

Please note this is a work in progress, comments welcome!

Reconstruction on old foundations: classification and fixation in contemporary South Africa

Gerhard Maré

Indeed: abstraction is one of the modern mind's principal powers. When applied to humans, that power means effacing the face: whatever marks remain of the face that serve as badges of membership, the signs of belonging to a category, and the fate meted out to the owner of the face is nothing more yet nothing less either than the treatment reserved for the *category* of which the owner of the face is but a *specimen*. The overall effect of abstraction is that rules routinely followed in personal interaction, ethical rules most prominent among them, do not interfere where the handling of a category is concerned, including every entity classified into that category just on account of having been so classified (Zygmunt Bauman 2000:227, emphasis original).

Introduction

This year, 2007, is the tercentenary of the birth of Linnaeus (the Swede Carl von Linné). As noted in the tercentenary website's biographical sketch, 'The Linnaean era is characterised by an ambition to catalogue, organise and give names to the whole natural world. Linnaeus attracted many disciples, and he has left a lasting impression in many locations' (<http://www.linnaeus2007.se>). In addition, the site states: 'The tercentenary is centred on the concepts of **Creativity - Curiosity - Science**. These principles form the basis for all events and they have set their stamp on the preparations'.

These are important aims within any scientific project, whether social or natural, but, as Bauman has warned in what I quoted above, classification also has the tendency to stifle creativity, to militate against curiosity, and to give rise to inhuman science and politics. The 'ambition to catalogue, organise and give names' of the Linnaean era has had disastrous consequences for humanity when it has been extended to human beings, the

point argued so eloquently by Zygmunt Bauman in his discussion of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides. It is present in everyday social stereotyping, as well as in the formal processes of institutional classification.

Confronted by the daily demands for and effects of an on-going contemporary example of this organising principle, namely 'race' classification in contemporary South Africa, in this paper I will draw attention to a number of critical reflections on classification and the consequences of such practices; and, second, argue that the common sense of race thinking in post-1994 South Africa is not only severely compromising the aims set in the Constitution for progress towards a 'non-racial' society beyond the gross effects of the National Party's Population Registration Act, a cornerstone of the apartheid policy, but extending into research practice as well, restricting and constricting the kind of research in which many South African social scientists engage.

In a variety of ways this paper is aimed at 'awareness-raising' on the unreflective and banal continuation of 'race' classification in contemporary South Africa, with little debate of the issue and even less concern for the negative and, potentially, disastrous consequences. While the classification of people into 'races' is what concerns me most, I do not want to restrict myself to that here, but wander a bit wider, refer to the necessary pervasiveness of the application of abstract thinking, of classification, and move at times beyond the social sciences to stimulate general reflection on the practices of classification.¹ But always to return to my central concern, namely the classification of people into 'races', as it happened before and during apartheid, and as it continues on a daily basis all over South Africa and in many other parts of the world.

I am not directly concerned with the reasons advanced for, or underlying, 'race' classification in South Africa, but with the process of classification itself and the effect on an already divided social formation. These reasons rely overwhelmingly, when they

¹ Each reader will find their own 'gaps' in what appears here, and that is desirable. I have already benefited from the suggestion of one such gap – Heide Hackmann reminded me of the appropriateness of the classification of Nguni cattle colour and patterns (see below) to my purpose in this essay. Another reference is to classification in museums and the purposes of such classificatory institutions (see, for example, Dubow 2006:167-8); and yet another to the self-classification those who advertise under 'Entertainment' in the classified section of the daily newspapers: 'a young and fair gorgeous Asian', 'young and full of fun Asian', 'Afrikaans babe', 'sexy Chinese models just landed', 'Japanese stunner', 'black and white ladies', 'light-skinned Swaziland model', etc (*The Mercury* October 12, 2007).

are overtly advanced for scrutiny, with the need for redress, whether material (affirmative action, and black economic empowerment, especially), on political realisation of such aims as the ‘national democratic revolution’ or an ‘African renaissance’ (towards populist racialised mobilisation) or, less frequently, for psychological liberation and personal or group realisation. ‘Race’ then features as the means to attend to such aims and to measure success or failure in the various endeavours towards a variety of goals.

To engage effectively with racialisation (the classification, deliberately or as common sense, of people, of motivations, of explanations, in ‘race’ terms and as attributes of ‘races’) it demands, then, an ‘emancipatory social science’, as Erik Olin Wright calls it. Such an approach needs ‘to elaborate a systematic diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists’, but also ‘to envision viable alternatives’, and all the time ‘to understand the obstacles, possibilities and dilemmas of transformation’ (2006:94).² Wright’s argument is advanced in relation to class and a socialist project, but it can also relate to ‘race’ and its inevitable articulation with issues of power. The banal obviousness of ‘race’ is one of the major ‘obstacles’ to societal transformation, not only politically and materially, but also in social science research and analysis. However, the responses to this situation of a racialised society should be different from these different positions. Politicians, after all, operate within a world that rewards employment of the shallowest of mobilising techniques (as long as they are effective towards an immediate goal), while social scientists, on the contrary and hopefully, are called upon to step outside of that world and to engage in that ‘systematic *diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists*’ (emphasis added to Wright’s words this time); to ‘defamiliarise the familiar’, as Bauman would have it (1997), and not just to describe and accept it as it presents itself.

