# Review

## Mark Hunter (2019) *Race for Education: gender, white tone and schooling in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crain Soudien

csoudien@hsrc.ac.za

In *Race for Education* the Canadian-based geographer Mark Hunter inserts into the South African education, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, geography, politics, history and psychology discussion an important new ethnography of the relationship between schools and the social system in which they find themselves. His aim with this book is to develop a better understanding of the relationship between one of the great institutions of modernity, the school, and the human subjects who inhabit and flow through it. The broad approach he takes is to foreground and make an object of scrutiny the feverish tension which the engagement between people and institutions generates – schools with themselves, people with people, schools with people, schools *in* people and people *in* schools. Hunter is technically what one might call a social geographer. Social geographers are almost by definition interdisciplinarian. They think of space as a political site which requires understandings of and from multiple perspectives and sense-making strategies.

To understand South Africa properly, a great deal more work such as this is required. It is necessary to understand how the South African society is being formed through the weight of race, class and gender as these take expression though the mediation of space, language and the ever-changing forms of power in people's lives. What Mark Hunter is helping us come to see here is how the emptied-out frames of class, race and gender require, if we are to speak with any degree of helpfulness to each other in explaining power and privilege, and their opposites, constant

refreshing. South Africa in 2019, similar as it might look outwardly to its pasts, and this we must acknowledge, is not the same sociological place it was in 1994, when Mr Mandela convened the country and its people in a process for reimagining itself, or, indeed the place it was in the heady days of 1985 when the sight of a Casspir evoked anger and not fear, or, much less, that racial Disneyland the country was for people who thought of themselves as white in 1961. The issues people and their institutions in which they find themselves now in 2019 may, at a high level, be similar to those they experienced in the past, but their politics are fundamentally different. Work such as Hunter's brings us to understanding this basic empirical reality.

To take us to this contemporary reality Hunter concentrates on the city of Durban, the metropole of eThekwini, and in that vast urban landscape, the suburbs/townships of the Bluff, Berea and Umlazi. He conducted over 500 interviews, collected archival documents, assembled and analysed demographic data on schools and residential areas and simply watched and observed what was going on around him for eight years from 2009 to 2017. This data, it must be said, is extremely useful. Just on page 89 of his book, for example, he tells us the story of the difference between the education and income levels for the residents of the Bluff and those of Berea. He was able to build close relationships with several families in their navigations through the city. We see these navigations in the stories the families shared with Hunter. He introduces us to interesting personalities such as the upwardly mobile Mr Cosgrave who is a social mediator of working-class white the Bluff and upper-class white Berea; the enterprising boundary-crossing Dlamini family and the deeply racially literate Themba who asks Hunter himself difficult questions about the motives for his research. He writes of and about these people with a rare intimacy. Mr Cosgrave is problematic in many ways. Hunter, however, remains respectful of his subjects. He is not judgemental, even when he hears them in Zulu talking in mildly cynical ways about him. He writes easily and lucidly but insistently academically.

The book itself is structured around four periods. Hunter uses these to hold together the thread of his account of how families navigated their way through apartheid and the post-apartheid period. The first period is labelled 'Racial modernism' and encompasses the 1950s and 1960s. The second is the period of the late 1970s and 1990s and is called 'Marketised assimilation'. The third is essentially focused on the immediate years

after 1994, the coming of democracy. The last period, 2000 and onwards, is described as the period of the 'Racialised market.'

The first section of the book is the second largest of the four. Given its focus on race, it provides the essential context for Hunter to develop his argument. In it we see the almost autonomous trajectories taken by the racialised communities of, on the one hand, the Bluff and Berea, and, on the other, Umlazi. In the former the dynamic of class is strong. In the latter, interestingly, it is gender. White class formation and black gendered manoeuvring. In the description of Berea one sees the role Durban's elite schools played in the making of the city's sense of its whiteness. Cricket and rugby were prominent mediums through which being white and elite were cultivated. On the Bluff, by contrast, very evident were strenuous efforts on the part of the Natal Education Department and the Bluff schools themselves to contain the less-academic interests of the children and their families. Schools on the Bluff, Hunter helps us understand, developed in deferential awareness of what their Berea counterparts were doing. Whiteness, as a consequence, was being modelled on the Ridge and held up for the rest of the city to come to terms with, either to emulate or to come to know one's place in the social hierarchy.

South of the city, Umlazi, at that time, because of the country's racialised geography, developed according to very different existential, I cannot think of a better word, exigencies. Class as a social factor was not absent at all, but gender, and this is an important new gloss to which Hunter introduces us in thinking about power and social complexity, was critical. In Natal, during the colonial period, women were regarded as 'perpetual minors in law'. Only men were entitled, to emphasise the point, to access rights to township homes. To escape this patriarchal system women had to apply for exemption from customary law. One of the ways they did this was through fighting for control of their children's well-being. Schooling was a key site through which this fight was prosecuted. So long, explained Hunter (63), 'as a woman had at least one dependent child, being unmarried did not exclude her from attaining a township house'. As the restrictions around people classified as African acquiring property in urban areas relaxed in the 1980s, this situation changed, but the essential relationship that had developed between women and their children in the township space remained. Women continued to invest in their children. Schooling was critical. As Hunter (69) explains: '… women's "agency" to encourage children's schooling was not predetermined or discrete from wider

relations and practices'. Developed here was a powerful inter-generational security system. Mothers sacrificed intensely for their children. They went to great lengths to get them into and keep them in schools. Children would be better-off than their parents were. But they also were able, always with qualifications as Hunter shows us in this book, to understand their relationships with their mothers as relationships not just of obligation – the black tax – but of reciprocity. As their parents got older they would see the responsibility of having to support their parents not as a burden but as a mark of their connectedness to each other.

