

## THE DREAM OF A WORLD FREE FROM THE BURDEN OF RACE

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Race has been a powerful, if destructive, force in the making of the modern world. It has separated masters from slaves, colonizers from colonized, settlers from natives, citizens from subjects. In response, historical struggles against racism and white supremacy have contributed to a deepening of the key normative pillars of the modern international order.

Various rights, including the right to self-determination, have been universalized. So have been core concepts of modern life such as freedom and justice, the equality of all human beings, or the belief that political power is meant to protect human life.

The persistent conviction that democracy is the best form of realization of human freedom is owed in no small way to the relentless critique of racial rule by various abolitionist, anti-colonial and civil rights movements.

The historical commitments to bring about a non-racial world have not only been underpinned by various philosophies of redress and reparation. At their core has also been some idea of a shared humanity.

Born out of the crucible of the struggle against apartheid, the idea of non-racialism is arguably one of South Africa's most potent contributions to modern political thought and practice. At its most utopian, non-racialism gestures towards a future time when the structures of racism will be thoroughly dismantled.

All forms of racial injury and trauma will be healed.

Race as a category of political organization and an index of social identification will become irrelevant.

The distribution of the means of life and survival will be made on a basis other than mere claims of descent.

Every human being will be recognized as a human like any other human irrespective of the color of one's skin.

The humans will finally share the Earth with other species, animal and organic.

The utopian imaginary of a world free of the burden of race has powered the struggles of the oppressed since the advent of the modern age. It was a crucial dimension of various slave insurrections in the New World, including the Haitian revolution.

It gave meaning and purpose to the long and excruciating campaigns for the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was also central to the decolonization struggle, the Civil Rights movement and some of the most radical attempts at changing the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As racism has kept mutating, so have forms of intersections between race, class and gender. Although local in its manifestations, racism has always been a global phenomenon and part of its persistence is a result of its planetarization.

Furthermore, the force of racism in our world stems from its capacity to mutate and to constantly reappear in ever-changing forms in the most unexpected sites of everyday life.

The weakness of most anti-racist struggles is the result of our inability to keep up with the mutating structures of racism and their virulence.

As racism worldwide takes on a genomic turn and is now propelled by the war on terror, various anti-migratory policies, the resurgence of compensatory forms of nationalism and mass incarceration, South Africa is caught between various contradictory processes.

The first is the unilateral intellectual disarmament undertaken by the ANC during the last decade. Twenty years after the end of apartheid, this intellectual disarmament has paved the way to the capitulation of the elites to the kind of bureaucratic instrumentalism that now dominates public culture. As a result, it has been unable to give any positive, future-oriented meaning to the project of non-racialism since non-racialism is meaningless in the absence of values.

To do so would have required harnessing the intellectual traditions and the cultural history of black people, as well as the articulation of an Afropolitan position that could embrace those forms of white-African identity we need in the struggle for racial justice.

Having failed to turn white guilt into a moral debt, the ANC has left the most reactionary sectors of white society off the hook while chasing away those progressive and anti-racist whites who could have supported the idea of a radical transformation of the society.

Meanwhile, reactionary and conservative forces have co-opted non-racialism, which they now equate with color-blindedness. They use non-racialism as a weapon to discredit any attempt to de-racialize property, institutions and structures inherited from an odious past. Rather than thinking affinities, they invite us to celebrate our differences, in an ironic twist that tragically reveals the extent of apartheid's posthumous victory.

They also mobilize the discourse of non-racialism in order to silence those who point to any trace of racism in the present, or call for some form of reparation for the injustices of the past. Instead, they now pretend that the government is practicing reverse racism in a country in which not one single former oppressor lost a cent as a result of the transition away from centuries of spoliation and dehumanization.

Non-racialism is also under attack from forces which equate it with a politics of accommodation or capitulation.

Indeed for many, non-racialism is nothing but the ideological cover for the failure to address the inequities of the present. It is not different from earlier attempts at justifying unequal coexistence. Instead of non-racialism, what is needed is a resolute anti-racist politics.

And yet, properly understood, non-racialism is not opposed to anti-racism. In fact, it is the necessary supplement to all forms of anti-racism. It allows us to project ourselves into the future in a way the presentism of our struggles hardly allows.

A proper non-racial project is not the equivalent of color-blindedness. Under current conditions, color-blindedness simply means “keeping blacks in their place”.

As Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues, non-racialism begins with the necessity of uprooting racism from the sinews of the present. It implies depriving the racists in our midst of the power to externalize their racism. It requires that everything be done in order to prevent the racists from successfully making the racialized hate themselves.

