What Racists Believe

Race Relations in South Africa and the United States

Gerhard Schutte

Sage Series on Race and Ethnic Relations
volume 8

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For my parents and Andries and Stephan—in South Africa.

Series Editor's Introduction

The study of whiteness is becoming an important fad in 1990s race and ethnic studies. We now have growing numbers of scholars who are studying whiteness as a racialized category in the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Brazil, and South Africa.

Gerhard Schutte has written a fascinating book on the social, cultural, and political construction of white consciousness and racialized visions of nationhood in South Africa, with some comparative remarks regarding the same in the United States. Given the political transformations occurring in contemporary South Africa, what he has to say about the construction of white consciousness and the changes it is undergoing is quite timely. Also, the unique case of whiteness in South Africa, which has been a matter of minority demographic presence, sets Schutte's analysis apart from whiteness studies conducted in nation-states where European-descent populations are in the majority.

Another thing that sets this book apart is that whereas most studies on whiteness have been published by cultural and literary studies scholars and by historians, Schutte is a sociologist. His approach, which draws heavily from phenomenology, critical discourse theory, and grounded theory in ethnographic and long interview data, offers a methodological strategy for other sociologists interested in exploring the fascinating question of whiteness in nation-states and regions dominated by persons of European descent. What this means is that he has attempted to examine the roles of institutions and other social organizations (the state, political parties, organized religion, media, economics, ecosystems) in shaping the racialized consciousness of whites and their visions of their multiracial nation.

The rich interpretive perspective on the study of whiteness that Schutte offers is a model for other sociologically oriented scholars to emulate and expand.

John H. Stanfield II
Series Editor

Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of an idea that first occurred to me in 1985 during my sabbatical on an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship in Bielefeld, Germany. On March 21, 1985, 19 mourners were indiscriminately killed by police at Langa in the Eastern Cape. It was also the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. In the intervening years, numerous killings of blacks occurred as a result of the actions of police and other whites. Since 1985, even more have died in the context of resistance to apartheid. Both whites and blacks, frequently assisted or directed by whites, were involved in these killings. These violent reactions to resistance to an iniquitous system prompted deeper questions: What forms of consciousness among whites could give rise to such actions? How was the "other" conceptualized to make him or her a target of elimination? These questions gave rise to even more broader ones that caused me to reflect on racial thinking in general within the community in which I grew up.

During the course of my investigations, which first concentrated on the Afrikaners, it became clear to me that it was necessary to create a broader ethnographic description of Afrikaner "culture" than simply concentrating on sensational incidents of racial violence. The then director of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), C. F. Beyers Naudé, who for decades endured the persecution and harassment of the government because of his stance on race relations, encouraged and inspired the study. The SACC's Asingeni fund made it possible for me and my coinvestigator at the time, Diana E. Forsythe, to conduct a preliminary study on the Afrikaners. During the course of this study it became clear that substantial shifts had occurred in the white community that indicated that the old ethnic divide between English and Afrikaans speakers was less noticeable in the light of the urgency of South Africa's race problem. In 1987 I decided to refocus

the whole study on the issue of white solidarity. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation made a generous award to cover the cost of the ethnographic research and the transcriptions underlying the study. Without the assistance of the MacArthur Foundation this study would not have been possible.

I need also to acknowledge the contribution many colleagues, assistants, and students made to this work. I am indebted to Anselm Strauss, with whom I had discussions in San Francisco at the time his major methodological work on qualitative analysis appeared. In Evanston, Illinois, Howard S. Becker not only became a friend, but opened my mind to new perspectives on fieldwork. The fieldwork itself was a daunting task. The scope of the study was too large for me to gather all the information personally. The heads of the anthropology departments at the University of the Witwatersrand, David Hammond-Tooke, and the Rand Afrikaans University, Boet Kotze, helped me get in touch with advanced-level students who helped me in the interview phase. Anthropologist At Fischer, at the Rand Afrikaans University, helped me select Afrikaans-speaking students. He was especially helpful in putting me in touch with rural contacts through his brother, Dirk Fischer. I will not easily forget the pain and concern with which he spoke about his fellow rural people.

I gratefully acknowledge also the help I received from Charmaine de Fortier, Gail Emby, Annemarie Grindrod, Carol Schoeman, John Simmonds, Harold Thompson, and Tessa van Riet-Lowe. Tessa van Riet-Lowe and Harold Thompson invested great effort in providing extensive material, and Annemarie Grindrod did brilliant work in sorting, reading, and coding hundreds of schoolchildren's essays. Sandra Brady and Ashley Lammers helped me transcribe the interview material recorded in English and Afrikaans. They invested hundreds of hours in the often-frustrating labor of listening, typing, reviewing, correcting, retyping, and printing. Only those who have done this kind of work can really appreciate the effort involved.

