THEORIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE AMBIGUITIES IN AN ERA OF NEOLIBERALISM: THE CASE OF POSTAPARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. In this essay, Sharon Subreenduth explores how social justice policies have both global–local and historical dynamics and maintains that, as a result, dominant Western models of social justice limit engagement with alternative modes of understanding social justice in non-Western locations. She uses the South African experience as a case study for examining the complexities of social justice policy in the context of the decolonizing efforts that undergird national policy in South Africa as it simultaneously negotiates neoliberal globalizing dynamics. The essay specifically analyzes the neoliberal concept of choice and how it figures within the discourse and practice of race and education within society. Moving beyond binaries, Subreenduth highlights the murky areas of social justice and articulates what they tell us about meta-analysis, narrative, resistance, complicities, infiltration, and the neoliberal il/logic of local–global histories.

Introduction: Rethinking Social Justice Frameworks

Social justice, like democracy, is an ideal that must continually be re-visioned in theory, policy, and practice because context, history, and interconnected global relationships and global social movements change the landscape of justice and equity. In other words, while social justice theoretical frames may on the whole work against oppression and marginalization, and may serve to counter dominant narratives that delegitimize issues of equity, they also result from different local experiences. Thus, in the West and the South, social justice may play out differently given different politics, logics, peoples, histories, and contexts. In this article I emphasize the importance of context in social justice endeavors. There is a considerable body of scholarship that engages with, critiques, and uses the concept and theory of social justice to analyze social constructs such as race and education in the United States specifically and the West generally, but this work rarely engages with social justice ideology and practice in the global South. This essay builds upon and extends these analyses by exploring how social justice policies and initiatives have both global–local and historical dynamics, and thus how homogeneous or dominant models of social justice limit engagement with alternative modes of understanding social justice, especially in non-Western locations. The essay utilizes a case study approach and attempts to uncover what has taken place in practice in South Africa, when a government that was so

invested in its liberation struggle is no longer able to live up to its antiapartheid ideology and facilitate social justice for the oppressed. When the everyday lives of the black masses within South Africa’s almost two-decade-old democratic nation remain fairly similar to their experiences under apartheid, what social justice achievements can one claim? What role has social justice, as conceptualized in contemporary South Africa, played to intervene in colonial and apartheid political, economic, educational, and racial oppression and transgressions on human life?

The continuing demand for redress and equity for the majority black population prompts theorizing about South Africa’s social justice efforts as a means for contextualizing and making meaning of South Africa’s current political and institutional ideology, policies, and practices, especially against its racialized apartheid legacy and, more importantly, within an era of neoliberalism. In their contributions to this symposium, Stephanie Daza and Jeong-eun Rhee discuss how neoliberalism influences subjects, policies, and logics, and while its impact on social and school policy practice is context- and subject-specific, neoliberal logic also reconstitutes terms and concepts. At the same time, Hannah Tavares’s postcolonial reading of the construction of race through public education in Hawaii emphasizes the role and enduring impact of colonial history, politics, and policy in social justice efforts at educational equity. South Africa’s possibilities and struggles with social justice indicate a similar history and challenge for social justice in neoliberal times and have implications for how social justice is used as a global construct.

This essay focuses on how dominant social justice frameworks fail to engage with South Africa’s fight to reclaim humanity as a fundamental ideology and their consequent failure to work against the intertwined constructs of race and education. In South Africa, the complex and convoluted discourses and practices of colonial and apartheid histories and racial formations denigrated blacks and


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stripped them of their humanity.\(^5\) As a result of the racialized model of apartheid oppression, reclaiming humanity was seen as the linchpin to overcoming apartheid atrocities based on race privilege. However, as we consider South Africa’s social justice efforts, one has to ask, What does it mean to regain humanity? How does one “become” human again? How is this desire to be considered human reconstituted in postapartheid South Africa [outside of South Africa’s constitution] but still connected with that colonial essentialized African? The \textit{a priori} struggle during apartheid [similar to that of many colonized societies] was to regain a sense of what it means to be human, since during colonial domination the African as human consistently took the form of waste and was seen as disposable.\(^6\) This struggle to be recognized as human during apartheid serves as the foundation of the South African social justice ideology. Such recognition is intertwined with apartheid’s system of racial oppression/privilege and thus provokes these questions: Who remains disposable, or nonhuman, in postapartheid [deracialized] South African society, and what means do citizens have for redressing this? How does race figure in the regaining of humanity? What is the relationship between race and class with regard to racism and rehumanization?\(^7\) Despite changes in rhetoric and policy, and constitutional assertions that aim to rehumanize South Africa’s oppressed, daily life has changed minimally, if at all, for the masses of black South Africans, especially with respect to educational equity.\(^8\) Under these conditions, how are social justice ideologies mobilized to justify the ways in which South Africans can be human, as citizens of a postapartheid nation and a globalized world?