Linnaeus, in his classificatory approach to the natural world, divided humanity as well – into four ‘races’ (although this term is said to have originated later), based on appearance and ‘temperament’. The ‘races’ were ‘Europeans, who were “fair ... gentle, acute, inventive ... governed by laws”. Americans, who were “copper-coloured ... obstinate, content –free ... regulated by customs”; Asiatics, who were “sooty ... severe, haughty,

² Wright’s call reminds of Rick Turner’s argument for ‘utopian thinking’, as a way of shaking loose from the existing, to best allow critical reflection on the present, common sense, but with the goal of overcoming it (Turner 1980)

covetous ... governed by opinions; and Africans, who were “black ... crafty, indolent, negligent ... governed by caprice” (Witzig 1996:675). A google search (July 2007) using the terms ‘Linnaeus scientific racism’ produced more than 22,000 references (see also Dubow 1995:22, 25-6, for reference to the South African context). But let me turn to wider issues before returning to the specifics of ‘race’ classification in contemporary South Africa.

Classification: mixed blessing

I referred to Bauman’s description (drawing on Toscano 1998), of the consequence of abstraction: as ‘effacing the face’, as turning the individual into a ‘specimen’ of a ‘category’. It is here that the most horrendous consequences of classification lie, in the form of ‘demonisation’ (see, for example, Young 1999: ch 4 ‘Essentializing the other: demonization and the creation of monstrosity’): slavery (classification through the story of the ‘children of Ham’, for example (Davis 2006)), racism (‘scientific racism’, for example), genocide (see Bauman 2000, Mamdani 2001), and apartheid (notions of the ‘civil religion’ of *volkere* ‘constituted reality’, as Moodie (1980:xiii, emphasis original) described it). I will return to this ‘outcome’, where the process of ‘effacement’ leaves a section of humanity beyond any sympathy, as not worthy of the same life as ‘us’, or not even worthy of life itself.

Before that, however, I wish to look at examples of classification where it does not immediately concern social life, or is utilised in a way intended to be benevolent, in order to remind us of other ways in which this process is engaged. The first two cases, are chosen at random, reflecting coincidental interests of mine. Mention will also be made of less extreme examples of the employment of human categorisation, to indicate the pervasiveness of ‘race’ and other forms of classification in social life. After all, as Bowker and Star (2002) title their introductory chapter, ‘To classify is human’. They write that ‘[o]ur lives are hinged round with systems of classification, limned by standard formats, prescriptions, and objects’ (2002:1). There is no escaping (nor would we wish to escape), whether it be in the form of nuts and bolts, shipping containers, the internet,

blood pressure, distinct languages versus dialects, academic performance assessment, mammals, light emission, or whatever.

The first example I will draw from South Africa, illustrating a benevolent example of the ordering imagination at work. Novelist Marguerite Poland has produced a most wonderful book on the classification of Nguni cattle within rural Zulu life (Poland et al 2005). Drawing on her PhD thesis, working with anthropologist David Hammond-Tooke and illustrator Leigh Voigt, a magnificently illustrated volume of poetry, commentary, history and illustrations presents the reader and viewer with ‘a celebration of the Nguni cattle of the Zulu people’. Let me leave the words to the authors:

This is a book about human creativity – not the creativity of the plastic arts, or of music, but rather that of the poet, the wordsmith. ... The Zulu, like other South African Bantu-speakers, have chosen to define and classify their cattle through an extensive terminology that often, in striking metaphor, captures their individuality in images both apt and memorable. (2003:12)

Against this the Afrikaans song ‘Aanstap Rooies’ is simply bland! The book presents an historical and cultural contextualisation of the importance, the centrality of cattle within Zulu society, within which the classificatory system operates.

I refer to the practice presented in this book because it seems to reflect classification in its most lyrical form, with material and cultural function and poetic creativity mixed, with flexibility and fluidity at the same time as consensus on meaning and purpose. As a ‘Note to the Reader’ indicates:

Right from the start a note of caution is necessary. The classification of cattle in terms of physical characteristics should not be confused with the superficially similar scientific classification of, say, birds or plants.

Colour patterns are of a very different order. They are imaginative constructs and, as such, are infinitely varied. They are used, essentially, for individual identification of valuable property and, in this regard, their owners have found their aesthetic imagination, both visual and poetic, strongly engaged. ... Yet, there is clearly a broad, widely accepted consensus of basic terms that has come through, unchanged, from the past.

Not all forms of classification admit to such adaptation and change, such involvement of those who employ the categories. But despite stereotypical perceptions of scientific ‘facts’, the picture in the natural sciences actually reflects a far-from-fixed picture of the

world. To illustrate this I turn to another South African example of the classificatory process, this time of birds (referred to by Poland et al as ‘superficially similar’).

In their ‘Introduction’ to the latest *Roberts* [previously *Roberts*] *Birds of Southern Africa*, and here I refer to the VIIth edition, the editors (Hockey, Dean and Ryan) have a sub-section that refers to the ‘evolution and classification of Birds’ to which I wish briefly to refer. They have had to justify ‘radical changes’ in this weighty volume, no longer a field guide, from previous issues of this classic introduction to southern African birds, books that have appeared on many shelves, and initiated thousands of amateurs into this field (where earlier editions of *Roberts* have sold many copies since the first edition in 1940, to meet the increasing participation in bird watching):

Birds can be classified in many ways – by size, shape, colour or even palatability – but biologists strive to classify organisms in a hierarchy that reflects their evolutionary relationships. Such a natural classification has to be inferred from the pattern of shared derived characters, ...