The Program of African Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston hosted me as visiting scholar from 1988 to 1992. Through the program's support, I gained access to the superb Africana Collection in the library. The curator at the time, Hans Panofsky, not only proved to be an invaluable resource in tracking down material but, more important, impressed me with his humanitarian concern for Africa. During most of the research period, Marilyn Green of Palo Alto, California, provided me with a newspaper clipping service that kept me informed about South African events as viewed by the U.S. press. I thank her for her effort. Finally, I wish to

mention Marjorie Benton, who helped me get in touch with resource persons in the Chicago area. Her support at a very difficult time in my career will not be forgotten.

I undertook this project out of my personal concern for the country of my birth and the well-being of everybody who resides there. I approached it also with the knowledge that a substantial gap exists in our qualitative knowledge about white South Africans. Whether this book will help to fill that gap, time will tell. I also have the practical intention of providing, to some degree, usable knowledge to anyone interested in the minimization of violence in a South Africa undergoing dramatic structural changes. Writing these lines on the day of the first democratic election ever held in South Africa, I realize that the contents of this book attempt to describe white attitudes and values at the start of a new era for that country. May they change and may peace be maintained and lives spared in the new South Africa.

Gerhard Schutte
Chicago

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1

Introduction

This book is about South African whites during a period of rapid social change. The legal system that enshrined their privilege is rapidly disappearing. They are faced with adjusting to a new situation in which their traditional senses of identity, purpose, and place in society have largely become obsolete and in need of substantial modification. Yet many, clinging to the past, meet the undeniable reality of change with disbelief and resistance. Others adopt strategies of coping with the new reality. I will argue that permeating these diverse responses is a sense of solidarity and unity shared by a broad spectrum of whites. On the surface, the evidence suggests that they are torn by a divisiveness that sometimes borders on civil war. However, on a different level there are many unspoken and tacit agreements about their hopes for the future and the nature of interracial relations.

The material presented in this volume is largely descriptive, but it raises important theoretical points with regard to the issue of social solidarity. I would therefore suggest that the reader whose interest in the topic is general and relatively nonacademic start at Chapter 2. The current chapter deals with the general theoretical and methodological framework underlying the study reported here, and is therefore more technical in conceptualization and style.

GOALS OF THE STUDY

It is my purpose to present in this volume a systematic and analytic investigation of the social origins of those structures of consciousness that persistently give rise to attempts to preserve and consolidate whites as a group in the rapidly changing political environment of South Africa. I consciously

do not want to frame the initial statement of the problem in terms of racism, paternalism, fascism, or any other preconfigured explanatory judgment. It may well prove to be one, or a combination of these, but, methodologically speaking, I will adhere to the principle of examining the evidence first before proceeding any further. The avenue of examining evidence of social solidarity first puts the investigation within the framework of a classical theme of sociology.

It is very tempting to look at the problem in terms of racism, as many studies about South African realities have done. From a comparative perspective, Teun van Dijk (1985, 1987, 1992a, 1992b) and his colleagues have conducted extensive work on the discourse of race and racial differentiation in a number of Western democratic societies. They have taken their point of departure from the common observation that, regardless of its illegality, racism is still rife in the United States, Great Britain, and various European countries. In these societies, racism tends to assume a relatively covert form, disguising itself in neutral and subtle ways. However, if one looks at the social structures of these societies, at the distribution of power, health, and wealth resources, blatant inequalities simply stand out. This racism is borne by covert and disguised sentiments of superiority and entitlement and has real and disabling consequences for minorities in these societies. Under the conditions of white majority domination found in these societies, these mental images of the racial and ethnic "other" are perpetuated and reproduced on two levels. Van Dijk and others have demonstrated how the reproduction of racism is achieved on the macro level in the dominant discourse encountered in the press, electronic media, and political and educational arenas. At the same time, this discourse provides legitimation for the existing societal structure by providing "rationales" for inequalities or by denying their existence. Discourse on the macro level informs group attitudes and dispositions. On a micro level, the reproduction of racism operates on the level of everyday situated interactions of individuals.

The relationship between the micro and macro levels is a complex one. On the micro level, group members engage in practices governed by cognitions and values that are publicly mediated in the dominant discourse. Yet individually shared values and attitudes cannot simply be seen in a deterministic framework, as if the dominant discourse would successfully inscribe itself in, and determine, the individual mind. The interrelationship is a dynamic one. Group members experience the world individually and collectively and attach meaning to it. The public discourse, in whatever form it may take, would lose its relevance if it did not orient itself toward

these shared meanings and expectations. On the other hand, individual experiences and expectations may be shaped and guided by the public discourse. We fully recognize the interplay between the micro and macro levels of discourse. However, in the existing literature on South African race relations, very little attention has been paid to the micro level (I review some of these studies in Chapter 2). One-sided attention has usually been given to the role of the political elite and leaders in South Africa. This volume is designed to give more weight to the neglected perspective from below. It is structured in such a way that it accounts for the ongoing public discourse but emphasizes how members of the white public attach meanings to current events and political and economic pressures.

