‘The Elephant in the Living Room’: The Denial of the Importance of Race by Whites in the New South Africa

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Abstract: This paper seeks to understand the way in which some white South Africans claim not to be concerned about the ‘colour’ of their neighbour and yet still display considerable concern about the type of neighbour. Rather than race, categories such as ‘culture’, ‘ethical values’, ‘standards’, ‘class’ and ‘behaviour’ are offered as criteria for determining the acceptability of prospective neighbours. One reading of this is that class is replacing race as the primary category through which whites understand social difference. Another reading might be that these self-consciously ‘careful’ statements portray the speaker as politically correct thereby attempting to disguise continuities with the now discredited intolerant language of the past. However, it would be inappropriate to go in search of ‘hidden’, ‘subliminal’ or ‘subtle’ racism – as many high profile anti-racist projects in post-apartheid South Africa have. Rather it is important to situate these statements within a fuller understanding of the way whites have historically conceived of social difference. ‘Racism’ cannot be reduced to orthodox Verworedian apartheid and it is necessary to recognise that this was merely one solution to what was seen as the ‘problem’ of social difference and racial hierarchy. Other more ‘liberal’ solutions sought the advancement and then assimilation of what they defined as ‘inferior’ groups. Thus I shall suggest that while the denial of the importance of race may escape easy classification as apartheid-like racism, concerns about ‘culture’, ‘ethical values’, ‘standards’, ‘class’ and ‘behaviour’ betray a belief that these groups are still not yet sufficiently advanced or developed to seamlessly integrate into suburbs without disrupting their much cherished status as ‘modern’, ‘civilised’ and ‘western’.

1. Introduction

In 1992, the left wing *Weekly Mail* newspaper published an article on racism written by one of its anchor journalists, Phillip van Niekerk. He began the article by saying “‘There’s a syndrome known as ‘the elephant in the living room’: everyone knows it’s there – how can you miss it? – but would rather not talk about it” (van Niekerk 1992). He went on to illustrate this with a statement by a white woman opposed to squatters: “We are not opposed to the blacks, we’ve even got a few coloureds and Indians living among us. We don’t oppose other races if they’re on the same cultural level as us.” van Niekerk’s interpretation was that

> Lurking beneath the carefully couched explanations is a completely different truth. It is a rather ugly one, and one that we need to confront frankly and stop egg-dancing around. The “new” South Africa cannot be built on convenient denials of racism.

This was an astute analysis of the growing tendency of many to deny “that they are operating on the basis of ‘race’” (Dixon and Reicher 1997: 370). It raises the important concern that language systems are being adapted to maintain the substance of apartheid while sufficiently altering its appearance to pass the scrutiny of post-apartheid political correctness. The following discussion will examine examples of similar “convenient denials of racism” (section 2) and will then consider the historical (section 3) and contemporary (section 4) contexts that shape such ways of speaking. The historical

context is important in understanding post-apartheid interpretations of society as these interpretations are responses to previous frameworks (Frankenberg 1993: 138 & Wetherell and Potter 1992: 19). In particular, it necessary to understand the relationship between, on one hand, the ideology that society is divided into a hierarchy of races, and on the other hand, the easily identifiable language of racism. I will suggest that while many people may attempt to convince themselves and others that they are not racist by avoiding certain words, they still appear to be concerned about racial hierarchies. Racism, then, is bigger than abusive or discriminatory language and, as Sharp put it, "it is perfectly possible to be racist without stressing, or even using, the term 'race'" (1988: 8). Section 3 will the consider the ways in which acceptable words can be used to invoke problematic frameworks.

The contemporary post-apartheid context is important because of the way in which popular debates discourage what Frankenberg (1993) calls *race cognisance* – an arguably more healthy approach in which individuals recognise and acknowledge the way in which a sense of racial hierarchies influences the way they think. However, as with much of the US since the civil rights movement – white South Africans after apartheid tend to gravitate towards *colour* and *power evasiveness* (Frankenberg 1993). Thus, despite van Neikerk's warnings in 1992 of the need for a frank confrontation, denials of racism have characterised debates on race in post apartheid South Africa. In an ironic twist, Van Niekerk himself illustrated this eight years after he penned the above article when he stood before a hearing of the Human Rights Commission and declared indignantly that "racist is the most provocative insult that can be levelled against my colleagues and me" (SAHRC 2000: 60). He was representing the *Mail and Guardian* (formerly *Weekly Mail*) by then as editor, and had been summonsed to respond to accusations that his newspaper – established in 1985 in ideological opposition to the apartheid government – was racist. This intriguing episode will be examined in more detail in section 3, along with other public debates on the scope of racism.

Thus, while it is indeed possible to identify of the use of 'culture', 'standards', 'ethics', 'behaviour' and 'class' as alternatives for what in the past would have been couched as racial exclusion, the objective of this paper is not to prove racism. Indeed, it will become clear that attempts to prove racism in post apartheid South Africa are largely counter productive and are part of the reason why people resort to other frameworks of exclusion. The categories 'racial', 'racist' and 'racism' tend to have elastic definitions that can be widened or contracted according to the objective of the user. Those who use the categories seldom see themselves as falling within them but are the property of a morally condemned 'racist other'. Meanwhile, those on the receiving end of such 'accusations' are aware of the undesirable nature of this label and attempt to dissociate themselves from it. This may be a shrewd discursive response but it permits people to deny their membership of this category without honest introspection that would allow them to confront intolerant attitudes.

