

Michael MacDonald

Why Race Matters in South Africa

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The monograph entitled *Why Race Matters in South Africa* offers not only an answer to the question it states in its very title, but tries also to sketch the ways in which race matters in South Africa. In other words, in addition to asking 'why' it also explains 'how.' The perspective assumed by the author places this racial discourse in a diachronic narrative, while at the same time attempting to position it within the context of contemporary theories of democratic deliberation. Therefore, the text's conclusions to some extent specifically apply to South Africa as a historically shaped region, and offer a substantial contribution to our understanding of South African issues. On the other hand, however, it may prove to be an interesting study for all interested in the question of how the intricate relations between race and democratic empowerment play a role globally, and not only within the South African context.

This broad historical narrative of the ways in which race matters – or in many respects luckily rather *mattered* – in South Africa, places a primary stress on the issue of citizenship. Within this account, race originally stands as a signifier for citizenship rights. Thus, whiteness has historically been the major point of difference between those possessing the right to be within the political community and all those defined as *other* and without the right to vote – “[. . .] whites were ‘white’ because of their skin colour and their cultural affiliations, but not only because of them. They were white because citizenship converted the conspicuousness of being white into a community of whites” or as expressed even more clearly: “[w]hites were citizens and citizens were white, and blacks were noncitizens and noncitizens were black” (MacDonald 2006: 59, 177).

A non-white claim for the vote therefore constituted a claim for inclusion in the political community, but also in the artificially constructed ethnic community. Still, the author perceives this claim and its eventual realisation not solely in terms of civic idealism, but also from the perspective of a political economy. Insofar as participation in the community remained racially restricted, the machinery of the modern South African state was effectively controlled by an oligarchy of white capital owners – “[b]lackness demanded political rights; the demand could not be met

within the framework of white supremacy yet could not be suppressed within the framework of capitalist stability" (MacDonald 2006: 177). The fact that the author decided to employ a basic description of the economic processes of the apartheid years definitely adds a deeper dimension to his diagnosis of the system. What remains crucial to the account put forward in this book, however, is the fact that removing the binary logic of apartheid has not abolished the political economy of race altogether. Instead of de-racialisation, a gradual multi-racialisation has come into force. Within this context, the author addresses the problems that the new elites currently face – as representatives of formerly underprivileged groups they may fall into the trap of ascribing themselves special status on the basis of their race: "The ANC mobilizes the national claim – that the 'who' determines the value and meaning of the 'what' – to insinuate that the black bourgeoisie behaves differently and better than the white bourgeoisie" (MacDonald 2006: 156).

While reading the book I was especially impressed by its ability to weave this simple explanatory framework into a complex historical narrative. Starting from the emergence of the original logic of white supremacy it presents different points of view on the ways in which the South African model of racism was derived from European modes of conceiving racial difference. This tries to account for the developmental difference between the direction taken by SA and that of the USA. An important part in this story is played by the differentiation between two cognate concepts: *racism* and *racialism*. It interprets the South African case not as a blunt case of racism, but a more elusive case of racialism – segregation legally formalised on the grounds of preserving qualitative differences between peoples. The illusion of racial categorization was maintained for very practical reasons – it served as the formal grounds of granting or denying the aforementioned citizenship rights and political power: "Racial identities, which had been fluid, now (in the manner of Weber) came to be organized on the basis of their relationship with state power. They were frozen bureaucratically [. . .]. In dividing society between whites and blacks, it [the state] simultaneously was dividing South Africa between citizens and noncitizens. Yes, it was advantaging whites and disadvantaging blacks" (MacDonald 2006: 47).

Exclusion from participation in Western culture – as epitomised by the Bantu education concept – was thus not openly asserting the supremacy of this particular culture, but rather manipulatively utilising the concept of difference. Not only could it lead to cementing the fundamental binary "black and white" divide, but also towards producing an effective fragmentation of the non-white communities into "invented" tribalism: "Whites were citizens, regardless of ethno-cultural background, and blacks – with the partial exception of the Cape – were not citizens. The new state, in other words, recast the basis of government; it substituted race for ethno-culture" (MacDonald 2006: 46). In the later chapters of

his book, MacDonald provides a comprehensive account of the development of “black emancipation” movements. The author presents “the long road to freedom” of Mandela and the ANC, the largest and best known freedom movement directed against apartheid, and currently the most influential political party. But at the same time, the reader is provided with a larger picture of the truly heterogeneous opposition scene – the historical development of the main freedom movements and alternative ideas represented by their leaders. This presentation is interesting for historical reasons, but it may prove to be equally useful in understanding the current political processes taking place in South Africa.

The big question that the book puts forward concerns not the mere history of race, racism and racialism in the context of an identity driven political economy. It attempts rather to uncover the roots of the present state of affairs in the fossils of the recent past. With apartheid being of course over, and the transition period having succeeded in redressing some of the racially driven imbalances of power and property, the race issue is itself far from over. The book offers a helping hand to all those who are keen to trace the ways in which race matters not only now, but will continue to matter in the future. The account which it meticulously builds up is largely original and nonconformist – engaging in principled criticisms of many prominent standpoints, both political and academic. It offers an interesting view from an American perspective so well informed that it is able to transcend its own cultural Americanism, presenting a balanced view of a problem not easily addressed in a balanced manner.

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