The mere fact that the current dominant discourse is not very successful in shaping white minds may be a peculiarity of South Africa. In my experience over the past two decades, a large proportion of the white public has become disillusioned with the dominant discourse controlled by the National Party and the captains of industry. The steady decline in the standard of living of the middle class and the seeming rudderlessness of the political process have caused a large section of the white citizenry to drift away from their traditional leaders and the dominant discourse, in both political and economic senses. Dominant discourse and public discourse therefore do not necessarily overlap. Although public discourse is still greatly influenced by the interests of the dominant, there is a domain of this discourse that is less formal. Description and analysis of this informal domain is crucial if we are to come to a better understanding of the values and cognitions that underlie white actions and verbal practices. The evidence for this type of discourse is found in everyday talk, gossip, rumor, anecdotes, and symbolic interaction. In shifting the focus toward a grassroots perspective, we are guided more by the evidence itself and less by populist considerations.

WHITES AS A "MINORITY"

South Africa presents a unique situation with regard to race relations. In no other country has a numerical minority dominated for so long in the postcolonial era. Where race relations do constitute a problem in the West it is usually within the context of relations between a white numerical majority and racial and ethnic minorities perceived by whites to be different and/or unequal. Those in the numerical majority, of course, also happen to have the greater share of power and wealth in their respective societies. This is the pattern found in the United States, Great Britain,

Germany, Holland, and other nations. During colonial expansion, people of European extraction settled as minorities in a great variety of places around the world. In some areas they were highly successful in reducing indigenous populations to powerlessness (or in decimating those populations). As a result, they emerged as dominant majorities in those countries. In the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, British settlers became the majority. British colonies in Africa and Asia produced powerful settler minorities. As a proportion of the total population they were small, and eventually they had to integrate or return to Britain after national independence was achieved in the former colonies. Southern Africa was an exception, however. The farther south in Africa the territory was situated, the longer it took to establish participatory governments. After Zimbabwe and Namibia gained their independence, South Africa was the last territory to move toward a democratic form of government.

The dominance of the white section of the population in South Africa must be understood historically. The British took over a preexisting Dutch settlement when they arrived, and it was these settlers who never enduringly emancipated themselves from colonialism until the whole territory of South Africa was surprisingly granted independence after the colonial Anglo-Boer War. Britain disempowered the black majority of the population by ratifying a South African constitution for the country that would entrench and safeguard white power. As a result, the white minority monopolized political and economic power. Today whites remain a sizable numerical minority, making up about 15% of the total population. In comparison with the dominant majority in the United States, whites in South Africa stand in almost exact inverse proportion to blacks. In the United States, African Americans number approximately 12.5% of the population, which is close to the percentage whites represent as a proportion of the South African population. Though numerically a minority, South African whites are a "majority" in terms of the political and economic power they wield. We can expect that, unless blatantly racist, the rationales whites produce for the structure of their society and the nature of their culture would differ from the rationalizations and self-justifications of their counterparts in white America. Arguments based on the "will of the people" or "the South African way of life" simply lack credibility in light of the overwhelming presence and visibility of the black majority. I am sensitive to this difference, and this volume examines how whites endow their privilege and domination with a sense of plausibility under the historical circumstances they find themselves in during the last decade of this century. The construction of plausibility in the presence of so much evidence to the contrary is an

interesting theoretical problem in itself. In essence, the way whites manage the cognitive dissonance between the reality they perceive and the reality they idealize deserves special attention.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

This study is theoretically informed by the phenomenological perspective Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1974; Luckmann, 1983) adopted in their analyses of the social construction of reality. In the words of Luckmann (1978), this is an "egological" and "reflexive" perspective. The "egological" perspective takes "the individual human being as the center of a system of coordinates on which the experience of the world is mapped." It is "reflexive" because it reinstates "human experience in its place as the primary datum about the world and it describes this experience by turning and returning to the intentional features of experience" (p. 8). This theoretical orientation implies a methodology with which it is closely integrated, thus I will raise methodological issues while discussing theory.

Studies from a phenomenological perspective tend to celebrate the creativity and constructiveness of humans within their social contexts. The nature of the material analyzed in this book does not leave much to celebrate about the way in which many whites construct their reality. The depressing nature of the evidence does not exonerate the inquirer from attempting a subjective understanding of their constructions. This understanding implies the "reflexivity" referred to above, especially in the sense of turning toward the intentional features of whites' experience. As an exercise in sociological understanding, the research required that I capture, as much as possible, an internal view of the world from the perspective of my subjects. Having lived in South Africa for most of my life and having been socialized in the Afrikaner section of the society were both advantages and drawbacks. I was, or am, one of them. Being a "native" of a society means that one takes for granted what the other members take for granted. As Schutz (1973, pp. 207-229; 1976, pp. 20-26, 226-249) points out, taken-for-grantedness is the mode of consciousness typical of everyday life, or of the commonsense world. This mode of consciousness is an unquestioning one that tends to suspend doubt about itself and its assumptions about truth and justice. Scientific investigation amounts to just the opposite insofar as it adopts a critical attitude toward its own cognitions and suspends belief about social construction claims. Translated into