

Defining the undefinable



Racism is a power practice that is based on the false notion that there are races with essential characteristics, argues **Lynette Steenveld**.

The HRC Inquiry highlighted the many different ways in which racism is spoken about. Some sets of meanings fall into what we might call a 'conceptual realm'. However, concepts are also employed in the cut and thrust of social (political) life, where they are worked/moulded in the service of different users. This arena of the usage of words, we might call the political realm. The different usages or meanings of racism, reflect its life in this realm.

While many people would accept the argument that there is no genetic basis for categorising people into 'races', some would argue that there is a 'cultural' basis for such distinctions. But even this argument is contested, as the 'cultural aspects' change over time, so that it would be impossible to find 'cultural essences' which could form the basis for categorising humanity into finite 'races'. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes in his book, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, "Talk of 'race' is particularly distressing for those of us who take culture seriously. For where race works... it works as a sort of metaphor for culture; and it does so only at the price of biologising what is culture..."

Having established that there is no such thing as 'race', Appiah uses the concept racialism to refer to the attribution of distinctions between people on the basis of a presumed 'race'. Thus racialism (ascribing difference to the false category, 'race') is the broad term referring to an 'essentialist' basis for differentiation.

It is, he suggests, racialism that provides the basis for the concept racism, from which flows certain kinds of political practice.

In South Africa, HRC panelist Margaret Legum has described racism thus: "Racism in the modern world is the result of the theory or idea that white people are superior to black people." She suggests that "we have all been taught racism: that means black people as

well as white...Racism means that all people's relationships, even with themselves, are influenced by colour."

She continues, "Racism is the outworking in a culture of an ideology or a theory that one 'race' of people is superior/inferior to another. Racism is at work when not only those who belong to the so-thought superior group, but also those in the so-thought inferior group, believe the ideology of superiority at some level of their consciousness. They do so because all of the manifestations of their common culture reflect that ideology, so they take it in without having to think about it."

Fellow HRC panelist, Joe Thloloe, uses the following definition in workshops on racism: "behaviour towards another based on one's belief and assumptions about 'race' AND the belief that one or more 'races' are superior to others".

What Legum's and Thloloe's 'definitions' share is the idea of supremacy/inferiority. But while Thloloe points to the fluid character of beliefs and assumptions about 'race', Legum is less explicit about this.

However, Legum clearly locates racism in the political sphere, to describe an ideology or system of beliefs and practices, that is premised on the false notion of 'race' as a conceptual means of differentiating between people.

Legum's 'definition' of racism usefully links the idea of white supremacy/black inferiority to a system of cultural practices (evidenced in the spheres of economics, literature, painting, religion, politics, etc.) that is centuries old, and thus deeply embedded in the common culture shared by both those thought to be superior and inferior.

Implicit in this 'definition' is the view that black people, thought by many for centuries to be inferior, cannot practise racism towards white people — because they are (seen in broad historical terms) unable to enforce the cultural belief that black people are superior, and white people, inferior. Thus for Legum, racism is simply the ideology of white power ('herenvolkism'). In terms of media analysis, this would refer to any representations which contributed to notions of whiteness as superior and blackness as inferior or less powerful.

This view is echoed in the SABC's presentation to the HRC prepared by Prof. Dumisani Hlope and Christine Qunta (who in her capacity as a member of the Black Lawyer's Association requested the HRC to investigate racism in the *Mail & Guardian*). They write: "Racism is constituted therefore when racial prejudices are matched with the power to act on such prejudices". However, they are silent on the notion of 'race' which forms the conceptual basis for their definition.

Legum uses the term 'race dis-

crimination' to refer to acts — by both black people and white people — which draw distinctions between the two groups, whether positively or negatively. But as noted above, she would not see such action by black people as 'racist' (i.e. based on her notion of the ideology of racism), because there is no associated historical power. Thus for example, affirmative or corrective action could be seen in these terms as being discriminatory, but not racist.

Challenging Legum's views expressed in the media, Howard Barrell pointed out in his HRC submission for the *Mail & Guardian*, that this still presupposes an understanding of 'race' as some essential category, and thus in Appiah's conceptual framework, would be regarded as an example of racialism, the beginning of the slippery slope towards racism. This would be a valid critique if Legum does not distance herself from the false concept 'race'.

Apartheid was premised on the false idea that humanity could be divided into distinct 'races'. As a result, South Africans' social experiences have been shaped by this wrong view. While affirmative or corrective action, for example, may be necessary to redress the past social inequities, it is ironic that these measures have to work with the same false concepts, thereby potentially perpetuating them at a conceptual level.

In order to make sense of the debates about the 'definitions' of racism, we need to ask why the 'definitions' matter. In Appiah's view, given that there are no 'races', "there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us...The evil that is done is done by the concept, and by easy — yet impossible — assumptions as to its application".

What this leaves us with are questions about how we can construct an anti-racist politics. How can the media contribute towards this? How can we get to a society where 'race' is a redundant concept?

Race = the group into which people are classified on the basis of heritable and essential differences

Racialism = the (false) belief that there are heritable characteristics possessed by members of our species that enables us to classify people into distinct groups of 'races'. In this view, the traits and characteristics identified constitute a kind of 'racial essence'. [Simply, a classificatory system of essential differences — but no value judgements attached to the classification]

Race discrimination = the behaviour or practice of distinguishing between people on the basis of their presumed 'race'

Race prejudice = the attitude, belief, mental construct that makes judgements about people on the basis of their presumed 'race'

Racism = the system of beliefs and practices that people can be classified into groups on the basis of presumed differences which justifies the unequal allocation of power and privilege.

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ANGELINE SEPTEMBER b. 1945

Ukufa kwenhliziyo ngumzwangedwa — The ailment of the heart is known to one only

The British first started making the Xhosa people run away from their homes in 1812 when they burnt all the lands and foods in the Zuurveld area. My image shows how women had to retreat without anything but their pride because their homes had been burnt and they had no food to eat. This is why I have shown the empty calabashes and the fires.

