

REALISING THE DREAM: UNLEARNING THE LOGIC OF RACE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL.

Soudien, Crain. 2012.
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Realising the dream can be read in many ways. As its subtitle indicates, it is about the ‘logic of race’ and it is about ‘the South African school’. As also indicated in the subtitle it is also about ‘unlearning the logic of race in the South African school’. As such, *Realising the dream* can be read as being about ‘race’ and racism, South Africa, South Africans, South African schooling and about ‘un/learning’. Whilst I think it is appropriate to want to read *Realising the dream* in these ways, I want to suggest in this review of the book that *Realising the dream* is about more – much, much more.

Realising the dream is not just about ‘realising the dream’ of a non-racial South Africa. Neither is it only about schooling ‘new’ South Africans into a ‘new logic’ that transcends ‘race’ and racism. Nor is it only about understanding the ‘logic’ of discrimination and how it may be acquired, and subsequently, ‘unlearned’. *Realising the dream* is about all of these but it is about much more.

Realising the dream is about the complexities, contradictions, dynamism and forces that construct all of us as human beings. *Realising the dream* is about the struggles of being, becoming and living as human beings, in all its multifaceted layers of complexity and enigmatic dynamism – as we live, become, be, know and move through time while



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being on earth. *Realising the dream* puts forward an argument about the dire importance of realising the dream of being human, and it does so with scholarly dexterity, critical engagement, seriousness, and care.

This review first outlines what the book covers. I do this only briefly in order to outline how the book is structured and what is contained in each of the chapters of the book. The brevity of this discussion is also to ensure that it does not spoil the actual reading of the book, which I would urge all to do. I then pick up three essential arguments in the book in order to demonstrate why I think this book makes a more profound point about being human than only dealing with 'race' and racism, South Africa or South African schools.

The first of these arguments is about identities. The second argument is about agency. The third argument is about going beyond the strictures and confines of existing systems of dominance and subordination in order to realise the fullness of our complex human selves.

Those who are familiar with Soudien's work will recognise that *Realising the dream* is both in conversation with and takes further issues that Soudien has dealt with elsewhere. For example, in *The making of youth identity in contemporary South Africa* (Soudien 2007) Soudien discussed his research with learners in schools in Cape Town, and the many layers of complexities that 'white', 'coloured' and Xhosa learners navigated through in order to make meaning of and to survive in the schools that they occupied. In *Realising the dream*, one will hear echoes of these discussions, but *Realising the dream* takes these discussions forward as well.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of *Realising the dream* engage with the theoretical debates that the book uses. These range from questions about social constructivism, issues about identities, debates about 'race', the impact of the Enlightenment on modernity and modern selves, to questions about difference, multiplicity and movements of people through space and time and how these shape their lives and who they are and become.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 historically cover the schooling of South Africans from slavery, missionary education, apartheid education to post-apartheid education. This is a particularly succinct and yet comprehensive coverage of schooling in South Africa, historically and currently.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 continue with an analysis of schooling in post-apartheid South Africa, and re-focuses the discussion in the book on questions of identity, becoming and being in the South African school. These chapters also pick up on the very useful theoretical coverage of the central concerns in this book which were raised in chapters 1, 2 and 3.

Whilst chapter 7 focuses upon the constructions of 'privilege', chapter 8 focuses on the constructions of 'subordination'. In both these chapters (7 and 8) Soudien attempts to move beyond polarised understandings of privilege and subordination, and to demonstrate the fluidity and complexities of privilege and subordination as they are lived and experienced in individual lives, and how these play out in schools.

In chapter 9, Soudien uses the framework and arguments developed in chapters 7 and 8 to engage with both the possibilities and challenges for individual agency in the face of many forces and levels that impact on people on a daily basis. In this discussion, Soudien also attempts to work with both structures and agency as opposed to treating them separately.

Chapter 10 provides the conclusion for the book.

As can be seen from the above brief account of what is contained in the chapters of *Realising the dream*, the extent of the coverage of the issues that Soudien provides in the book is comprehensive. From the key concepts, theories and debates in mainly sociological thinking in chapters 1, 2 and 3, the history and construction of contemporary South African education in chapters 4, 5 and 6, to the empirically based analysis of learners' and schools' experiences in chapters 7, 8 and 9, *Realising the dream* is thorough in its coverage of the issues. The coverage provided is also critical, scholarly and moves almost seamlessly from historical and global concerns and issues to local South African engagements in ways that are both illuminating and useful.

In the following, I turn attention to the three arguments that I want to outline, which were indicated earlier. These are arguments about identity, agency and going beyond current configurations of forces to enable the realisation of the dream of being and becoming human.

Soudien carefully attempts to balance social constructivist claims about the construction of identities with the social reality of people's experiences of these constructions in their daily lives. In relation to 'race' this means that whilst one can, rightfully, argue that 'race' is a social construction and is scientifically false, it does not mean that the social experiences of racism are not real. This is a difficult tension to straddle because in arguing for the social reality of such experiences, one tends to give credence to something that is false. It is precisely in showing how something as false as 'race' can still lead to real experiences of racism that Soudien is able to deconstruct the 'logic' of 'race' and to show how it in fact constructs the experiences of racism in social experiences of people.

However, Soudien does not work with an essentialised understanding of notions of identities. Soudien constantly shows how identities intersect with each other. It is also due to such intersections that human beings and human lives are so complex, fluid and dynamic. The intersections between 'race', class and gender receive particular attention in the book.