2. "I don't see colour": Colour evasiveness in the new South Africa

The following interview and newspaper material was collected as part of a broader research project on white responses to various forms of urban desegregation (Ballard 2002: 221). They should not be taken as necessarily representative of white South Africans and it should not be presumed that other groups are immune from such language. What these extracts do represent is a particular way of speaking about

desegregation in which speakers claim that race does not matter. They share similar formulations, although not necessarily in this order: First the speaker denies that race has anything to do with what they are saying. Second, this is followed with a qualifying 'if' or 'as long as' (underlined). Third race is substituted for an alternative criteria (highlighted in bold/italics) that determines the acceptability or compatibility of prospective neighbours, such as culture, standards, behaviour, economic income and ethics:

> **Example 1:** Its basically a ***culture*** thing for me, you if you can fit in with anyone else that's fine, I don't care what you are. (Sarah: Female, ±50s, English, Born SA - Pta, Married, Book Keeper, Sep 96).
>
> **Example 2:** It's not a black-white thing – it basically boils down to bad ***town planning***. You can't put ***sub-economic housing*** in the middle of a suburb. The government took away influx control and left nothing in its place. If we don't make a stand here no-one is safe. ("It's Survival of the Fittest, Says Angry Horse-Belt 'Liberal'" *Sunday Times*. 9 February 1992)
>
> **Example 3:** [A black neighbour], wouldn't bother me in the slightest. (pause) If the ***standard*** of the neighbour is kept the same, I wouldn't mind whoever lives there, it wouldn't bother me. (Karen: Female, ±21, English, Born in SA - Jhb, Unmarried, Science Student, Sep 96.)
>
> **Example 4:** You know [I don't see] colour; it's the individual, if you have much as common, as long as they have the same sort of ***ethics*** as you have, et cetera, that's the big thing I think the ethics um, (pause) ***moral standards*** (Viv: Female, ± 48, English, Born in N. Ireland, Married, Reps educational goods, Sept 97.)
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> **Example 5:** [Black neighbours wouldn't worry me] if they were ***clean*** and ***well-behaved*** and ***quiet***, you know if they were going to beat big drums all night or something then I'll probably have problem. Toy-toying around the place. [Not] if their ***standard*** is up to standard. I'm not racialist. (Malcolm: Male, 68, English, Born in SA - Dbn, Married, Retired, Aug 97.)

The immediate observation that should be made of these examples is that it seems impossible to avoid the topic of race even when one is trying very hard not to be racist. In her assessment of white women's approaches to race in the San Francisco area, Frankenberg (1993) concluded that whether one thought of oneself as a racist or not, everybody thought *through* race in one way or another. Frankenberg identified three broad ways of thinking through race: *essentialism*, *colour evasiveness* and *race cognisance*. This is a typology which applies well to South Africa. *Essentialist* racism, the first category, carried normative weight prior to the civil rights movement in the US, and prior to democratisation in South Africa. *Essentialist* racism includes all overt use of race as an objective category of understanding social diversity, and this generally involves the explicit positioning of whites as superior and others as inferior. While this was expressed by apartheid politicians for decades and continues to surface in post-apartheid South Africa, many whites no longer identify with such discourses and distance themselves from them.

The second way of relating to race is to adopt discourses of *colour evasiveness*, and this is what is being exemplified in the above extracts. This group of discourses, associated with liberal ideologies, makes an explicit or implicit moral rejection of "racism" as an "irrational prejudice" based on some misguided belief in social groupings that do not exist. Liberals take as their starting point the irrelevance of "race", and many people seem to assume that "being caught in the act of seeing racial difference was to be caught being 'prejudiced'" (Frankenberg 1993: 145). The motivation for this strategy is clear. Aware that racism is no longer acceptable, people take care to avoid using racial discourse in order to "portray themselves in as positive light as possible" (Alasuutari 1995: 91). This is particularly important in the interview situation where "[r]espondents may fear 'being shown up'. People often avoid describing aspects of behaviour or attitude that are inconsistent with their preferred self-image" (Layder 1993: 138). Similarly van Dijk highlights the importance of impression management and the need to portray a

> positive self-presentation, so as to avoid making a bad impression or simply to convey a positive impression to the audience. … semantic moves such as apparent denial "I have nothing against Blacks, but …" may serve as part of overall strategies of positive self-presentation. What follows after the "but" in such cases will usually be a move in the complementary strategy of racist talk, that is, negative other presentation. (van Dijk 1993b: 117)

As Wouters suggests, though, the crisis in this re-presentation is not only a response to the politically correct environment where race has become taboo, but a response to sincere moral shifts within individuals who genuinely abhor racism (Wouters 1998: 145). Therefore *colour evasiveness* is not merely a case of sanitising one's motives, as Dixon and Reicher (1997: 370) put it, also reflects a crisis within people who are seeking to overcome what they consider to be morally wrong standpoints. Once again, this reflects the new norms of society. As Dixon and Reicher indicate, the distancing from overt racism reflects "South Africa's changing moral order" (1997: 371). Racism has become akin to something "criminal", a sinful behaviour of which one is either guilty or innocent (Frankenberg 1993: 147).

Yet Frankenberg, and many others, have questioned whether *colour evasiveness* represents actual progress beyond racism. The problem is that the *colour evasive* approaches define racism in narrow terms in order to place their views outside of the category. Rather than referring to a broad exploitative system, racism is used to refer to quite specific behaviours such as 'treating them badly' as encapsulated by the new judicial concept of 'hate crimes'. Above all, one is racist if one acknowledges that there are such things as different races – hence the taboo associated with racial language. Having defined racism in these narrow terms, it is possible for someone to say that they cannot be accused of racism, and are therefore 'innocent', since they do not practice these kinds of behaviours or use the wrong kinds of words.

The concern with this way of responding to race is that the way racism is defined (as anti-social prejudiced behaviour) does not adequately capture the way people are still able to make social differentiations that achieve similar effects to the old, overtly racial discourses. In other words, is it possible to be 'racist' – defined as perceiving black people as inferior – without using the discourses of 'race', or even referring to 'black' and 'white'? It is also possible to be racist even if one is willing to accept that black

people would be tolerable neighbours, precisely because of the conditinality of that acceptance. For Swanadan, racism is "chameleon-like" and adapts to new environments (quoted in Cross and Keith 1993: 1). In the new anti-racist environment, we might expect racism to adapt by "camouflaging" itself and denying its existence. In this regard, *colour evasiveness* may disguise continued belief in the inferiority of certain groups in society in much the same way that racism used to. It is possible to use euphemisms or alternative categorisations to refer to social hierarchies. Race becomes an "absent presence", a thought that is "unspoken" rather than "missing" (Frankenberg 1993: 138, Cross and Keith 1993: 8). Frankenberg argues that "colour evasion actually involves a selective engagement with difference, rather than no engagement at all" (1993: 143). This is evident in examples 1-5 presented above, where the nonchalant dismissal of race by the respondents is never offered without a proviso, and tolerance thus becomes conditional (Goffman 1963: 121). Each of these speakers display an enduring concern about the *types* of people that live in their neighbourhood, even if 'type' is not expressed in terms of 'race'.