In this essay, I first outline the three dominant social justice frameworks. Second, I examine the ideological social justice resistance to apartheid, and how social justice as a mode of equity is conceptualized and realized in postapartheid South Africa. In both cases, social justice is strongly linked with regaining a sense of humanity while also demanding [constitutional] equal citizenship rights. Third, as a way to concretize how social justice frameworks have become ambiguous in the South African context, I use David Theo Goldberg’s concept of the secularization of race to examine the role of racelessness in South Africa,\(^9\) both as a postapartheid


7. See Rhee, “The Neoliberal Racial Project,” for a discussion of the neoliberal racial project, biopower, and governmentality.


social justice intervention and as an attempt to create an equitable democracy. Within my discussion of race, I closely examine the role of “choice” in both promoting and limiting social justice efforts; specifically, I explore how the South African government’s educational initiatives, perceived as a transformative mode of social justice intervention undertaken to empower the oppressed, actually exemplify how choice operates to perpetuate and maintain ubiquitous racialized oppression. I focus on choice because of its pivotal role in managing apartheid’s racialized oppression and its persistent impact on educational redress, controversy, contestation, marginalization, and oppression. In order to examine social justice as a model for decolonizing efforts that go beyond the simple redistributive leanings of dominant social justice frameworks, I use the South African experience as an example of the complexities of social justice efforts in non-Western contexts, especially with regard to the decolonizing efforts that undergird national policy in South Africa as it negotiates neoliberal globalizing dynamics.

Bringing forth the case of South Africa as an analytic context helps move the current discourse and theorizing of social justice beyond dominant Western frameworks and provides a tangible circumstance in which to elucidate contemporary neoliberal complexities with social justice endeavors. Thus by theorizing social justice against and within its relationship to race and education, which have been organizing institutions of dehumanization in South Africa, and against a complex historical narrative of power and privilege connected to race and education, this essay contributes to, and also complicates, dominant Western conceptualizations of social justice in an era of neoliberalism.

Expanding on social justice conversations in Educational Theory, I pose the following question: What happens to social justice when neoliberalism becomes the driving force? For instance, in her review essay “Education for Social Justice: Provocations and Challenges,” Kathy Hytten provides an insightful analysis of three edited texts that span critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and globalization theory by reviewing the connections between democracy education and social justice in the United States. She argues that current times force progressive educators to engage in a more powerful and compelling educational discourse that foregrounds issues of social justice. In line with Hytten’s call, here I review


11. It is important to note that South Africa attempted redistribution as part of its social justice/redress efforts, for example, land redistribution. As of yet this redistribution has not been resolved.


contemporary social justice efforts with regard to race and educational equity in South Africa, specifically those that invoke the concept and practice of choice as a form of social justice. This essay calls into question the neoliberal underpinnings of choice as a practice of social justice. To do this, I begin with three dominant (Western) social justice frameworks, using these as a referent for theorizing about South Africa’s social justice efforts.

**Dominant Social Justice Frameworks**

In *The Handbook of Social Justice in Education*, Fazal Rizvi examines the three dominant approaches to social justice in relation to international social justice efforts:

1. *Liberal humanism*: This approach emphasizes fairness, individualism, and the state’s responsibility to develop policies to remove barriers arising from unequal power relations that prevent access, equity, and participation.

2. *Market-individualism*: This approach rejects the practice of redistribution as unjust and argues that the state has no right to distribute private goods that people produced as a result of their own efforts; it emphasizes the market in economic and social exchange. The market is crucial to facilitating social exchange and promoting individualism because of the assumption of individual property rights that can be exchanged.

