressures to lighten the skin are felt by many.

The next two chapters, by George Chaplin and Göran Therborn, respectively examine the social, racial and political landscapes of South Africa during its long period as a settler-colonial state. In his chapter, “Settler-colonialism, nationalism and geopolitical politics: An overview of the mobilisation of race in South Africa in the context of lost turning points”, Chaplin examines how attitudes and policies towards race in South Africa and official South African government positions on race during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were influenced by social and political movements outside of South Africa. Most historical and sociological treatments of South African race policies during this time emphasise that South Africa’s policies developed *sui generis*, and did not draw inspiration or direction explicitly from movements outside of South Africa. Chaplin disagrees, and in an expansive historical overview dissects the influences of global geopolitics on the development of nationalist movements in South Africa, from early Russian communism to Nazism to later Soviet communism. His detailed exegesis provides detailed evidence for the influence of these contrasting powerful ideologies on the political and governmental landscape of South Africa. Of greatest importance is his description of the rise of influence of Nazi ideology on the development of the philosophical underpinning and racialised mechanisms of the South African apartheid state. The eventual triumph of Nazi philosophy in South Africa in everything but the name was and remains a source of shame and denial even in academic circles in the country. Chaplin’s reference to a lost turning point in his title makes fascinating use of an engaging counterfactual scenario from mid- and late twentieth century history. He ponders if the course of apartheid might have been shortened if those opposing it had not embraced Soviet communism, and whether racial justice in South Africa may have been better served and apartheid reversed if American and European democracies had not feared the communists they saw lurking behind African nationalism.

In the next chapter, “From settler to postcolonial: The turn of the South African nation-state in a comparative perspective”, Therborn looks at the twentieth-century history of South Africa in the context of other nation-states and grounds South Africa in the context of global colonialism. His focus is on how the establishment of a new democratic government in 1994 marked a turnaround in the ideological underpinnings of the country, if not entirely in its economic fortunes. Therborn’s chapter draws considerably on his highly regarded overviews of the diverse origins of nation-states. As a settler-state, South Africa was inherently racist by definition, but it developed a uniquely repressive manifestation of settler-statehood because of its unusual demography, with white Europeans accounting for only 20% of its population. Examining its “racial rehabilitation” in the context of other settler-states, he notes that South Africa’s rejection of apartheid was part of a global movement of human equalisation, which included rejection of institutionalised racism and sexism. He shows how the abolition of apartheid in 1994 in South Africa meant the abolition of the settler-state itself and all the mechanisms of social repression that went with it. This did not, however, bring an immediate turnaround in the fortunes of the country or its once-repressed populations. Although much has been done to address the many severe manifestations of inequality in South Africa, the country remains markedly unequal because, Therborn argues, it was so from its earliest days as a settler-state before apartheid.

The volume’s second section, “Assessment and Future Prospects”, is devoted to chapters expressing some of the deepest of the EoR core group’s discussions about the costs of a racialised world order to humans and humanity. These sprang from the group’s exploration of “the three questions” in 2017: “What do you wish to change with regard to race, racism and racialism?”, “Why?” and “How would you bring this about?” The topics which emerged from consideration of these questions were close to the hearts of core group members, and reflected individual interests and predilections as well as the influence of current events such as the #RhodesMustFall movement. The group’s discussions and members’ essays did not express clear solutions to profound problems, but rather developed into deeply thoughtful foundations for detailed explorations into South African racial politics and the long-term effects of race in South Africa and elsewhere. The discussions and essays were predictably diverse, and included investigation of the South African Constitution and specifically, how contemporary politics and social values failed to fulfil the promises of social equality enshrined in the document. They also considered the biological and social understandings of race, and how new information from both the biological and social sciences was changing our perspective on the nature of the human condition, including the association of biological and social phenomena with “race”. Finally, the discussions and essays explored how race-thinking framed the very nature of human beings and the human

condition, including the ways we express ourselves and relate to one another through language. The six chapters in this section comprise distinct forays into the realities of race-thinking and their pervasive and sinister effects on the human being and human societies.

In the first chapter of this section, Gerhard Maré revisits the most salient theme of his oeuvre in, “Ways of being: ‘Race’ as common sense; non-racialism as humanist necessity”. Maré’s chapter is a conversation with himself and the reader in which he poses questions about race and race-thinking at all phenomenological levels. This is an uncomfortable conversation about the nature of the verities of race-thinking and how every manifestation of race-thinking and racialism – whether it touches on biology, language, human rights, or the greater social order – is about recognition of inherent difference. The scourge and the tyranny of race, he argues, is that it deforms the substrate of thinking about everything else. Maré is cautiously optimistic about the future and challenges current and future generations to determine their own moral compass and to not be directed by social constructions of the past.