If we recognise that 'race' was only one way in which whites (and the west more generally) structured society between a superior 'us' and 'inferior' them, it is useful to list some of the other words that can be used to denote this split (also see Amato 1997: 27, and Williams and Chrisman 1993: 127, Wilton 1998: 174).

Box 1: Binaries that have played a role in producing identities in South Africa

European	African
White	Black
Western	Non-Western
Modern	Traditional
First World	Third World
Capitalist	Communist
Private property	Communal property
Nation	Tribe
Civil	Customary
Civilised	Uncivilised, barbaric, savage
Advanced	Backwards, primitive
Developed	Undeveloped, under-developed, developing
Present, future	Past
Progress	Stagnant
Inventive	Imitative
Mature, Adult	Immature, Child
Rational	Irrational
Culture	Nature
Educated	Uneducated
Intelligent	Unintelligent
Open	Closed
Scientific	Superstitious
Ordered	Chaotic
Christian	Heathen, Pagan
Moral	Immoral
Law-abiding	Criminal
Clean	Dirty
Restrained, self controlled	Impulsive, undisciplined
Industry	Agriculture
Productive	Lazy
etc.	

Mindful of the fact that these different vocabularies need to be located within their respective periods in which they were current, and they should not be equated to one another without acknowledging their sometimes contradictory relationships (Pratt 1985: 122), it is important for the purposes of this argument to consider the possibility that words which are not overtly racist can be used as "complementary strategies of racist talk" (van Dijk 1993b: 117). Stallybrass and White argue that elements on lists of binaries distinguishing high from low, such as the above, can form "chains of associations … where one 'high' value is associated with another 'high' value produced in a different discursive domain and where this is then associated with others" (Pile 1996: 117). Through "sliding signifiers" of metaphors, one expression can thus be displaced by another (Pile 1996: 180; also see Gilman 1985: 205). For example, according to Fabian, industrialization, urbanization are the "cousins" of civilisation, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization while tribal, traditional, third world, are "euphemisms" for primitive, savage (Fabian 1983: 17-8). All denote "evolutionary time" and signify developmental separation between the West and the rest (also see Amato 1997: 76).

Biological-Darwinist racism, which is arguably the most easily identifiable form of racism, is therefore only one pillar of supremacist ideologies. Although racism is often associated with a sense of biological hierarchy, this scientific racism was particular to the social Darwinism and eugenics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dubow 1995). It is possible for race to be invoked without reference to biological or physical differences (Boonzaier 1988: 64). For Bonnett, white identity

> has never been wholly reliant on scientific racism. The range and repertoire of white supremacy far exceeds the terms of biological racism and, as events have shown, is quite capable of surviving the latter's demise. (Bonnett 2000: 61)

The dominant post-war mood internationally was one in which biological racial beliefs were unpopular. In this context, racial supremacy articulated itself in complex ways, with "a series of contradictions, fudges and contortions" (Dubow 1995: 281). Bauman suggests that culture has moved in to fill the void:

> Rejection of strangers may shy away from expressing itself in racial terms, but it cannot afford admitting being arbitrary lest it should abandon all hope of success; it verbalizes itself therefore in terms of incompatibility of *cultures*, or of the self-defence of a form of life bequeathed by tradition… Arguments that wish to be as firm and solid as those once anchored in the images of soil and blood now have to dress themselves in the rhetoric of human-made cultures and its values. (Bauman 1993: 235)

In example 1, Sarah's attempt to separate culture from race seem to forget the close association between these categories both internationally and in South Africa (Dubow 1995: 20, Marks and Trapido 1987: 8). 'Culture' provided the vehicle for the continuity of much racist ideology as biological ideas of race became discredited (Barkin 1992, Berg and Kerns 1996: 115, Frankenberg 1993: 13, Jackson and Jacobs 1996: 2, Miles 1989: 62). European legitimation of "domination, discrimination, repatriation" is now largely of the "cultural" or "differentialist" kind (Rattansi 1994: 55, referring to Balibar 1991).

One of the advantages of the notion of culture, from a conservative point of view, is that it is a more flexible and acceptable term which is more difficult to challenge because it is less precise and fixed than biological ideas of race. It is possible to insist on difference "without the need to define precisely on what grounds that difference was predicated, or whether such difference was likely to be temporary or permanent" (Dubow 1994: 358).

Thus, while *colour evasiveness* claims to be "antiracist" it can often be used to reactionary effect (Frankenberg 1993: 143). The platform of "colour evasion" even allows whites to respond with outrage to intrinsically racial procedures carried out by the post-apartheid state in an attempt to address economic inequality such as affirmative action (Frankenberg 1993: 148). Colour evasion therefore also involves the evasion of power relations and social inequalities. The denial of the importance of race appears to "embrace cultural and other parameters of diversity" but does so "in ways that leave hierarchies intact" (Frankenberg 1993: 143, also see van Dijk 1993a: 6).

The narrow definition of racism as 'hate crimes' or 'prejudice' blinds people to the implications of social practices on inequality. By thinking of racism only as overt 'anti-black' discourse and actions, "structural and institutional dimensions of racism [are] less easily conceptualised and apparently less noteworthy" (Frankenberg 1993: 139). For many people who would classify themselves as liberal, it is not wrong for people to be excluded *per se*, but it is wrong if it is done in the name of race (Sibley 1995: xiv). For example, it is acceptable to refer to cultural difference, and insist on the right of one *culture* to decide on the admission or rejection of Others, but it is not acceptable to do so on the grounds of race (see example 1 above). Recall, also, example 2 in which a 'liberal' laments the fact that "the government took away influx control and left nothing in its place". It is also acceptable, to most liberals, for people to be excluded on financial grounds. Consider the following:

> **Example 6:** [Y]ou've got to accept [the influx of black neighbours] (pause) and just hope that they're; the thing is that economically I think you will get a better class, you won't just get er one who shouts and you know, when they talk to each other all the time. (Lindsay: Female, 74, English, Born in SA - Vryheid, Widow, Retired, Aug 97.)

> **Example 7:** Basically you're paying quite a sum of money to live in various exclusive areas and you find that those people generally have high powered jobs or jobs where they're working hard and they actually have moved away from certain traditions, because I mean there's; I think in everyone from Christianity to the younger generation, all religious aspects are being broken down (Jane: Female, 28, English, Born in SA - Dbn, Librarian, Single, Sept 97.)