3. *Social democratic*: This approach rejects individualism and prioritizes the needs within community. The social democratic framework argues that ideas of justice are not compatible with markets and foregrounds person rights, including equal treatment of citizens, freedom of expression and movement, reciprocal relations of power and authority, and so on.14

Central to these frameworks are globalized neoliberal precepts that provide a narrow and hegemonic conception of social justice and tend to minimize the complex interplay of politics, history, policy, race, and power. Therefore, here I push for a “defamiliarizing” of these dominant frameworks and attempt a theorization that seriously engages alternative, complex, and more nuanced social justice efforts taking place in the global South.15

While the three social justice frameworks outlined previously drive discourse and practice within global circuits, scholars have shown that they fail to attend to

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the complexities of social justice efforts in non-Western contexts. For example, in their discussion of social justice goals in African education, Leon Tikly and Hillary Dachi critique the neoliberal impact of development in Africa through donor and international organizations (which typically base social justice efforts on the first two models), and address key social justice educational initiatives. They argue that three dimensions to social justice in sub-Saharan Africa are absent from these efforts: (1) redistribution and access to resources, (2) recognition of the claims of historically marginalized groups, and (3) participatory justice within debates on education. These three dimensions help provide a better historical and contextual understanding of social justice efforts in sub-Saharan Africa — precisely the kind of understanding that I maintain should be recognized within dominant discourses of social justice. Additionally, Tavares’s postcolonial rereading of historical texts in the construction of race in Hawaii’s public education system demonstrates the value of case studies for providing a more contextualized analysis that is not ahistorical. Roland Coloma, in his essay in this symposium, also shows the value of paying more attention to historical racial formations in both local and global contexts. South Africa’s dual oppressions of colonialism and apartheid were dehumanizing, necessitating complicated social justice efforts to regain humanity. This focus on regaining humanity is very different from the focus of liberal humanism on individual fairness. Therefore, South Africa’s dual oppressions and social justice efforts in response to this legacy need to be analyzed and theorized within particular historical, temporal, and political eras. This requirement is particularly imperative for educational theorists who work within the tenets of social justice. In line with the argument Barbara Applebaum sets out in her article “White Complicity and Social Justice Education,” this essay presents how theory and theorizing ought to be contextualized in order to provide a relevant condition for researchers to think about race and education within Western and non-Western societies that claim a postracial era.

Claiming Humanity Through Social Justice Efforts: Against Apartheid and Postapartheid

The antiapartheid social justice framework was based on an ideology for decolonizing the population and for recognizing, denouncing, and dismantling the apartheid atrocities that arose from a political system and policies that differently managed, based on race, the daily life of South Africans. South African activist

18. Tavares, “Reading in the Wake of Postcoloniality.”
and scholar Mokubung Nkomo calls for knowledge, policies, and practice to have a democratizing effect and a social justice intention on South Africans, which captures what is meant by South African social justice efforts that are decolonizing:

A massive effort to decolonize the prevailing Eurocentric epistemology must be a priority project. The African reality must be at the center of the new democratic epistemology if only for the compelling logic of restoring the humanity of those who for centuries had been alienated by racially inspired, exclusionary models embedded in the prevailing epistemological order.21

This call for the colonized to assert and claim their humanity is a call echoed by many anticolonial and indigenous scholars.22 Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that colonized people are “compelled to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it has meant to be considered not fully human, to be savage.” Therefore the struggle for humanity within previously colonized nations has been “framed within the wider discourse of humanism, the appeal to human ‘rights,’ the notion of a universal human subject, and the connections between being human and being capable of creating history, knowledge and society.”23 This oppositional redress to apartheid oppression and dehumanization — to the treatment of black South Africans as savage — was the basic intention of postpartheid South African social justice. Therefore, the key question in addressing the social justice agenda of regaining humanity is this: Who in postpartheid South Africa continues to be sacrificed (that is, dehumanized) in the name of South Africa’s economic development in the era of globalization and neoliberalism?