For it to succeed, the victims of racism must be supported and the troubling gaps in life-chances between blacks and whites must be reduced. Those who have been racialized and dehumanized must be empowered so as to recover a modicum of self-agency and if necessary, the kind of healthy narcissism that has been crushed during the long centuries of brutality.

Any effective policy to combat racial inequality today must confront the complex relationships between race, class and gender in South Africa. But more importantly, it has to be future-oriented. An anti-racist

politics that is simply preoccupied with the present is always at risk of reproducing, in the structures of its outcomes, the very racist terms it pretends to overcome.

The post-apartheid State has also fostered a normative project with the aim of achieving justice through reconciliation, equality through economic redress, democracy through the transformation of the law and the rehabilitation of a variety of rights, including the right to dignity.

This normative project has been enshrined in a utopian Constitution that attempts to establish a new relationship between law and society on the one hand and law and life on the other.

Yet, the project of non-racialism has lost much of the aura it enjoyed during the struggle against Apartheid.

Furthermore, since 1994, scholars, writers, public intellectuals, artists and activists have been drawing our attention to the persistent nature of racial categories and structures of racism in the world.

They have highlighted the various ways in which, because of their ever mutating nature, these structures have been continuously shifting.

We now realize that there is probably more to race than we had ever imagined.

New configurations of racism are emerging worldwide. Because race-thinking increasingly entails profound questions about the nature of species in general, the need to rethink the politics of racialisation and the terms under which the struggle for racial justice unfolds here and elsewhere in the world today has become ever more urgent.

Racism here and elsewhere is still acting as a constitutive supplement to nationalism. How do we create a world beyond nationalism?

Behind the veil of neutrality and impartiality, racial power still structurally depends on various

legal regimes for its reproduction. How do we radically transform the law?

Even more ominously, race politics is taking a genomic turn.

In their attempts to explain human origins, to predict behavior or to cure or prevent diseases, evolutionary theory, genomics and neurosciences are re-racializing human difference.

Evolutionary metaphors and genetic determinism are spreading far beyond their biological domains.

Current genocentrism operates as if genes acted independently and were not in constant interaction with each other and with the social and cultural environment in which they are embedded. As a result, the social is being eradicated and human nature is being biologized.

The human mind is reduced to nothing but the epiphenomenal expression of a biochemical brain process.

What was once part of culture is increasingly naturalized.

Meanwhile, the line between body enhancement and genetic enhancement is increasingly blurred. The search for the beautiful nose, enlarged breasts, the appropriate jaw line and the beautiful face is fast turning into the search for the beautiful race. In the process, new categories of the normal and the abnormal are produced.

In today's hyper-marketized economy, the collection of high-quality human eggs is gaining steam. They are bought and sold as part of a global demographic race that operates as a back door for eugenism.

Framed within neoliberal individualism, this new wave of eugenism is less about the culling of the unfit and the selection for breeding of the fit than the creation of new genes and new qualities yet undreamed of.

The patenting of genes continues unabated for the profit of new biotech industries.

Entities hitherto outside commodity relations are being drawn into the sphere of the market.

The body itself and its various parts, blood included, have become a form of capital that can be mined to secure revenues. In its attempt to build a powerful genomics medical industry, global capital is seeking to capture property rights in the body and property rights concerning information about the body.

At stake in the contemporary reconfigurations and mutations of race and racism is the splitting of humanity itself into separate species and sub-species as a result of market libertarianism and genetic technology.

At stake are also, once again, the old questions of who is whom, who can make what kinds of claims on whom and on what grounds, and who is to own whom and what.

In a contemporary neoliberal order that claims to have gone beyond the racial, the struggle for racial justice must take new forms.

In order to invigorate anti-racist thought and praxis and to reanimate the project of non-racialism, we particularly need to explore the emerging nexus between biology, genes, technologies and their articulations with new forms of human destitution.

The regimes of the racial in the making are part of the ongoing cultural shift towards the values of neoliberalism, the deepening alienation from ourselves and our increasingly commodified selves.

But simply looking into past and present local and global rearticulations of race will not suffice.

To tease out alternative possibilities for thinking life and human futures in this age of neoliberal individualism, we need to connect in entirely new ways the project of non-racialism to that of human mutuality.

In the last instance, non-racialism is truly about radical sharing and universal inclusion. It is about humankind ruling in common for a common which includes the non-humans, which is the proper name for democracy.

In this sense, non-racialism is the antithesis of the rule of the market. Left to its own devices, market libertarianism has led here and elsewhere in the world to the domination of politics by capital. In turn, the domination of politics by capital has resulted in the waste of countless human lives and the production in every corner of the globe of vast stretches of dead water and dead land.

To reopen the future of our planet to all who inhabit it, we will have to learn how to share it again amongst the humans, but also between the humans and the non-humans.