Some analyses might suggest that we are merely witnessing the increasing dominance of class over race, since the latter was only ever a red herring to disguise material accumulation by whites. However, the concern with wealth – while crucial – should not be the singular focus of analyses (Dubow 1995: 248, Parnell and Mabin 1995: 48). Its clear from these extracts that we are not dealing with mutually exclusive choices between race and class (Magubane 1996: 346). What we are observing is not the decreasing importance of race and the increasing importance of class, but a hope that class will function as an urban filter in the same way that race once did. Many liberals

believe that they are not racist on the grounds that they are prepared, in principle, to accept other groups into their ranks on the condition that these groups are able to transcend that which previously made them inferior. In other words a black person who leads a middle class western lifestyle, is ‘well educated’, speaks good English without an (African) accent, holds down a professional job, and has a regular nuclear family is more than welcome to live next door. This person would be held up as an example of the injustices of apartheid which previously blocked the progress of capable people. If, however, a black person who deviated from these requirements – i.e. was conspicuously and unapologetically ‘African’ – were to move into the neighbourhood, eyebrows would be raised. Street traders and squatters are examples of people who provide precisely this kind of disturbing urban presence (Dixon et al 1994, Popke & Ballard forthcoming, Saff 2001).

Colour evasiveness is problematic, then, as it “prevents any discussion of their relationships with people of different skin colour, class or sex from going far beyond a multi-culturalist banality like ‘they are just different, we are not better’” (Wouters 1998: 145). This is overcome by Frankenberg’s third category of *race cognisance* in which respondents acknowledge that, although race is not an *essentialist* biologically or culturally determined attribute of people, it makes a very real difference to people’s lives and to society as a whole (1993: 157). While *essentialist* racism uses the categories of race as objective truths of society, and colour evasion pretends that there is no such thing as race, *race cognisance* is a set of discourses that uses as its starting point the idea that race is both constructed and important. Although rare, *race cognisance* is present amongst white South Africans, as is illustrated by the following interview extract:

> **Barry:** I think most people, when they’re, when they’re sober, say the correct things and that they love the country and that they’re going to stay, and after the fifth beer, they hate kaffirs, I hate to use the term, because that’s exactly what it reduces itself to. Is that machine [the tape recorder] on that the moment?
>
> **Richard:** It is.
>
> **Barry:** Okay, I’ve just got to clear a few things. As a racist; you know as someone who’s grown up in a race society I am aware of race, and it would be foolish to pretend that I’m not aware of race, everything is within parameters that that we have. To short circuit the discussion and not to have to stick on politenesses, it would be easier to talk of “honkies” and “darkies”, you know, then they’re both equally insulted. If I use the term “kaffir” it’s used in context as a white South African {ja} you feel fairly strongly about a darkie, you know, {mm} I’m just going to keep it straight, I’m not going to talk about any other better term, you know, just keeps it clean. (Barry: Male, 43, English, Born in SA - Zululand, Married, Personnel, Sep 96 and Jul 97.)

In this extract, Barry takes the rather unusual step – within the context of other interviews – of admitting the importance of race to the way he thinks. Later in the interview he related how he is always aware of people’s race when, for example, reading letters to the editor in the newspaper. Under apartheid, Barry was a passionate member of the ANC, spent time in townships, and was arrested for wearing “Free Mandela” shirts. It is somewhat ironic, then, that the interview participant we might expect to be least racist was the participant who most readily conceded the impact of race on the way he thinks, even labelling himself “racist”. Barry, therefore, was displaying *race cognisance* as described by Frankenberg. He had gone beyond the liberal pretence that race was not important and was attempting to acknowledge, to himself, that race structures the way he thinks. The danger of turning all references to

race into a taboo, of judging all who attempt to grapple with race is that white people will be unable to move from the confusion of *colour evasion* to a more healthy acknowledgement of the continued relevance of race. Anderson advises that we "might more freely move across our various states of being, if lines of conversation with our own dark sides are opened out, rather than shut down and secreted away" (2000: 317). In section 4, I will explore the exact conditions in post apartheid South Africa that prevent the progression to *race cognisance*, while section 3 examines the heritage of colour evasion in SA.

3. A genealogy of *colour evasiveness* in South Africa

Many who use the supposedly tolerant language of *colour evasiveness*, and allow in principle for the possibility of neighbours of other races, believe somewhat self righteously that they are occupying a new moral position, fundamentally different from the apartheid past. However, apartheid-style segregationism was not the only application of racial frameworks in the past. When assessing racism in South Africa's history, it is necessary to distinguish between, on one hand, the racist mindset that 'we' are better than 'the other' (Box 1, above) and, on the other hand, the political projects that flowed from this mindset (Figure 1, below). Apartheid – which is often assumed to represent South Africa's racist past – was only one of a number of attempts to respond to the 'problem of social difference.' Within the context of an identity framework which places whites as superior and blacks as inferior, there have been two mainstream ideological standpoints held by white hegemonic groups on whether black people should attempt to overcome what whites saw as their inferiority. The first (represented by the right hand genealogy in Figure 1) maintained that it is better for blacks not to attempt to become like whites, and racial difference was seen as absolute and fixed. The second view (left hand genealogy in Figure 1) argued that black people were capable of overcoming their inferiority through civilisation, modernisation, education, conversion and by abandoning their "traditional" ways.

Dutch colonialism of the 1600s and 1700s, and the Boer states of the 1800s, were characterised primarily by the first approach which emphasised the irredeemable heathenness of indigenous and enslaved groups (period 1, Figure 1). British colonialism did not contain the same level of consensus about the degree to which black people should be helped along the path of civilisation. This position was taken up by missionaries and some liberal politicians who felt that although blacks were inferior, they could improve, develop and progress towards the high level of civilisation whites had attained. Through assimilatonist policies, it was hoped that the "potential threats to security" seen to be posed by indigenous tribes would be brought under control (Welsh 1972: 36). This assimilationist tradition (represented by the left hand genealogy) is, I believe, the forerunner of present day colour evasiveness. The introduction of attempts to 'civilise' black people led to opposing tensions, such as the "simultaneous appearance of the sentiment to abolish slavery and the emergence of racialist ideology in the form of social Darwinism" (Magubane 1996: 154). The liberal tendencies of British colonialism were far from secure, and by the time of the 1910 Union, liberal assimilationism had been comprehensively defeated by conservative segregationism (period 2, Figure 1). There was a growing prevalence of writings, including scientific writings which "undermined any belief in social progress and democracy" and denoted a "drastic swing toward harsher and reactionary racial attitudes" (Magubane 1996: 207). Prevailing sentiment, championed by the likes of Cecil Rhodes, had become impatient

with "'sentimental' liberalism and humanitariansm" (Porter 1968, cited in Magubane 1996: 122, also see Parry 1983).