Initial attempts to infer the relationships among birds were based largely on their shape and structure, but it soon became apparent that *characters subject to selection for immediate survival, such as bill, wing and leg shape, carry little in the way of deep evolutionary signal*. Focus then shifted to more conserved characters, such as bones, muscles and other internal structures. These formed the basis for the classification of birds into orders and families, whereas external appearance and structure were used to group similar species into genera.

Inferring relationships among bird genera and families was hotly debated during the early 1900s, but a fairly stable order was established *reflecting a consensus based on the available evidence*. However, the last few decades have seen a *revolution in avian classification thanks to the development of techniques that detect and analyse differences among organisms in the most fundamental building blocks of life – their genes...*

For the most part, the *new genetic evidence* has supported the relationships among birds inferred using morphology, but there have been some major revisions, hence the need to change the sequence in which species are listed in *Roberts*. This work is ongoing, and doubtless we shall see further changes in the next few years ... (2005:12, emphases added).

Human beings are not birds. We fly, but only at great cost to the environment, to take just one example. However, similar debates to those that concern the compilers of the new *Roberts*, of classification of human beings, have engaged scientists and social scientists

over centuries, a history which will not be explored here (see, for example, Gould 1981, Malik 1996, and the novel by Basu 2006). Rather, I will introduce a couple of areas in which discussion of the reasoning for and some of the consequences of the continuing 'race' classification of humans has taken place, before turning to contemporary South Africa.

One such specific case is the use of 'race' categories in the field of medicine – 'the medicalization of race', as Witzig refers to it (1996:675). 'Race' categories are frequently employed when the body plays a role – fairly obvious a point as 'race' is of the body; recognised by and located on and in the body in various ways – whether it is the outward appearance, attribution of distinct blood types, workings and abilities and size and shape of the brain, the shape of the skull, or the athletic abilities that the body carries (for the last-mentioned see, for example, Burfoot 1992). Witzig starts his article with a reference to Linnaeus as the originator of the 'use of race to classify large divisions of *Homo sapiens*' – but as perceiving humans as belonging to single species (1996:675, also see above). He first discusses the many differently defined 'race' terms employed in medical literature, for teaching and reference (and their different referents – such as skin colour, language, and geography, while some are used as 'implying an ideal race form' such as "Caucasian", and even the survival of the terms used by the 'original taxonomists'). Next he notes that '[u]nfortunately, the continued appearance of race taxons in the medical literature has legitimized them as acceptable descriptive labels for patients and has thus made them seem integral to the proper diagnosis and treatment of disease' (1996:676). Witzig points to the different status attributed to 'race' and/or ethnicity in medical textbooks, with little consistency (surprising for a field perceived as 'scientific' in its approaches), and to the consequences of crude diagnoses based on such inaccurate or misused categorisations as 'race' and ethnicity (see also Root 2001). A very large and rapidly growing critical literature exists on this topic, but in parallel the use of 'race' classification as a diagnostic tool also continues.

But to return to the actual process of classification in the field of health, I refer to a recent contribution. In *International Sociology* Peter Aspinall takes a somewhat different approach, from that argued for by Witzig, and certainly not critical of the use of 'race' and ethnic categories in medical research. He does use the very inconsistencies

highlighted by Witzig as his starting point. His concern is with improving (or establishing) ‘instruments for comparative research with *ethnicity* as an independent variable’ (2007:43, emphasis added), taking into account, amongst others, ‘the range of meanings attributed to the terms ethnicity and race’ (2007:42), rather than voicing similar criticisms on the use of the classifications. This concern arises, for him, because researchers are employing terms with very different meanings in their national settings for ‘cross-national’ comparisons – Aspinall uses the definitions given to the terms ‘Asian’ and ‘White’ in Britain, the USA and Canada to illustrate the confusion (see the summary in Table I, 2007:48). Despite (or maybe because of) acknowledging that ‘[i]nternational agencies like the United Nations and EUROSTAT report that they have no internationally recognized standards or classifications for ethnicity or related concepts and that no such criteria can be recommended’ (2007:64), Aspinall suggests that ‘it is an opportune time to support and promote these harmonization objectives’ [within the EU] (2007:65). It is not clear why this task is recommended, in the light of the confusion illustrated by Aspinall’s own research (also see Bhopal and Donaldson 1998, Pfeffer 1998).

A much more challenging and engaging argument is that offered by Ian Hacking. In an article in *Daedalus* (Winter 2005) he seriously confronts the question ‘why race still matters’ in so much of the world and in so many contexts, through examining five possible answers. He draws an important aspect of his arguments from John Stuart Mill and his approach to classification (including the notion of ‘real Kinds’)³, adding a necessary sensible complexity to the debate on the relevance of ‘race’ classification to the practice of medicine, where he turns to ‘statistical differences’ (an approach that features strongly, now that scientific racism is difficult to argue publicly), and asks for ‘some new concepts’. Michael Root takes the same starting point as Hacking, arguing that ‘... race can enter into many statistically robust biomedical generalizations even though there are no biological races’ (1998:S629). He adds:

³ Hacking writes: ‘races would be real Kinds if there were endlessly many other differences between the races that did not follow from the marks by which we distinguish them’ (2005:103). Hacking concludes this part of his discussion: ‘Race sciences were devised to discover a lot of differences between races that do not follow from the marks of color and structure by which we distinguish them. You do not have to treat people equally, if they are sufficiently different’ (2005:104).