Although it is illuminating and interesting to show deconstructively how identities are formed and shaped by complex and complicated micro-sociological and macro-sociological forces, it could also easily lead to an overdetermined sense of people's identities, leaving one with the view that people are wholly constructed and do not make choices and do not have any possibility for their own, self-determined actions. Soudien is very mindful of this, and carefully tries to show that human beings always make sense of the world/s they occupy, and there always are many ways in which they

act in relation to such situations as they navigate through such spaces in order still to live a meaningful life for themselves. Soudien shows that there are no givens in the ways people may respond to the situations with which they deal. There are many ways of being, of making sense of things and one cannot simply read off how things would play themselves out in any situation on the bases of social categories and the structures which bolster them.

For example, in chapter 3 Soudien discusses male initiation rites and how these carry old forms into the present and how they impact on the school. Drawing on Ngwane, Soudien shows that one could easily assume that such old initiation rites are only masculinist and sexist on the basis of deconstructing how such rituals construct forms of masculinities that position men as dominant. Yet, Soudien shows that initiation rites such as those used in the Eastern Cape, which were researched empirically by Ngwane, are more complex than mere constructions of dominant forms of masculinity. In these initiation rites there are serious attempts to resist the impositions of modernity and still hold on to traditional rituals and beliefs, but to do so in ways that speak to the present and the future. Soudien says:

His (Ngwane's) argument is based on a premise that is similar to mine. He argues that dominant representations of South Africa in which the old and the new and resistance and compliance are framed in opposition are too limiting. Instead he paints a picture in which the institutions of modernity are themselves sites of struggle. (Soudien 2012, 93)

It is by straddling the old and the new, modernity and tradition, that Soudien shows how the relations between structures and agency are far more complex than polarised thinking would allow. It is in recognising 'modernity' and all of its structures as 'sites of struggle' that Soudien is able to show that in any given situation agency is always possible and these possibilities lie in the struggles that people engage with on a daily basis as they make sense of their lives, engage with the forces acting upon them and the institutions which attempt to regulate and control them. For Soudien, such sites of struggle are everywhere – in the school, in the state, in structures of modernity, in the old and the new. These struggles, it should be noted, are acts of agency by people. Soudien constantly maintains this sense of people as agents, with agency, and keeps this thread running throughout the book. For Soudien, people are not only acted upon and constructed, they are purposeful agents who are constantly negotiating spaces for their own selves and self-expressions. As Soudien states:

this book has sought to make clear [that], we do not only live in a world which is determined for us by the forces of dominance. We always retain the power, by virtue of being human, to intervene in the processes which seek to determine our fates. Our agency – our will to act – will always carry a value, small or great, in shaping what becomes of us. (Soudien 2012, 242)

Viewing people as constituted by complex and complicated intersecting, fluid and shifting identities, as occupants of sites of struggle and as agents who make meaning

of their lives in active ways, and recognising that whilst social constructions around categories of 'race', gender and class constrain, people still remain agents of and in their lives, lead Soudien to pursue what I consider to be the most profound point that the book attempts to make, and that is about realising the dream of being human.

The experiences of 'race' and racism, as with other forms of discrimination, have the effect of dehumanising people and reducing their humanity to the power configurations of processes of domination and subordination. One needs to keep in mind that the distortions to our humanity are experienced on both ends of the spectrum. Both the dominant and the subordinated have distorted images of themselves.

For example, 'white' people have their own humanity circumscribed by the interpellation of 'whiteness' and whilst it has privileging effects it does not allow 'white' people to be fully human by seeing themselves as being more than 'white'. 'Black' people too have their humanity reduced and perverted by the constant depiction of 'black' people in demeaning and dehumanising ways. 'Blackness' too does not allow people to realise their full potential as human beings because it keeps them within the confines as prescribed by constructions of 'race' and racism.

The 'logic of discrimination' then, is one that is ontologically a distortion of our own humanity. *Realising the dream*, then, is more about how we can realise the dream of our own humanity, about how we can be the full human beings that we are. As Soudien says:

We have here the wonderful challenge, not only of how we will live together as people, but also of how we will develop our individual capacities and gifts beyond all the limiting prohibitions that our varied histories and legacies throw in front of us. It is how we manage our freedom as individuals and, at the same time, demonstrate the capacity to live with each other that is important. This is the promise we as a society represent. We have the opportunity here of demonstrating how we might take real joy in the endless differences which make us human and of showing that we realise that our differences are the resource upon which the survival of the human race depends. It is in realising that we resolve our differences, whatever they might be, and celebrate our achievements in very similar ways that our oneness as a human race is asserted. (Soudien 2012, 3)

The challenge that Soudien is focusing on in *Realising the dream* is thus more than how to realise the dream of a 'new South Africa'. It is about the challenge of being human in ways that contest dominant constructions of ourselves and in ways that pierce the logic of such forms of discrimination so that we can be fully human in the fullness of its complexity and wonder.

However, Soudien also wants to approach this ontological challenge of being human in systems of domination and subordination in ways that go beyond self-awareness or self-actualisation. Soudien says:

How does one cultivate the capacity...not simply to know oneself, but to actually take care of oneself?...How does this sense of care come to include the awareness that one's well-being is

completely dependent on the well-being of others, others upon whom one will inevitably have to call when one's imagined self-sufficiency is shown to be impossible? And...how does one install this sense into the South African psyche? (Soudien 2012, 2)

As such *Realising the dream* is more than only being about a 'new South Africa' and overcoming the 'logic of race'. It is about being human in relation to others, it is about caring for oneself as a human being and recognising the humanity in others. It is about creating the enabling spaces which go beyond the language, structures and systems of domination and subordination of modernity to allow for the realisation of the humanness of all, inside and outside of South Africa.

Realising the dream is a book about being human. It is also a book about how such humanity is perverted and distorted by processes of discrimination and how schools re/produce such processes of discrimination. It is also a book that makes an empathic appeal for the dire need for us to recognise our humanity and the need for us to allow each other to be human. It is this dream of being fully human, and in relation to others, that Soudien hopes we would realise.

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