> As du Bois himself recognised, at the turn of the twentieth century, assimilation was the last thing on the minds of most whites who had convinced themselves of their own natural superiority. In other parts of the colonised world as well as South Africa, attempts to bring the benefits of civilisation to the barbarians gave way to efforts to retain "the outward structure of native life intact". (Magubane 1996: 8 quoting du Bois)

As well as the materialist basis for segregation linked to the need for mining labour (Magubane 1996: 265), there were also perceptions that the emergence of an ambivalent detribalised, urbanised black population was a problem from a social point of view. The ambivalence of this group represented a disruption of the hierarchy that whites had established with themselves at the civilised, modern pinnacle and others beneath. Black intrusion into "white territory" – both metaphorically in terms of the black middle class' adoption of Anglicised mannerism, speech, dress, and literally in terms of the intrusion into cities – was alarming precisely because boundaries were no longer firm and it was no longer possible for everyone to unambiguously "know their place", either within the landscape or within the hierarchy. (Dubow 1995: 166, Marks and Trapido 1987: 9, Schmidt 1996: 14, Welsh 1976, also see Bhabha 1986: 198 on mimicry). The response to this ambivalence was a drive to restore clear boundaries, to allocate all people to a racial type and each type to a place. As Wilton explains in psycho-analytic terms,

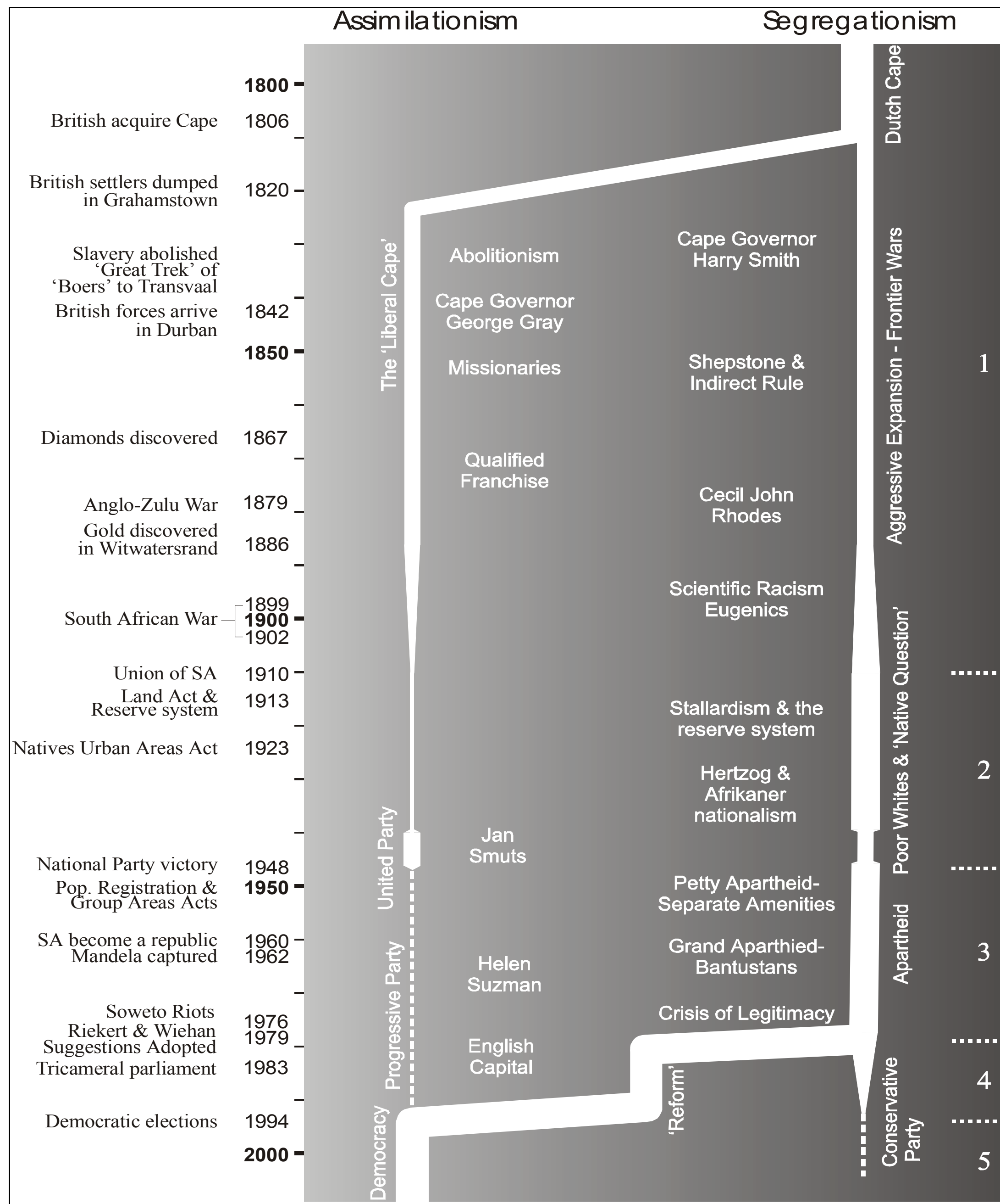
> Moments when a socio-spatial order is challenged may bring with them a blurring of boundaries. When this happens, dividing lines between self and other, inside and outside become vulnerable, provoking anxiety and with it, a violent attempt at expulsion-abjection. (Wilton 1998: 179)

Twentieth century administration, then, saw the creation of two levels of segregation. The first was the exclusion of surplus black people from cities and attempts to concentrate these groups in reserves and, later, homelands. Whites defined themselves as "natives" of South Africa, blacks as foreigners with citizenships in homelands, and Indians as aliens to continue in South Africa on white people's terms. Social hierarchy was translated to a geographical imagination whereby cities were associated with civilisation and with white people, while rural areas were associated with an absence of civilisation, and were the natural domain of black people (Rich 1980: 71). The second level of segregation was of unavoidable (albeit temporary) black, Indian and coloured groups within cities through the Group Areas Act and its antecedents.

