Centuries of Colonialism, Slavery and Apartheid Have Left a Legacy of Institutional Racism

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In this edited version of a new introduction to Assata Shakur's autobiography, Prof Gumede points out that centuries of colonialism, slavery and apartheid have left a legacy of institutional racism, whereby dark skins are often instinctively prejudiced in societies across the globe. Racism is also endemic in global relations between nations.

Official racism may been long abolished in South Africa and the US since anti-race activists such as Assata Shakur in the 1970s US, and anti-apartheid activists in South Africa launched their resistance, yet it's terrible legacy persists for long thereafter.

The challenge for both SA and the US is how to overcome the legacy of both individual and institutional racism long after official racism had been scrapped from the statue books.

Centuries of colonialism, slavery and apartheid have left a legacy of institutional racism, whereby dark skins are often instinctively prejudiced in societies across the globe [1]. Racism is also endemic in global relations between nations: nations seen as 'white' are invariably higher in the pecking order than black ones.

'White privilege', the special benefits, which Peggy McIntosh describes as an "invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks"[2], which accrues benefits to a person purely on their 'whiteness', is a fact of life in country and international institutions across the globe.

It could be as small as a shop assistant giving special attention to a white shopper and ignoring a black one. Or the stigmatisation of black women, who are not "passive, servile, non-threatening, and invisible", by talking out loudly against injustices, as "Angry Black Women" [3]. Assata Shakur would have been labelled as an "Angry Black Woman".

'White privilege' also means growing up with the implacable assumption that one's view of the world, social understanding and ways of looking is the 'normal' – which is also replicated in companies, international culture – whether in films or thought, quality universities and global media. Those of colour have to adapt to 'whiteness', or play by 'whiteness' rules.

In both the US and South Africa racism has infused the DNA of almost every institution in society and racist practices have often become so part and parcel of habits and routine, and social and professional interaction that it is often not even recognized as such.

In South Africa incidents of government corruption are sometimes often broadly viewed by some white South Africans as a general failure of all blacks, rather than seen in their specific contexts, of a corrupt individual, whatever the colour, politics or class.

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Racism has a terrifying impact on individuals. The US-based Institute for Peace Justice described some aspects of racism as a "rejection or neglect as well as attack — a denial of needs, a reduction of persons to the status of objects to be broken, manipulated, or ignored. The violence of bombs can cripple bodies; the violence of miseducation can cripple minds. The violence of unemployment can murder self-esteem and hope. The violence of a chronic insecurity can disfigure personalities as well as persons".

Johan Galtung points that victims of racism are often "depicted as being poor 'by choice,' as a result of their own actions and faults.

Part of the SA 1994 democratic project and the US post-segregation project was to undo the racism which is embedded in institutions and social life, and build human rights' based societies.

Institutionalised racism and apartheid have left both black South Africans and African Americans, with massive 'existential insecurity'. Their cultures were under attack, they were physically dislocated, they were deprived materially, they were deprived from equitable access to public goods such as education and healthcare. Chronic insecurity caused by humiliation scars the individual sense of self. Interpersonal relationships were broken, whether through migrant labour or because of harmed sense of self.

Slavery, colonialism and apartheid have caused 'dislocation' of "familiar and trusted social benchmarks"– whether cultural, individual or social. This leaves a void within many individuals. The challenge for both the US and SA is how to help broken individuals fill that void.

Frantz Fanon [4] points out how institutional racism scars the black "psyche": causing inferiority complexes, low self-esteem, aggression, anxiety, depression, and often "a defensive romanticisation of indigenous culture", whether emphasising fundamentalist Zulu-ness or Africanness, or nostalgic African communal development ideologies.

In our globalised world individual self-esteem, identity and value are increasingly measured in how much an individual possess in material possessions. Since a big part of the legacy of institutional racism is that blacks in both countries are invariably mostly poorer off, reinforces 'existential insecurity', among the poor blacks.