Race is like crime. No one would be guilty of theft had we not invented or recognized the relevant laws or drawn any property lines. ... We invented race and crime but we did not invent them out of nothing; our categories have a history and rely on prior practices and understandings [such as the speculations about human origins by such people as Linnaeus]. (1998:S630)

The concepts that Hacking employs are statistically “significant,” “meaningful,” and “useful.” (2005:105):

Let us say that a characteristic is *statistically significant* if its distribution is significantly different from that in a comparable population. Let us say that a characteristic is *statistically meaningful* if there is some understanding in terms of causes, of why the difference is significant. For example, in the early days no one knew why smoking was associated with lung cancer, but now we understand quite well, although not completely. The correlation used to be merely significant, but now it is meaningful.

Finally, a characteristic is *statistically useful* if it can be used as an indicator of something of interest in some fairly immediate practical concern. Take an example from another topic nowadays much discussed. A body mass index (BMI) over 31 is a statistically useful indicator of the risk of type 2 diabetes, and is therefore useful in epidemiology and preventive medicine.

Even in this case (of diabetes 2), Hacking notes that there are ‘much better indicators’, but they are expensive to employ.

Hacking stresses, however, that such ‘classes [distinctions] that are statistically significant, meaningful, or useful are not therefore real Kinds’ – as horses and cows would be.⁴ This case is offered to illustrate the way in which classification of humans, drawing on pre-existing notions of ‘race’, serve within the medical sphere; but also to provide an instance where the validity of the classification, and the dangers that it potentially carries, are the subject of heated debate. In South Africa, too, such scientific uses are made of a statistical approach to a real or apparent correlation between disease patterns and ‘races’. These can be sophisticated, undertaken with some degree of caution, or extremely crude in their popularisation in which case they serve to reinforce common sense notions of biologically-existing races.⁵

⁴ Further examples explored by Hacking include the Hernstein and Murray ‘bell curve’ debate, Tay-Sachs disease, and the BiDil heart drug.

⁵ What I have deliberately not entered into is the appropriation and maintenance of racialised knowledge in the field of health – operating in a society already racialised in ‘naturalised’ ways. Here the debates rage around ‘traditional medicine’, ‘traditional healing’, ‘indigenous knowledge (and belief) systems’, placed in sometimes clear distinction to ‘western medicine’. What is the equivalent, seen from either side of the

However, the real horror of classification of human beings is best illustrated through the extreme examples of slavery and of genocide. Mahmood Mamdani has recently (*London Review of Books*, March 2007) warned against the dangers implicit in naming, using as an example the case of Darfur – is it genocide, civil war, or insurgency? It does not matter whether we agree with him in his rejection of the label of *genocide*, and many will not, as was illustrated also in the letters pages of the *LRB* subsequently, but the point here is that the classification of the events and the motivations that have led to the deaths of thousands in that conflict has implications on the global stage, and thus for the inhabitants of Darfur, Sudan, and the wider region. Here is an example of a social scientist reflecting on the analytical categories that best explain social events and that best serves to address the problem associated with the labels. Mamdani had, earlier, employed the term ‘genocide’ as relevant to the murderous events in Rwanda. In that case he had drawn attention to colonial racialisation of human beings in Rwanda, preceding the genocide of Tutsis. But there was more to it than that, a point central to my ultimate argument here:

The racialization of the Tutsi/Hutu was *not simply an intellectual construct*, one which later and more enlightened generations of intellectuals could deconstruct at will. More to the point, *racialization was also an institutional construct*. Racial ideology was embedded in institutions, which in turn undergirded racial privilege and reproduced racial ideology. It is this political-institutional fact that intellectuals alone would not be able to alter. (2001:87, emphases added)

Classification, in other words, but also *fixation*.⁶ It is here where the additional element of *standardisation* in Bowker and Star’s discussion of classification becomes relevant (2000:13-14). I refer to a few dimensions to which the authors draw attention:

1. A ‘standard’ is any set of agreed-upon rules for the production of (textual or material) objects.
- ...
3. Standards are deployed in making things work together over distance and heterogeneous metrics. ...
4. Legal bodies often enforce standards ...

‘racial divide’, of what Anderson (2006:2) writes about: ‘Whiteness might suggest a typical bodily constitution or temperament; a cultural legacy and thought style; a virility or femininity; a head circumference and brain capacity; a predisposition or resistance to certain diseases; a blood group; a lamentable inability to sweat off tropical moisture – and so on’.

⁶ Used to refer to ‘the act of fixing’ (in chemistry the ‘reduction from a volatile or fluid to a stable or solid form’) (Stein 1971).

...

6. Standards have significant inertia and can be very difficult and expensive to change.

We could also explore the various ‘effacements’ of the San people of southern Africa, pre-colonial and colonial; the even more extreme examples of settlement in Australia and the USA; and the recent flaring of nation-building and ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe. The racialisation of difference during the colonial period built on previous classifications of human origins, notions that included variations on the ‘children of Ham’ story that was used by Jews, Muslims and Christians at various stages to justify slavery (see the review by Davis 2006).

Recently, and locally, Neville Alexander asked for on-going and serious debate on ‘the question of what we mean by a non-racial, democratic South Africa’. The urgency is demanded because of the arguments similar to those already advanced by Bauman and by Mamdani, referred to above. Alexander notes that ‘it is a fact that racialised identities, as we know from situations such as Nazi Germany, Rwanda, and many others, have genocidal potential’ (2007:92). So let us turn to South Africa.