Until the late 1970s, the state maintained that its primary objective was racial segregation and the maintenance of hard boundaries. However, in its final decades, the white hegemony's crisis of legitimacy forced it to undertake an explicit search for alternative schemes of legitimation. As can be seen in period four (which we could call the de-racialisation of apartheid), dominant discourse shifted to a more centrist position thus prompting the formation of the Conservative Party to continue the tradition of orthodox Verwoerdian segregationism in opposition politics. The government began to take on elements of assimilationism by arguing that previously excluded categories of people could join whites as 'First World' urban insiders. Whereas the hierarchy of races had been unassailable in the past, the 1980s saw a growing sense of the possibility of social and economic mobility. Turning to the free market, a plethora of developmental

and economic distinctions between the first world, developed, educated sections of the population and third world, undeveloped, uneducated sections emerged (Norval 1990: 145, Schutte 1994: 163 and Sharp 1988c). Forced to abandon racial discourse, whites had to concede that non-white "progress" out of their backwards condition was possible, and that they no longer held a racial monopoly over "being civilised" (Marks and Trapido 1987: 57 and Posel 1987: 423-4). While the NP's reforms did not amount to an abandonment of the cornerstone acts of apartheid until their repeal in 1991, and indeed a refusal to abandon the principle of separate development until 1990, there had been a definite fragmentation of old ideologies by the 1980s (Sharp 1988: 9).

Figure 1: White hegemonic approaches to race 1800-1994



In Frankenberg's terms, discourse switched from *essentialist racism* to *colour evasiveness* where the denial of the importance of race became an important feature of discourse. Liberalism, then, does not amount to an abandonment of the distinction between an uncivilised mass and a civilised elite. As Schutte explains

> ...moderates found blacks to be socially acceptable as long as they adhered to civilized standards in their behaviour and lifestyle. The less civilized, according to this view, would automatically and spontaneously distance themselves. This might be achieved through class differentiation. The scheme of reasoning in this case was a social Darwinist kind rather than a racist one. Assimilation of blacks would occur at the top end of society, and at the bottom there would be poverty and ethnic differentiation. (Schutte 1995: 334)

Whereas in the past the distinction between acceptability (civilised) and unacceptability (uncivilised) was locked into racial distinctions, new distinctions between these categories were generated through a "proliferation of floating signifiers" (Norval 1990; 136). The elements in the list summarised in Box 1 were cut loose from a strict racial framework and now may or may not relate to race at all. The net effect of this was that the government managed to de-racialise privilege and the systems that create it, thus normalising it and deflating criticism of it (Posel 1987: 419, Schutte 1995: 165).

The so called period of reform in the 1970s and 1980s, then, did not confront old racial segregationist ideologies, it simply stopped using discourses easily identifiable as racist. Therefore it failed "to reshape or reconstitute the identity of those individuals who have internalised Verwoerdian values and meaning, and it has little to offer the constitution of subjectivity among its new black audiences" (Posel 1987: 439). The point of Figure 1 is to say that white people were not deposited on the doorstep of democracy with one way of thinking about race. The white population in South Africa was well on its way to a position of *colour evasiveness* by the time transition came in the first part of the 1990s. They had been given the mental tools with which to think about society as hierarchical but without having to use racial terms. These new mental tools appeared different to the harshness of apartheid since they professed tolerance and acceptance. Yet, although these tools appeared to be new, they were based on the same set of binaries that inspired segregationism.

The discussion, thus far, has established that there are indeed continuities between the ostensibly 'new language of tolerance' of post apartheid South Africa, and past frameworks of intolerance despite claims to the contrary. The remaining task of the discussion is to consider the reasons that underpin the vociferous denial of the importance of race. This shall be done through an examination of the parameters set by public debates on the nature of racism over the last decade.

4. The Contemporary Context: An elephant in the newsroom

It is not possible to undertake a full assessment of the debate on racism in post apartheid South Africa, especially with regard to the capacity of 'non white' people to be racist (notable debates here are on xenophobia and the Mbongeni Ngemi song about Indians of 2002). However, it is possible to make a few remarks the way in which this debate promotes *colour evasiveness* and discourages *race cognisance*. The argument I will make is that racism is used as a highly judgemental label to morally condemn a 'racist other'. The definition of racism is elastic and can be stretched or contracted to include

others and exclude oneself from the category. The liberal political opposition, largely representing whites, attempts to constrain the definition of racism to core *essentialist racism* – a label which they sometimes even apply to the ANC. The ANC government on the other hand attempts to open out the definition to include economic exclusion and what it terms 'subliminal' and 'subtle' racism. In the process, racism becomes a judgement of others rather than an assessment of oneself.

The first category of 'racism' discussed in the media does not provoke much dispute (represented in Figure 2 as band 1). These are broadly the elements of *essentialist* racism that unambiguously and overtly use race as the basis of abuse or discrimination. Under the category of hate crimes, newspaper reports have carried stories of the physical abuse of black people by whites, such as the much publicised dragging of a black electricity worker behind a vehicle[1] and reports of "white men randomly [opening] fire on passing blacks" while "shouting racial slurs".[2] Other racial abuse that was not physically violent was also covered. President Mbeki at the opening of parliament in 2000 referred to an email sent by a white manager referring to the way in which 'kaffirs' had stuffed up the country.