Relative to the way in which social justice was mobilized against apartheid, South Africa’s current institutional social justice ideology, as it plays out within a newly democratized and globally competitive nation, presents both limits and possibilities for a conception of social justice that is humanizing and decolonizing. In part, this challenge results from the ways in which South Africa’s social justice–oriented policies and practice have been incorporated into neoliberal globalizing dynamics that have reappropriated the original intentions of its social justice approaches.24 With regard to racelessness, examining the in/ability of social justice to rehumanize and reenfranchise black South Africans provides important insights. My intention here is not to malign or disregard the ongoing decolonizing


23. Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, 26 [emphasis added].

social justice efforts, but rather to consider the complexities, ambiguities, and conflicts involved in social justice and equity within this neoliberal era, especially for countries like South Africa that have a particular history of oppression and redress.

Understanding the historical relevance of race to educational equity and the contemporary articulations of race as referent to social justice discourse and practice must precede analyzing educational equity in South Africa. Apartheid oppression and discrimination were based on the biological categorization of race as a means to protect white privilege.25 Also important to note is how race was used in apartheid South Africa to determine access to physical space and economics as a way to manage white life and black life.26 Consequently, social justice efforts were rooted in helping the oppressed and marginalized to regain a sense of humanity, dignity, equity, and empowerment. This entailed fostering a collective sense of social justice and empowerment very similar to that characteristic of the social democratic social justice framework, but with a significant and critical focus on reclaiming black (African) humanity and dignity.27 During apartheid, the oppressed were regarded as subhuman, savage, the (human) waste of society. During the struggle for liberation, there were seemingly clear distinctions between what was just/unjust, who was oppressed/oppressor, and this allowed for the development of a collective sense of solidarity in the effort to topple the oppressive apartheid regime.28 During such collective struggles, binaries often seem more contained than they really are, and the case of South Africa is no exception.29 The sense of solidarity in the fight for human rights and the empowerment of the oppressed served as the foundation for the social justice ideology that emerged in South Africa’s postapartheid constitution and that continues to drive educational legislation and policies.

Almost two decades later, and against the preceding liberation claim, South Africa must reevaluate the condition and form of social justice postapartheid. South Africa’s current challenge is that, while the apartheid-era binaries have blurred, old oppressions have not disappeared, despite the integration of social justice into national and educational policies and laws. These oppressions are now maintained


28. However, even as I articulate that there seemed to be this salience with regard to injustices during apartheid (that is, the oppressors/oppressed), readers need to keep in mind that there were also murky areas of justice/injustice and oppressed/oppressor. See Aslam Fataar, Educational Development in South Africa’s Democratic Transition, 1994–1997 (Cape Town: Sun Media, 2011), for details on these blurred demarcations as well as how apartheid/antiapartheid policies converged.

by market forces rather than by apartheid. Today there are more pluralisms in South African society (with a push for market individualism), legislation, economy, and so on, and these tend to dilute the power of collective organizing for social justice that was present during the struggle for liberation from apartheid. Market capitalism’s focus on the individual consumer and individual choice as well as modern liberal individual rights seems to be part of an un/conscious and growing anticollective process. The once antioppressive fight against old colonial power is no longer a tangible reality, yet the history of liberatory struggle against colonial power continues to circulate within current policy discourses and practices. These historical-political entanglements are complex, all the more so because the “enemy,” so to speak, is no longer easily identifiable, and yet the apartheid legacy of racialized oppression has not loosened its grip on contemporary South African society. The greatest challenge for the South African government is how to implement social justice–based desires for reclaiming and asserting one’s sense of humanity articulated in the liberation struggle now that apartheid has fallen.

**Racelessness in the Rainbow Nation: Neoliberal Choice as a Social Justice Construct**

In this section, I discuss how the original intentions and orientations of social justice get infused by, are integrated into, and then become complicit with neoliberal dynamics. I primarily use Goldberg’s analysis of the “secularization” of race to theorize how the issue of race in postapartheid South Africa is affecting its social justice endeavors. Social justice (unlike justice, which is preoccupied with distributive equality) is considered more of a social construct that captures “both the social character of justice in general and how justice is actually practiced in different societal contexts. This is to distinguish social justice from natural justice as a universal feature of the fabric of the world.” Not surprisingly, then, an attempt to create a sort of raceless society to redress the injustices of a racialized society during apartheid has been a key characteristic of postapartheid social justice.