Do we classify the world we find, or do we find the world we classify?

This is the central question asked by Melissa Nobles in her study of the classificatory systems employed in censuses in the USA and in Brazil (2000). She answers this through a thorough examination of the processes through which census takers arrive at the (changing) categories to serve to account for the demographics of these two societies over many decades. Her conclusion is that we find the world we name: ‘... race is not something that language simply describes, it is something that is created through language and institutional practices’ (2000:12). Once there, however, locked in language, thought, and in practices, it gains ‘an illusion of ordinariness’ (Nobles 2000:180), apparently inflexible and static. In the cases of both the birds and the cattle presented above, we start off with pre-existing notions of what is desired by such classification: in the former an acceptance of evolution theory and an attempt to capture the shared evolutionary paths of families of birds; in the latter a pre-existing consensus, in broad outline, of groupings of patterns that will distinguish the type (the cattle appropriate to be

followed by an ethnic group – Nguni or Afrikaner) and the individual animal, because of its value to a specific group (the Zulu) and to the individual owner. In the case of birds, despite its scientific method (or actually because of that) the categories change; in the case of the cattle there cannot be two of the same – it rests on a range of variations.

In April, 2007, it was reported that a teacher, upon enquiring about the ‘race’ of a child (as required for the completion of an Education Department monitoring form), was told “‘Miss, I’m mixed, so just call me black’”. This occurred in Graaff Reinet, an historic town in the Eastern Cape. The teacher ‘wondered if the department could provide guidelines on how to go about classification. “How back is black? And when is a pupil a coloured?” ... A teacher at Uitenhage says if she can’t tell the race of pupils from their skin colour, she looks at their surnames. “failing that, I ask the pupil”” (*Weekend Witness*, April 14, 2007).

The Population Registration Act (Act 30 of 1950) provided the legal classification of the population of a country, South Africa, at a particular moment in time. The Act formed the basis of the policy of apartheid in its essential task of legally and forever distinguishing between ‘races’ (and ethnic groups) in all fields of social, economic and political life. It was a haphazard process – despite, or maybe because of the ‘definitions’ of ‘races’ that were provided. It is not necessary here to describe that particular instance in the history of the country. Suffice to say that the process was from the start drawing on already-existing categories, categories that were also accepted as signifiers of difference by the vast majority of the population. Names had been given to these categories and those names both reflected and created the ‘specimens’ who were to inhabit those categories. For example, before the Population Registration Act, the *Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa* (Hellman (ed) 1949: 9) could provide a table for ‘Proportion of each race to total population’ for 1904 to 1946 – these ‘races’ were European, Native, Coloured, and Asiatic. It was along the borders of these categories that the greatest confusion – and, hence, absurdity, misery and tragedy – was created. These cases were documented in the annual *Surveys of Race Relations* and other publications of the SA Institute of Race Relations and in the dispassionate words reflect the absurdity and hide the human misery of each case. They were there for all to see, if they were so inclined. Let me take one at random:

... the Minister of the Interior said that, altogether, 1,157 objections had been made to racial classification. ... Classifications that were determined by appeal boards totalled 530, of which 39 went on further appeal to the Supreme Court. Of these 530 objections, 330 were upheld, and 200 dismissed.

Asked about reclassifications made during 1968, the Minister gave the following information: [condensed]

Reclassified from 'White to Coloured'	3
Reclassified from 'Coloured to White'	69
Reclassified from 'Bantu to Coloured'	17. (SAIRR 1970:23-24)

It was added that (noting the consequences of such classification):

In many of the smaller towns, particularly in the Transvaal, there are few Coloured people, and the authorities have provided no separate housing schemes for them. Many of them have lived their lives in the African townships. ... [T]he Department of Planning stated that an inter-departmental committee had completed an examination of the possibility of reclassifying such of these people as had become Africanized. Questioned about this matter, the Minister of Planning said that 'at this stage no action is contemplated'. (SAIRR 1970:24-25)

But that same confusion (involved in drawing categorical lines where these are not possible), as the example of the Education Department in the Eastern Cape serves to alert us, also characterises post-apartheid classification, except where 'race'-belonging is accepted as everyday common sense, operating with that 'illusion of ordinariness'. What Bowker and Star pointed to in a chapter on 'The case of race classification and reclassification under apartheid', formed the approach in the past and forms the basis of contemporary classification:

As layers of classification system become enfolded into a working infrastructure, the original political intervention becomes more and more firmly entrenched.⁷ In many cases, this leads to a naturalization of the political category, through a process of convergence. It becomes taken for granted. (We are using the word naturalization advisedly here, since it is only through our infrastructures that we can describe and manipulate nature). We emphasize here the stubborn refusal of 'race' to fit the desired classification system suborned by its pro-apartheid designers (2002:197).

The distress felt by the Eastern Cape teachers, two of the probably many, at their inability to classify without guidance or legal definition, without 'standards, is a reflection of one of the central questions asked by Bowker and Star in their book: 'What happens to the

⁷ A strong argument could be made that the 'original (preceding both apartheid and post-apartheid) political intervention' effectively occurred under segregation and earlier.

cases that do not fit?’ (2002:9). And ‘race’ does indeed ‘stubbornly refuse ... to fit the desired classification’, as noted above.