Alongside this abuse, there has been open resistance to racial integration. Several former white schools hit the headlines for violent confrontations as white parents and pupils resisted racial integration. In Vryberg, a small farming town in the North West province, black students protested at the lack of English medium teaching and having been called "kaffirs" and "trash" by teachers. At another school, a sixteen year old white school pupil was quoted as saying that the

> Rainbow nation is [shit]. We're not interested with what happens in places like Johannesburg. We were raised on farms where black people work for us, not with us. Look how badly they live! We don't want to mix with them. They have their place and we have ours.[3]

There is little dispute in the public discourse that these instances constitute racism largely consistent with orthdox Verwoerdian Apartheid, and which can and should be morally confronted. However, there is dispute with regard to economic inequality (represented in Figure 2 as band 2). In particular, the government has been attempting to overcome racial bias in the appointment of employees, and argues in favour of affirmative action. Many whites virulently oppose the policy of employment equity saying that the principle of hiring should be the 'best person for the job', and people should be employed according to existing and not potential merit. Affirmative action is described as reviving the issue of racism. In a 1998 policy document, the Democratic Party argued that like any racially based policy of redistribution, affirmative action was wrong. They describe it as "apartheid in reverse", "reverse racism" and "a re-racialisation" of society (Democratic Party 1998). Former president F.W. De Klerk complained, in 1996, that the "African National Congress sounds more and more like an apartheid party because they talk of race all the time".[4] Opponents of affirmative action,

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[1] "Eight Hours of Hell on a Parys Farm" *Mail and Guardian*. 17 July 1998

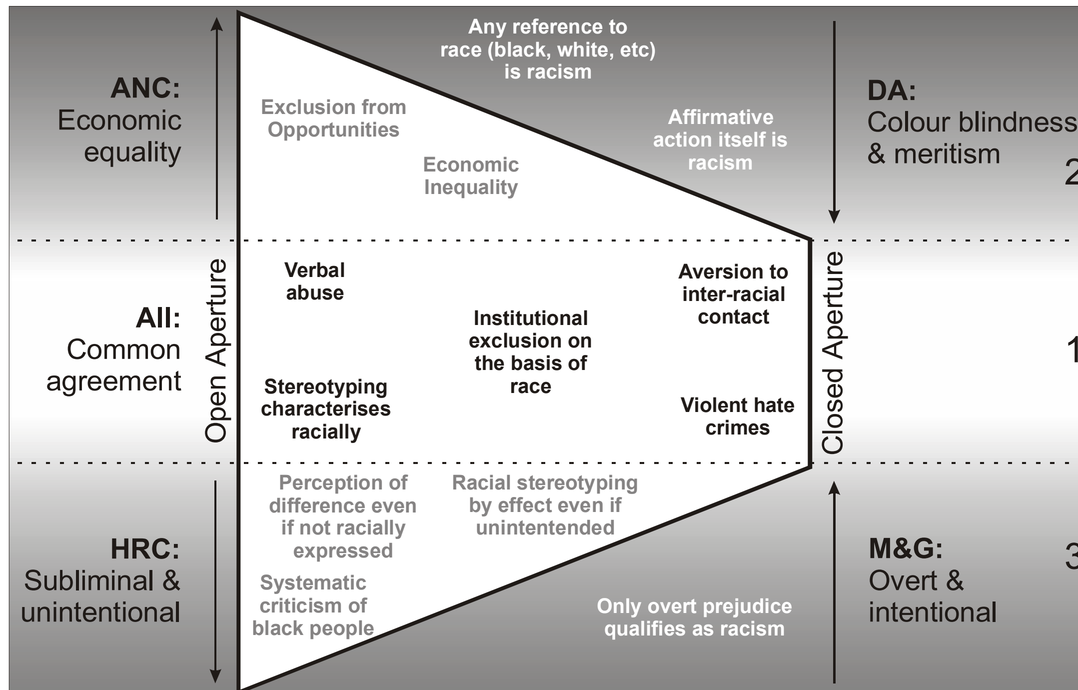
[2] "Spate of Racial Attacks in the North" *Mail and Guardian*. 13 August 1998 (Ndzhukula, Leonard)

[3] "Another Dark Place of Learning" *Mail and Guardian*. 31 March 1998 (Johnson, Angella). Also see Amupadhi, Hoshua " Police to Monitor Racism in School" *Mail and Guardian*. 8 August 1996, p. 8; Barron, Chris "Tough Going at Race School" *Sunday Times*. 11 August 1996, p. 3

[4] "Liberal Bigotry: Old and New" *Mail and Guardian.* 13 February 1998 (Roberts, Ronald)

then, use a narrow definition of racism taken to mean simple reference to race, rather than the government's definition of racism as a broader set of social inequalities.

Figure 2: Dimensions of the debate over racism



Public dispute is also taking place over whether racism should include non-explicit or even unintended racism (band 3 in Figure 2). As indicated in the introduction to this paper, the Human Rights Commission (HRC), a state institution established in 1995 to support "constitutional democracy" (SAHRC 2000: 5), conducted investigations into racism in the media between 1998 and 2000. One of the newspapers under investigation was the *Mail and Guardian*, a weekly newspaper owned by the *Guardian* in the UK. The accusations made against the *Mail and Guardian* revolved around a number of corruption exposés carried by the paper which critics argued only dealt with black people.[5] The ruling African National Congress also made a submission to the HRC regarding a 1998 article in particular that was highly critical of Thabo Mbeki, then deputy president. They argued that this article was an example of racism, a position they maintained even though it was revealed that a black female journalist had been the author. As the case developed, the chair of the Human Rights Commission Barney Pityana, outlined a wider set of assertions that the "white media" practiced "subliminal racism" which had the effect of creating "a negative image of Africans"[6] whether this was intended or not. Subliminal racism was described elsewhere as distinct from "naked racism",[7] the latter being crude and overt, while the former was covert and subtle (SAHRC 2000: 60). The notion of "subliminal racism" was intended to allow for the possibility that a racist idea could "be held and acted on without conscious intention – even in the presence of anti-racist conscious beliefs" (SAHRC 2000: 59). Anti-racist

[5] "Queen of the Race Card" *Mail and Guardian*. 10 March 2000 (Kindra, Jaspreet)
[6] "Pityana Prejudged the Media" *Mail and Guardian*. 25 February2000 (Barrell, Howard)
[7] Mahlangu, Ndaweni, Premier of Mpumalanga Province, 11 February 2001 "Address At The Opening Of The Mpumalanga Legislature" www.gov.za

pretences indicate that the mind is simply defending itself from thoughts and feelings it would rather not have. The commission argued that because "of the prevailing power relations, the reality in South Africa is that racism is manifested as white racism. That is a fact" (SAHRC 2000: 62). While the HRC position was in many ways a sophisticated one – supported by media studies experts and, in effect, an attempt to highlight *colour evasiveness* in society – it was in some instances conflated with overt and intentional *essentialist* racism. Academics involved in the writing of analysis scrambled to clarify that the examples they identified did not "constitute human rights violations or require censorship". [8]

Figure 3: Jonathan Shapiro. *Mail and Guardian.* 25 August 2000

In defence of its South African newspaper, the *Guardian* complained that "there is something McCarthyite in hauling journalists before a panel asking them, in effect, 'Are you now or have you ever been a racist'?"[9] The commission was criticised for engaging in a "witch hunt", and it was argued that the "race card" is used against any critic when criticism happens to cross racial lines simply to de-legitimate their criticism.[10] The newspaper's supporters suggested that rather than confuse the issue with types of racism that were intangible, it would be better to combat visible forms of racism (Figure 3).[11] Some complained that this incident had undone the achievement of the democratic transition as it had placed "race" back on the national agenda.