Goldberg traces the genealogy of the theopolitical formation of race in South Africa, highlighting the theological and equality-based components of the rationale for racial segregation that preached an “each to its own” message (that is, access to one’s own language, rituals, culture, and so on) but that at the same time upheld white economic and political power. The Freedom Charter was significant to the antiapartheid movement, as it rejected racialism and expressed a “vision of fair, equitable sharing of resources and wealth of the country, and equal rights and treatment in and by the law, irrespective of racial identity.” The Freedom Charter, Goldberg states, was key to postapartheid governmental deracialization.

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and secularization. As a means to disrupt the absolutism of race in postapartheid South Africa, the government adopted the premise of a raceless society by denouncing racial categorization with specific reference to race-based privilege (but not disregarding affirmative action policies in place). Goldberg poses key questions about the denunciation of a racialized society: In the absence of race as absolute, what does it mean to have a raceless society in terms of everyday lived realities? What does racial irrelevance mean in the South African context? South Africa adopted this racelessness in an effort to build a singular national identity and to create a sort of unifying attachment that is nonracial, that signals a commitment to negating racism and its effects on a subject, and that declares universal citizenship. Keeping in mind that race privilege in apartheid South Africa was not simply a result of ethnic and cultural differences, but was integral to economic and political power and, as such, permeated the entire social fabric, the legacy of apartheid continues to surface across social institutions, spatial geographies, practices, and behaviors. Thus the questions posed by Goldberg are timely with regard to theorizing the effects of racelessness as a social justice tool on the lived realities of daily life.

To depart from its racialized legacy, postapartheid South Africa conceptualized a new nation — the rainbow nation — as a means to create a raceless society and thus undo the dehumanizing effects of apartheid on racial identity, power, and privilege. This rainbow-nation state model was a contrapuntal move to apartheid’s racialization, turning away from racialized identity and instead to more social identities/subjectivities that are relationally and socially constructed in daily life under the assumption that social identities are based on freely chosen interactions. Clearly, the trope of the rainbow nation was an effort to enable the development of a national identity as opposed to the racialized heterogeneous categories mandated during apartheid. The performative rainbow-nation identity was first touted at the 1995 Rugby World Cup games held in South Africa. This was followed by other world sporting events, such as the 2003 Cricket World Cup and the 2010 Soccer World Cup. These public performances showcased the possibilities of a raceless rainbow nation and a collective national identity. But however well-intentioned the rainbow-nation state model was, the insidiousness of apartheid’s racialism continued to prevail in the everyday lives of the marginalized masses. Goldberg aptly states,

From the vantage point of a sociality figured on mixing, the fixations of race would amount to the negation of the rainbow nation, as that from which its robustness could be measured. The nonracial could be heralded only insofar as it took its leave from the racial, but in doing so has kept the ghostly terms of race ironically alive as implicit yardstick.

In working through the form of the “rainbow nation,” Goldberg elaborates, the question of “Who properly qualifies and who does not?” prevails and is critical


to understanding the rehumanizing social justice efforts. However, Goldberg also states that inclusion in/exclusion from the rainbow nation is “driven by the coterminous neoliberalizing thrusts of post-apartheid sociality” and therefore “full membership of the new polity extends to the healthy, to those who can pay-as-they-go, and to those who own property.” Goldberg’s questions implicate not just who belongs but also who, as a result of the ability to choose (social) identities, maintains/regains his or her humanness and who remains human waste/disposable.

As Goldberg notes, beneath the enthusiasm for the culture of the rainbow-nation model lurked the legacy of deeper separations, residually, educationally, commercially, and medically. These divides are reproduced so readily also in informal spheres and settings through implicit and sometimes explicit appeal to racial preference schemes or racially charged political agendas. Race has lost its religious authority, its sacralized status, to be sure, but freeing racism at once of its institutional constraints. The apartheid of race has been replaced by — better yet, subsumed into — a spiraling apartheid of class.