An even more recent example of a refusal to fit, here due to the clash between two different classificatory systems, was exemplified by the call that ‘women’ (a category of sex) as a group designated in the Employment Equity Act (EEA) as entitled to ‘affirmative action’ practices, should no longer include ‘white’ women (a category of ‘race’). Jimmy Manyi, president of the Black Management Forum (BMF) and chairperson of the Commission for Employment Equity proposed that ‘white women’, because they are ‘over-represented’ in terms of ‘demographics’ in senior categories of employment, should no longer be regarded as ‘previously disadvantaged’ (see, for example, *Mail & Guardian* September 7, 2007).⁸ As was pointed out to those who made the call for a racialised sex category, is that at present it runs directly against a far less contestable term (than the ‘race’ sub-categorisations) in the Act and, unlike the term ‘Black’, is not deconstructed into sub-categories of the apartheid groupings of ‘African’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Coloured’(see, for example, several other voices in the article in the *Mail & Guardian* referred to above, and Mamphela Ramphele in *Sunday Times* September 9, 2007).

Any social formation that relies on ‘race’ classification for the implementation of policy has to engage the participation of thousands of bureaucrats and an even greater number of bureaucratic practices (decisions are required far beyond personnel appointed specifically for such purposes), whether in the public or the private sector. For acceptance it relies centrally on the passive or active involvement of citizens in self-classification, or at least of a very large number of them. Policy also means actual or potential political mobilisation employing notions of ‘race’ – the one cannot exist without the other. If we are to examine the practices in South Africa, there are several forms of classification that the researcher would have to look at. For example: formal, legally required classification, but also the banality of everyday common sense and unreflective socialisation – EEA and

⁸ Nomhle Nkumbi Ndopu, deputy president of the BMF, noted in a subsequent letter (*Sunday Times* (*Business Times*) September 16, 2007) that the Department of Trade and Industries had already excluded ‘white women within the gender recognition’ of their Codes of Good Practice. She hit out at the criticism of Manyi’s suggestion as ‘the proverbial “kicking of the ladder once you are on top” views of some prominent celebrity black businesswomen and academics’.

Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (BBBEEA); classification through census requirements by Statistics SA; classification required by departments wishing to measure progress, such as in the case with which this section started; classification in pervasive race thinking – the prior vocabularies we work with in everyday life, vocabularies created through processes of socialisation and reproduced in myriads of ways subsequently – and here the content has to be examined, for it is not exactly the same for every individual or every racialised group, created and imagined in distinct ways; classification in the media, whether it be through reporting, editorials, commentary, though letters and talk shows, in advertising and in entertainment; and many more.⁹

Patterns of race categorisation, into the already accepted categories which allow policy implementation with as few disruptions as possible, rest on the ‘naturalization of the political category’ that Bowker and Star write of. This allows political subjects, already racialised, to respond to calls to identify as *meaningfully* belonging to one of the four apartheid-created ‘races’. Such pervasive common sense of race thinking will again (as under apartheid) remain entrenched, confirmed through the banality of daily race thinking and the perpetually available and utilised categories of ‘race’. As Bowker and Star write

⁹ A recent, and on-going, media example with a concern for labelling, which I will use because it is recent and because it provides a confusing mix of the need to describe and classify, but not of consistent terms: Lewis Hamilton, the boy-wonder F1 driver. I present a number of consecutive reports, random in the sense that they are from newspapers I read – Malaysian GP (*Mercury*, Apr 9, 07, Reuters) ‘British rookie’; Malaysian GP (*Mercury*, Apr 10, 07, SAPA-AFP) ‘Rookie Hamilton’ (headline), ‘The 22-year-old Briton, the first man of Afro-Caribbean descent to race in Formula One ...’; Malaysian GP (*M&G*, Apr 13, 07, Guardian News and Media) ‘Whiz kid ...’ (headline), ‘... first driver for 43 years to reach the podium in his first two formula one races ...’; Bahrain GP (*Mercury*, Apr 16, 07, SAPA-AP) ‘Hamilton, Formula One’s first black driver’; Bahrain GP (*Mercury*, Apr 17, 07, SAPA-AFP) ‘The 22-year-old Briton, the first man of Afro-Caribbean descent to race in Formula One and the second black driver after Indian Narain Karthikeyan, ...’; (Motoring Supplement *Mercury*, Apr 19-20, 07, Dennis Droppa) ‘rookie’, ‘The British youngster with Caribbean roots...’; Spanish GP (*Mercury*, May 14, 07, SAPA-AFP) ... the first black driver to race in Formula One’; Spanish GP (*Mercury*, May 15, 07, SAPA-AP) ‘22-year-old Englishman’, ‘the first rookie’; Monaco GP (*Sunday Independent*, May 27, 07, Alan Baldwin) ‘youngest championship leader’, ‘first rookie’, ‘22-year-old Briton’; Canadian GP (*Mercury*, Jun 11, 07, SAPA-AFP) ‘British Rookie’, ‘The first man of Afro-Caribbean descent’, ‘... the youngster from Stevenage in Hertfordshire, England – they have also dubbed him Formula One’s answer to golf’s black superstar Tiger Woods’ [ironic here as Woods prefers not to be called ‘black’]; Fernando Alonso referred to what he suspects may be preferential treatment when he joined the McLaren team: “From the first moment, I wasn’t completely comfortable. I am in an English team, with an English team-mate who is doing brilliantly,” he said’ (*Weekend Witness*, Jun 16, 07); Canadian GP (*Cape Times Drive Time*, Jun 14, 07, Minesh Bagaloo) ‘rookie prodigy’; Before US GP (*Die Burger*, Jun 15, 07, Reuters, SAPA-dpa) ‘eerste swart renjaer’, ‘groentjie’, ‘Britse renjaer’; before Chinese GP – ‘... it looks as if he will be the first rookie to win the world championship, the first British driver since Damon Hill, and the youngest ever champion’ (Simon Hattenstone, *Mail & Guardian/ Guardian News & Media*, October 5, 2007).