To overcome such scarring to the black psyche, governments need to govern in a more socially conscious way, with a greater sense of public duty, empathy, and solidarity with society's black vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Some blacks would overcompensate for white racist attitudes towards blacks: over-asserting their 'blackness', always seeing the world only between black and white, and nothing in-between, as if reality is not sometimes a mosaic of different colours.

Many white South Africans and Americans appear to be ignorant of the continuing legacy of "white privilege". Some argue poor blacks are in their predicament because of their own doing. Others say affirmative action is now privileging blacks. Yet others again fundamentalistically call for merit appointments to in effect continue 'white privilege'.

If white, to just glibly dismiss the continuing legacy of racism and apartheid policies – the education, jobs and property bar, and long sustained attack on black self-image is deeply

offensive. To argue that achievement is only a white preserve – if blacks do well, it must be somehow to do with their 'political connectivity' is outrageous. White instances of incompetence should not be ignored.

Some white South Africans and Americans have argued for "colour-blindness" [5], arguing race does not matter. Yet, as the African-American psychologist, Monnica Williams argues, "colour-blindness" has helped make race into a taboo topic that polite people cannot openly discuss. And if you can't talk about it, you can't understand it; much less fix the racial problems that plague our society."

Without an open, honest and sober conversation on race in the SA and the US, we cannot understand the extent of the continuing legacy of apartheid and racial segregation, and over the policies to be pursued to rectify it.

One danger is that institutional racism at country and global levels may plunge black people into perpetual victimhood, never taking accountability for their own individual and country failures, forever blaming racism, apartheid and colonialism, and therefore not being able to actively take control of their own individual and country destinies.

Furthermore, the temptation is often to hide behind racial solidarity to support often very undemocratic practices, by our black leaders or organisations, merely because they are black and antiracists. Appeals to black (or white) 'authenticity' often demands closing ranks behind very dubious and corruption, personalities, sometimes undemocratic politics and (black) government neglect of its (black) citizens.

In South Africa, many black and white judges and magistrates still astonishingly blame the victims of rapes for being responsible for being raped. Surely, in such these cases, a black magistrate and judge cannot be supported merely on the basis of his or her blackness.

The American scholar of race, Cornel West, rightly argues we must "replace racial reasoning with moral reasoning, to understand the black-freedom struggle not as an affair of skin pigmentation and racial phenotype but rather as a matter of ethical principles and wise politics" .[6]

What we should not do is in our bid to debunk outrageous racial generalizations defend individual incompetence, wrong-doing and even corruption, just because of the person is black or white.

Assata Shakur (right) left the Black Panther Party, because its leader Huey Newton, used the fight against racism to create leadership centred on himself, calling himself "Supreme Commander", and "Supreme Servant", and the organisation discouraged internal criticism.

Black liberation movements turned governments should not, after decrying discrimination by former colonial and apartheid governments, practice discrimination by appointing ethnic, regional and family and friends, to positions in their governments, rather than appointing the best talents.

Poor governance, corruption and lack of accountability, by South African or African country governments, only reinforce deeply held racial stereotypes of black – therefor better governance is crucially in slaying the racism dragon.

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Notes

[1] Macpherson, W. (1999), The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Report of an Inquiry by Sir William
[2] Macpherson of Cluny, Cm4262–1, London: Home Office; Waddington, P. A. J., Stenson, K. and Don, D. (2004), 'In proportion: race, and police stop and search', British Journal of Criminology, 44: 6, 889–914; Sveinsson, K. (2008), A Tale of Two Englands: 'Race' and Violent Crime in the Media, London: The Runnymede Trust.
[3] McIntosh, P. 1988. White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA
[4] Fanon, F. (1967). Black Faces, White Masks. New York: Grove Publishers; Rajab, D. (2012). Zuma out of touch with reality in South Africa. The Mercury, Durban, January 10
[5] Tarca, K. (2005). Colorblind in Control: The Risks of Resisting Difference Amid Demographic Change. Educational Studies, 38(2), 99-120.
[6] West, C. (1994). Race Matters. New York: Vintage

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