

The limitations of the race debate in post-apartheid South Africa

Racialism is normally used synonymous with racism. It refers to an institutionalised system of white oppression over blacks; politically, economically and culturally. Consequently, non-racialism implies the negation of white supremacy over blacks through the establishment of democratic institutions and the creation of a 'universal citizenship' with equal political rights and universal guarantees.

From this perspective, the transition to liberal political democracy associated with the establishment of formal democratic institutions, imbued with liberal democratic norms and procedures, will resolve the national question. It's further implied that the post-apartheid democratic government will set in train socio-economic processes to alter apartheid's system of separate development in favour of the historically marginalised and impoverished majority. This short article will look at the political and economic ramifications of this conception of racialism in South Africa's current democratic conjuncture.

Politically, the meaning of racialism as racial domination insinuates the redundancy of non-racialism in democratic South Africa as the "non" of non-racialism would have negated racism with the democratic breakthrough in 1994. Racism is no longer institutionalized; all South Africans enjoy equal political rights and universal guarantees; racial restrictions on property rights and on access to professions, trades and forms of work have been abolished; the instruments of labour coercion have been done away with, and a democratic constitution has put an end to legal repression. However, this definition of racialism ignores the attitudes of those who justified racial domination. It is unimaginable for an automatic disappearance of racial domination to occur in a society with deeply ingrained racial attitudes.

It also downplays the cultural dimensions of race; i.e. the demands of racial groups to be recognised *differently* based on their cultural/native values. They see race as the foundation of their political identities, contradicting the principle of "sameness" implied by non-racialism. Racialism in this context is not predicated on power or dominance, but is an expressed activity, enacting who people are. Some, for example, have invoked this cultural notion of racialism to motivate the legitimacy of the much bandied about Forum for Black Journalists. This was also demonstrated in a recent public debate on race hosted by the Democracy Development Programme in which a considerable number of participants motivated why they would prefer to be racially recognized.

Meanwhile, political rhetoric and mainstream analyses of racial domination tend to present a class neutral assumption of economic oppression. It is often insinuated that all black social classes suffered equal economic discrimination under the apartheid regime. Evidence by Professor Sampie Terreblanche in '*a history of inequality in South Africa*' unearths a growing economic gap between the black upper (bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie) and under (the middle to lower) classes since the early 1970s. According to the evidence, the income of the top 20 per cent of African households was eight times higher than that of the poorest 40 per cent, in 1975. In 1991 it was 19 times higher, and in 1996, 31 times higher.

The democratic government's BEE racial empowerment strategy has further deepened this widening gap between the black upper and under classes. Whilst many commentators want us to believe that BEE is "about black influence in the economy", it's main objective has

been the creation of a black bourgeoisie with a stake in the economy without tempering with the accumulation regime espoused by white capital. BEE has thus enabled the black upper classes to invoke their blackness in order to advance their economic ideals.

This brief expose of some of the political and economic pitfalls that dog conventional notions of race motivates why a much more critical debate is needed on the form and substance of race in democratic South Africa. Such a debate has to take into account the dynamic interface between democracy, non-racialism and citizenship. How do people understand democracy? Is it only about institutions with democratic norms and standards managed by a democratically elected political regime, or is it about more than that? How does democracy retain legitimacy in spite of widening socio-economic inequalities between the black social classes? Consequently, what's the meaning of "non-racialism", and how does it work? How possible is the creation of a 'universal citizenship' or a 'common national identity' whilst society remains deeply divided along different cultural / native lines?

Ibrahim Steyn is a researcher at the Democracy Development Programme and a PhD research candidate with the Centre for Democracy and Citizenship, School of Government/University of the Western Cape. He writes in his personal capacity.