Characterising the apartheid period, then, were quite discrete processes of social formation for people differently classified – class intensive in white communities and significantly less so in black communities. In the periods to follow, economic, political and social urgencies made it impossible for the Bluff and Berea and Umlazi to think of themselves so independently of each other. The second and third periods throw socially and culturally under-prepared South Africans together. They come into each other's presence with many and conflicting expectations and anxieties.

The second period, from the seventies into the nineties, is hall-marked, of course, by the rebellion against apartheid that one sees after the 1976 Soweto Uprising. It was, however, more complex. A major issue, one which has not been given sufficient analytic attention, was that the economy reached its structural limits. Large reservoirs of poorly paid unskilled black people were not going to keep the economy on an upward growth path. It needed much greater supplies of skilled labour which were able to give the economy both a consumer base and a tax-generating platform. This reality and the weight of the Uprising forced the apartheid government to backtrack on its grand apartheid dreams. Through a sequence of developments one sees in the period education massification taking place and the entry of black people into jobs from which they had been excluded. Many new schools are established. But all of this happens as the resistance movement begins to take hold in townships. From massification and the relaxing of the Group Areas Act begins to stir then a complex new black middle class, a class that has to both oversee its own social development and play a leading role in the Uprising. Contradictions abound. One sees, not quite simultaneously but in overlapping sequences, the rise, and subsequent retreat, of the good black school and then the flight of the new black middle class from the townships as what are called Model C schools open up. Coming out of this, social formation in the country is no longer

a racially discrete experience. Formerly disconnected communities' fates are now much more tightly bound together. What happens in Berea and the Bluff is inseparable from the social dynamics of Umlazi. This articulation produces new and quite different issues for schools and their stakeholding groups. South Africans in the period leading up to the formal abandonment of apartheid come to know each other better. And schools, particularly formerly white schools, are a prime site for this encounter. As Hunter shows, social conditions precipitate extreme anxiety in the white community. Working-class Bluffites scramble to reach Berea as black students begin to enter their schools. Berea principals strategise endlessly to preserve their advantages. Things, however, are not so straightforward.

Developments come to a head in Hunter's final period, from the 2000s on. The central issue for everybody in this period is the management of educational privilege. Where race was the primary factor in the first of his periods, class, now in the time of the fourth, is central. It is never, however, autonomous. Race conditions it. Gender repeatedly qualifies how it might work. The period sees, through the South African Schools Act, the opening up of schools to all the country's children, but the ability of the so-called good schools, via the function of school governance, to protect and preserve the privileges of whiteness. We see how most of Durban's white schools become largely black in this period but how they preserve what Hunter calls their 'white tone'. The preservation of this white tone is managed through rigorous selection procedures, through the deliberate recruitment of white children and the enticement of 'star' black children, and, by the management of linguistic and academic standards. The consequences of these developments are, however, complex. Poor black families, emergent black middle-class families, either don't make it into those schools or hover, perilously on their edges. One mistake and their children are out. But it is also lower-middle-class and poor white families who are having to improvise. They have neither the networks nor the financial means to guarantee right of way for their children. Of course, and this is not gainsaid by Hunter, their skin-colour gives them regularly, not always, the competitive advantage over similarly class-located black people. They are, however, not under the capacious affirmative action umbrella of apartheid. They now have to find ways of making ends meet. The middle-class trope of the atomised white nuclear family is now, in these new competitive class conditions, regularly displaced by a multi-

generational reality in which unemployed offspring find refuge in the modest ambience of their mummy or daddy's home.

And so, through this ethnography of a slice of Durban – there is of course much more to the city, *vide* now what is happening in the north of the city with the collapse of Hulett-Tongaat's sugarcane empire and the rise of the Umhlanga Ridge complex – Hunter makes several contributions. *Race for Education* is, of course, a text about the South African school and the role it plays in constituting South African society. The big South African sociological debates about the making of this society – race versus class in the main but also the themes of structure and agency – are explored powerfully. Hunter has read and uses key *habitus* scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, but he comes to ground the concept in the complex ecology of South Africa. This is key and, talking critically, provided Hunter with the grounded material to speak much more theoretically about the questions of social formation and subjectivity. But one sees at work, on the one hand, the institutional histories and trajectories of the schools, and, on the other, the lived experiences of the racialised, gendered and classed human subjects who move through the schools. And this is valuable for all of us. The contribution of the text, as a result, is strongly sociological. Hunter brings together race, class and gender through the mediational orbit of space and language, to produce a narrative of the durability of power. The narrative has the echoes and traces of old privilege. They are, significantally, symbolically dimmed. But, and this is the value of the book, one sees the inventive creativity of interest and power to produce new social alignments of privilege and subordination. Race and class in the new conditions of post-apartheid, as a result, are not the same species of power they would have been at the height of apartheid. They have taken on new forms and have come to produce new forms of inclusion and exclusion. What has come out of this effort, thus, is an update of older key texts on what it means to be white in South Africa, such as Vincent Crapanzano's 1985 *Waiting: the whites of South Africa;* what it means to be black and what it means to be young and having to deal with questions of identity as in Nadine Dolby's 2001 *Constructing Race: youth identity and popular culture in South Africa.* It also connects with the more recent work of Aslam Fataar on the relationship of young people to their social spaces. It offers, beyond these, suggestions for how we might take a sociology of *becoming* – not just black, not just white, not just rich, not just poor, not just male and not just female – forward in South Africa.