about classification in general, 'These standards and classifications, however imbricated in our lives, are ordinarily invisible' (2002:2), approximating closely Billig's 'banality' of nationalism, of the nation (1997 - below). They, Bowker and Star, continue: 'Remarkably for such a central part of our lives, we stand for the most part in formal ignorance of the social and moral order created by these invisible, potent entities. Their impact is indisputable, and as Foucault reminds us, inescapable. Try the simple experiment of ignoring your gender classification ... The material force of categories appears always and instantly' (2002:3). This will remain the case unless challenged along with struggle against power relations. It is that confrontation with power (also the power of ideology) where the adherence, unfortunately shallow, to a 'non-racial' future lay; it is here where struggles to challenge the National Party's division of the racially oppressed into three major groups were played out, against a shared 'blackness'. Biko's 'black consciousness' was deliberately aimed towards a 'community' of the oppressed and against the NP's use of 'black' (after 'Native' and 'Bantu' had fallen into disfavour as politically appropriate for formal usage). It is an irony, but not that surprising, that under the ANC government a similar deconstruction of 'blackness' (of shared discrimination and deprivation) should again be occurring – and there are many examples, both in the statements of politicians, in the application of the EEA, in intra-institutional mobilisation of racialised constituencies, in 'quotas' or 'targets' in sports teams, in proportional representation lists, in census categories, and much more.

The (socially constructed) existence of 'races', as part of the 'natural' world (the world which we do not question because it simply 'is') is taken for granted, with perpetual reminders in everyday life that these categories exist – this is what I have previously referred to as the 'banality of race thinking', drawing on the work by Michael Billig on nationalism (1997). The first answer mentioned by Ian Hacking to his question, 'why has there been such a pervasive tendency to apply the category of race and to regard people of different races as essentially different kinds of people?', is that 'the distinction *is just there, in the world for all to see*. Superficial differences between races do exist in nature, and these are readily recognized' (2005:102, emphasis added). We can turn to processes of socialisation (through family, educational establishments, peers, etc), to spatial location of people, to the media, to legislation, to benefits that accrue to acceptance of

'race' categories, to political mobilisation, for evidence of (re)production at this level of the taken-for-granted. 'Race' classification is both invisible and visible, both informal and located in formal structures, processes and policies, executed by agents of various types. On the other hand, in this country we would search far and wide, with little success, to find important and consistent sites for questioning, never mind undermining of, notions of 'race'.

Conclusion

In one of the examples presented above we have seen the variation that is allowed and demanded by the context in classification of Nguni cattle. Here the specimen is not, cannot be (fully) subsumed into the category. The purpose, after all, is to identify the individual specimen, the one that has its importance to the owner, albeit within a loosely accepted general category, and to identify with 'the abundant herd'. The process, after all is creative:

... as the tradition of naming is a dynamic one, part of an oral art in which immediate and spontaneous performance, gesture and context play a vital role, the work [the book] can only catch at something of its spirit and reflect part of its character. This is an art that finds its fullest expression not in the pages of a book, but at pasture, in the byre, where people gather to talk about and contemplate the things that move them most. (Poland et al 2005:11)

I have referred to new classifications and the on-going reconstruction of categories of birds, where new research methods and findings in the field of genetics have made change inevitable, and where further change is expected, and welcomed. Cases of classification of humans, in different fields, have also been mentioned.

In its Preamble, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that the people of the country recognise the injustices of their past and 'believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity'. Further, the Preamble asserts that the Constitution has been adopted as the supreme law of the country so as to 'heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights'. The Founding Provisions in the first chapter commit the

nation to 'human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms' and to 'non-racialism and non-sexism'.

The commitments expressed in that founding document of an envisaged democratic society reflect an essential element of the struggle against apartheid. It takes different forms but shares the vision of a South Africa where all may participate equally, 'united in our diversity', of forging a society which is entirely antithetical to that conjured on the basis of apartheid ideology. This vision includes 'non-racialism', a value so strong in the pre-eminent liberation movement that it was referred to as the 'unbreakable thread' in the struggle against racial domination (Frederikse 1990). It is a value that continues to be expressed frequently in public discourse and political documents.

In a society still plagued so heavily by conflict driven by social divisions, it is clear that these admirable ideals have yet to be translated into effective and informed practice, into something that shows a semblance of policy. This is unsurprising, as there has been remarkably and depressingly little social and scientific research, nor philosophical and theoretical reflection, on the issue of non-racialism during the apartheid period and in a democratic South Africa created under this banner (there are, of course, exceptions, such as Stevens et al (eds) 2006). Instead, there appears to be an almost unquestioning perpetuation of racialism, or what might be better termed 'race thinking' or 'multi-racialism', in everyday life – in social interactions, in policy, and even in law. The manner in which South Africans view society, and the ways in which the social world is organised and presented through media, political discourse, literature, arts, legislation, foreign policy, curricula, and countless other facets, are clearly still largely informed by notions – sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit – of racial identity and racial distinction. Race thinking and its impacts on society are, of course, by no means peculiar to South Africa, but they are certainly heightened here – this in a country whose Constitution is held up as a global exemplar for entrenching human equality, as a model of transformation for a globally abhorred system of social organisation. In short, notwithstanding the very ideals upon which contemporary South Africa is founded, race thinking is still very much ingrained in the national mindset and continues to manifest as a primary mechanism by which society organises – and indeed disorganises – itself. And, in addition, little effort is made to debate and examine the easy continuation of race

thinking. We have not effectively reclassified the democratic world, but effectively continue in the classified world we found in 1994, a world understood in terms of ‘race relations’.