In the next chapter, Nina Jablonski discusses “The effects of racism on the human body”, an exploration into the nature and kinds of biological damage done to the body by long-term racism. This chapter does not explore “racial differences” in biology, but differences in biology brought about by racism. The chapter peels away the layers of effects of racism and discrimination on human health. Effects on socioeconomic position mature during human lifetimes into adverse effects on well-being through health disparities at multiple levels. Jablonski’s rumination on the unrecognised toll of epigenetic modifications to the human body caused by the stresses of racism raises new sets of worries about the costs of racism, as we begin to recognise the many ways in which human bodies and human genes are being constantly remodelled by the physical and social environment and by life experience.

Crain Soudien, in the next chapter, “Knowing and being: Living our learning about ‘race’”, develops one of his deepest discussions to date on the nature of what we might call “race knowledges” and how they affect our being and state of knowing. Like Maré’s chapter, Soudien’s is a personal reflection based on a life of observation and experience about and with race-thinking and recognition of the humanitarian consequences of a racialised world. This chapter is a search into the nature of the kinds of knowledge that exist about race and how we as individuals metabolise those knowledges. The discussion of how inequality changes the fabric of any relationship is insightful and, here, Soudien places the burden on the knower, the person aware of the effects of their status on life’s outcomes. His prescription for the future – that we should have consciousness of regard for all human beings and

know others as we know ourselves – is not new, but the path he takes to reach the conclusion is, and makes for, a highly salutary read.

The following chapter, “Semantics in the philosophy of race” by George Chaplin and Nina Jablonski, examines another aspect of race knowledges by looking at the extent to which race-thinking has co-opted our consciousness and language. Chaplin and Jablonski contend the fossilised lexicon associated with race has made any attempt to deal with the effects of racism almost impossible. The solution they advance is the creation of a new, non-pejorative vocabulary for defeating race that is acceptable to all. The authors’ discussion is unique in that they incorporate into their discussion a philosophical repudiation of race as a biological concept applicable to humans. The fact that human races have no metaphysical reality, they argue, is the ultimate negation of race-thinking. That our current depauperate lexicon prevents us from describing this properly and abolishing racism is a tragedy, but hope arises, the authors contend, from a willingness to create a new way of thinking, conceiving, and verbalising about humanity.

Zimitri Erasmus, in the next chapter, “‘Who was here first?’ or ‘Who lives here now?’: Indigeneity, a difference like no other”, looks at race knowledges from a related perspective, but arguing from different evidence. She explodes the overused simplification of race being just a social construct by looking closely at “race” as composed of interconnected and institutionalised practices of power in relation to class, gender and multiple other factors. These practices are specific to historical moments and together they shape the racialised realities of any place and time. Erasmus’ discussion focuses specifically on the status of people who self-identify as “Khoi-San”, and their status as the original indigenous people of South Africa. She critically examines the nature and application of the concept of indigeneity as it has been applied to the Khoi-San, and especially as it has been used recently to differentiate them from other non-European South Africans and accord them special privileges. Erasmus’ treatment exposes the ultimately contingent nature of race and the practice of race labelling, and questions the value of labels such as “indigenous” especially when they are applied as sops without substance.

Njabulo Ndebele ends this section and the volume with his provocative chapter, “South Africa beyond ‘non-racialism’”. Here, Ndebele looks beyond the damage wrought to individuals and societies by race and racialised conceptions of the human condition to examine the real costs of these phenomena to the world, as they have played out over centuries. After counting the horrific worldwide humanitarian and economic costs of racism, he does not dwell in bitterness or pessimism, however. He sees a bright future and, in South Africa in particular, a new human order grounded in a “majoritarian human norm that carries the motive responsibility to create a new and humane future for all”.

In the diversity of its chapters and their respective authors, we have in this volume a unified loud voice, arcing towards a world without race, race-thinking and racism. This is the voice that calls out the many origins of injustice that people have meted out to one another and experienced as the result of a racialised world order. The chapters in this volume were born out of the unity of humanity that was experienced during the STIAS meetings of the EoR Project, and it is the hope of all the contributors that this loud and strong voice will be heard. With persistent effort, race will be transformed from common sense to nonsense.

References

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