> Having kicked out the National Party because of its racist policies we're heading back in exactly the same direction. Instead of regarding other South Africans as just people, we're busy tying racial tags round our necks again, just like the Nats did with the last three numbers on our ID books and in the dompas, and checking people for crinkly hair. So here we go, blinded by tears, self-pity or often totally

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[8] "Sheena Duncan Quits over Racism Probe" *Mail and Guardian.* 25 February 2000
[9] Editorial *Guardian*. 15 February 2000
[10] "Defy Barny's Thought Police" *Mail and Guardian*. 18 February 2000 (Kadalie, Rhoda)
[11] "Crossfire: Exactly What is this 'Racism?'" *Mail and Guardian.* 17 March 2000 (Harvey, Ebrahim)

> pointless and inapplicable remorse, staggering into the future backwards, the euphoria of a new beginning evaporating like a popped balloon. Bugger the rainbow. What a way to build a nation.[12]

Furthermore, some commentators described the HRC's notion of "subliminal racism" as nonsensical on the grounds that the very suffix "ism" implies that a person needs to make "a conscious commitment to a point of view".[13] The frequent accusation of racism was seen to result in the meaninglessness of the word

> [Racist] is now invariably an epithet, used with such irresponsible abandon by politicians to describe the real or imagined vices of their opponents, that it is in danger of losing its condemnatory power. If this continues, soon calling somebody a racist will be a charge roughly equivalent to suggesting that he is overfond of cream cakes. [14]

What I am trying to highlight with Figure 2 is the elastic nature of the racist label. On one hand, the ANC and HRC take an expanded definition to include inequality and subliminal and unintentional stereotyping. On the other, the DA and the *Mail and Guardian* dispute the breadth of this enlarged definition and prefer to consider racism to mean easily identifiable *essentialist* racism. The key aspect in these national debates is one's position with regard to the accuser and accused. In the enlarged definition the government is able to identify many instances of racism in the economy and media. In the narrow definition, groups such as Liberals and the *Mail and Guardian* manage to adjust the definition in order to exclude themselves and by some contorted logic, the ANC finds itself in the unlikely company of the apartheid government for its attempts to implement affirmative action. The net effect is that everyone is attempting to secure the moral high ground and no one's definition of racism includes themselves in the category.

National debates of this kind, therefore, are not conducive to what should surely be the objective which is to instil some level of *race cognisance*. In an environment where race is taboo, or it is a means with which to discredit an opponent, there is every incentive to shift away from *essentialism*. Yet in this climate, where race is akin to a crime, something of which one is either guilty or innocent, people will try to project a positive sense of self. They do not want to admit to other people or even themselves that sometimes the way they think is based on racial frameworks. They try to do the right thing by avoiding racial terms, but fail to realise that the way they think may not have shifted as far as they thought.

Conclusion

The widespread rejection of the Group Areas Act amongst whites in the new South Africa does not mean that whites have suddenly become accepting of all people, and it is important to examine what has filled the vacuum left by the backgrounding of racial discourses. Whereas 'the wrong types of people' were previously defined in explicitly racial terms (black, coloured and Indian), they are now defined according to other criteria. For example, those who wish to continue exclusion of the 'wrong type of

[12] "We Won – Don't Lose it Now" *Mail and Guardian* 20 October 2000 (Tyler, Humphrey)
[13] "The Truth about Liberals and Racists" *Mail and Guardian*. 4 December 1998 (Holiday, Anthony)
[14] Holiday, Anthony "The Truth about Liberals and Racists" *Mail and Guardian*. 4 December 1998

people' without resorting to the discourse of race have found alternatives to race, such as the concept of 'culture', 'standards', behaviour' and 'ethics'. Such words, while benign in appearance, have the power of capturing the right for the speaker to define acceptability (and unacceptability) and therefore can be deployed to call for the exclusion of people on the speaker's terms. Furthermore, there is very little material difference between the apparently innocuous insistence that newcomers must fit into the local culture, and the key justification of apartheid that different cultures were incompatible. When people insist on the cultural compatibility of newcomers, thereby calling for the exclusion of those they consider incompatible, essence of apartheid can be expressed in the *new* South Africa without using now-discredited racial discourses.

Frankenberg's category of *colour evasiveness* identifies an awkward discursive standpoint of wanting to move beyond racism but not being willing to acknowledge the structural effects of racism on society. By fixating on politically correct language, people convince themselves that they fall outside of the category of "racist". They are not insincere when they say that race is not important – they genuinely want to move beyond the crassness of overt race *essentialism* and would do anything to avoid being associated with racists. They think they achieve this when they find other words to express their sense of social difference such as culture, standards, morals and so on.

However, attempts to prove racism are largely unhelpful. The question should not be 'is that person/institution racist?' but rather 'in why are my thoughts influenced by racial frameworks?' While the first formulation is accusatory the second is introspective. Herein lies the importance of avoiding the judgement of "racism". As we saw demonstrated by the HRC's summons of the *Mail and Guardian* to testify at racism in the media hearings, accusations of racism tend to be met with denial and a failure to acknowledge and confront the importance of race. People who think of themselves as ideologically progressive, such as the editors of the *Mail and Guardian*, do not want to be bundled with apartheid through suggestions that race has an influence on their actions. The HRC's attempt to overcome this by identifying the category of "subtle" and "subliminal" racism apparently failed to demonstrate to the media that race might influence journalistic and editorial decisions. As long as *race cognisance* remains taboo – a crime of which one is guilty or innocent – people will be pushed towards a *colour evasive* discourse in which they fail to acknowledge to themselves and others that race informs the way they think. A shift in mindset towards *race cognisance* would be essential in moving from a position where 'race doesn't matter' to a position where race is seen to be important but a product of oppressive historical structures.

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