Let me return to the call for *creativity*, *curiosity*, and *science*: it is imperative that science, and especially social science, returns to the processes of and reasons for classification and casts a critical eye over them. Such an approach demands the ‘emancipatory’ science for which Erik Olin Wright argues. Building on an unblinkered curiosity it has creatively to suggest alternative ways to work towards a society of growing equality without employing and recreating the categories, especially of ‘race’, that were the foundations of apartheid. Yes, this is ‘utopian thinking’ in the manner suggested by Rick Turner, but it is also to be approached with an awareness of the real obstacles that exist – not only in the way of challenging the odious categories of ‘race’ and thereby the oppressive uses to which they were put, but also obstacles in the goal of creating societies that afford lives of opportunity and dignity for the majority of human beings. François Vourc’h captures this concern (2006:xv) as follows:

... one takes cognisance of how difficult it is when embarking on a process of deracialisation to do away with the illegitimate categories of apartheid. Who are we if we are no longer blacks, coloureds or whites? It is neither simple nor evident how to implement a policy that wipes clean the slate of racist ties without affording the victims of this odious system the opportunity to be vindicated for their oppression and to gain recognition for the extreme prejudice endured in an all too recent past. ‘Yes’ to deracialising social relations and ties, but for whose benefit?

That reminds us, too, of those who benefited, and not just of the victims of apartheid; that ‘substantial part of the white community [who] supported a morally depraved political system with increasing majorities’, as Xolela Mangcu writes some years ago now (*Sunday Independent*, October 15, 2000), also has to be brought into the process of analysing and addressing racialism and racism. Mangcu’s argument, then, was that the real challenge was ‘that of giving to race a liberatory meaning’. Is that possible when there are those who now benefit from uncritically maintaining ‘the illegitimate categories

of apartheid'? Are there not even more obvious dangers, than the slim possibility of social forgetting if we strongly argue for a project around non-racialism, inherent in the celebratory continuation of race thinking when it is effectively one of the few alternative mobilisation strategies due to the failure of any meaningful 'nation-building' project?

But it is not only the continuation of the past, in new forms, that allows (even demands) a return to 'race'. Jock Young has argued that social insecurities (such as 'crime and other social problems' which, in the local context could include HIV/AIDS, unemployment, poverty, and immense inequality) enable projections of blame onto the 'deviant other', 'the ever-present possibility of demonization' (1999:96). Such projection will find obvious recipients in already-existing categories of 'race', ethnicity, and, in another realm altogether, existing scapegoats such as 'witches'. Yes, these pre-existing classifications are socially constructed, but as Young reminds us,

In reality, the social system produces people who appear as if constructed as an essence. *It is neither essence nor illusion* but a world of appearances which appears as if it's constructed of essences, whose very reality has a stolid, stereotypical quality. (1999:119, emphasis original)

It is this world in which political mobilisers act. Toscano, to whom I referred earlier, does not idealistically argue for an abstract cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, he writes that

Coexistence of different groups is indeed problematic and fragile, but at the root of violent group conflict (not simple tensions, not simple divergences, not simple controversies) we almost inevitably find the conscious, systematic, intellectually dishonest endeavour of political leaders aimed at convincing the group of: (a) its own uniqueness and nobility; (b) the despicable, treacherous nature of the rival group, stereotyped in abstract terms that leave no space for individual difference and exception [that appears in Bauman's reference to 'the category -']; (c) the objective nature of certain group interests defined as "unavoidable goals" combined with the denial that - ...- "there are always choices" and that they are also determined by subjective values and not only by objective values, and (d) the absolutely "zero-sum" nature of the rivalry often to the point of mutually exclusive survival (*mors tua, vita mea*). (1998:68)¹⁰

What Toscano is referring to is *the political mobilisation of difference*, a mobilisation that relies on the already-existing notion of difference, of a category to which an appeal is made. This is an issue that has concerned me over the years, specifically with reference to

¹⁰ The language and ideas drew this reader, again, to Göran Therborn's approach to ideology (1980).

ethnic mobilisation: the cases of Afrikaner and Zulu mobilisation serving to illustrate the process.

What allows such mobilisation, and what allows (sometimes demands) it to tip over into ethnic cleansing, into dehumanisation of the political and social Other, into what Bauman described as the situation when ‘the fate meted out to the owner of the face is nothing more yet nothing less either than the treatment reserved for the *category* of which the owner of the face is but a *specimen*’? It is appropriate to leave this as a question.

I will end with Michael Root’s concluding words in ‘How we divide the world’:

Laws of nature do not make race real, we do. While the social sciences can explain how or why we so divide ourselves, we need to decide whether we ought to. (1998:S638)

It is a complex but essential task to engage in.

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