The postapartheid effort to diminish the influence of race by propagating the notion of the rainbow nation, based on freedom of choice and association, has not had the intended effect of displacing the iniquitousness of race (as an apartheid and colonial construct). Instead, it has presented individuals freedom of choice with regard to adopting social identities that are configured by and through association, relation, and what has become the out-of-control apartheid of class in postapartheid South Africa. Goldberg states that freedom of choice can only take place within the limits of one’s means and networks, which in present-day South Africa are tightly connected to class, yet remain infused by the colonial, apartheid legacy of race. So there is no demise of race — just a displacement of its meaning, which is now articulated through class. The postapartheid race-class formation thus moves the issue of race from biology and cultural differences to the market-mediated value of commodification. This is reflective of the market-individualism model of social justice, where the market decisively facilitates social exchange for individuals under the assumption that individual property rights are exchangeable.

As Goldberg states, class maps race — hence the process of re-racing through class, which has not been successfully unhinged from its anchors in colonialism and apartheid oppression, persists in South Africa. Considering the massive unemployment rate of approximately 23 percent and the poverty that prevails in South Africa, how did the antiapartheid movement’s social justice initiative, to decolonize from the racialized apartheid era, become hijacked so that only some (such as the growing black middle class) are benefiting from this (now neoliberal)

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36. Ibid., 526–527.
38. See Rhee, “The Neoliberal Racial Project,” for further development on market-mediated value and commodification.
social justice movement? By drawing on some of the examples discussed previously, I point to how neoliberalism subsists — ideologically, structurally, and materially — and where it invents new formations of racism that effectively continue the work of the old ones while making devious adjustments, such as introducing the notion of “freedom of choice” [used as a social justice tool]. Specifically, I focus on this question: Despite the failure of social justice efforts to produce equity, how can South Africa use these experiences to reconceptualize social justice and continue its decolonizing efforts aimed at regaining humanity?

**Racelessness Connected to Educational Choice: A Social Justice Mode for Decolonization**

In this section I discuss the role education plays in upholding or dismantling race, and I examine the (neoliberal) concept of choice in education as a social justice intervention. I analyze South Africa’s social justice ideology with regard to educational policy and engage with a critique of how race and neoliberalism are implicit in these policies and practices. I examine how choice ideology has developed through the raceless rainbow-nation state model that has become a “commonsense” practice in South Africa.\(^{40}\) What contributes to the power of choice ideology is that it can be linked to the raceless national identity that is supposed to reflect the historical resistance to apartheid. But, as I theorize, neoliberalism has infiltrated the original discussion of racelessness as national choice, resulting in more complicated formations of racism. Thus social justice attempts at redress of racial atrocities and oppression have been hijacked so that their effects instead align with the ends of neoliberalism. I will examine how discourses around school choice, which first stemmed from postapartheid policy for social justice, have become part of this neoliberal social justice effort. In addition, I use the practice of choice in education to further theorize ambiguities of social justice in South Africa.

During apartheid, separate schooling for the four race groups attempted to control the direction of thought, limit the boundaries of knowledge and communication, and condition the black mind for servitude and subordinated positions in South African society. It can be argued that the main purpose of separate education was not necessarily to deny educational opportunity or access; rather, it was a calculated attempt to protect white privilege, to institutionalize social control, to subvert black South Africans’ political and economic aspirations, and to distort the ideological contents of apartheid.\(^{41}\)

South Africa’s educational history and the role education played in both institutionalizing and resisting apartheid is heavily documented and easily accessible.

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40. See Daza’s discussion on common sense in “Putting Spivakian Theorizing to Work.”

The postapartheid democratic government instituted and implemented a number of educational policies intended to transform South African society. Critical to such transformation were those policies intended to redress educational and social inequities. This is evident in a number of policies, from Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in 1995 and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2001 to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2011. OBE and the NCS were championed as the ideological and practical means through which education could play the role of promoting human rights and social justice in democratic South Africa. However, the inadequacy of this system in redressing apartheid oppression compels a closer examination of whether these policies, especially within educational discourses that tend to homogenize and globalize, have the underpinnings of neoliberal, market-oriented educational policies and thus continue to uphold racial oppression. OBE, for example, offered localized “control” through local governing bodies and choice of language (from among dominant local languages) to be used as the medium of instruction. But how does this approach work in the context of a nation that prizes English as the language of economics and power — a neoliberal confluence — and in which most schools use English or Afrikaans as the medium of instruction? Such ambiguities and conflicts demonstrate that even the best social justice intentions, when misaligned with the national practice, limit or diminish possibilities for social justice and equitable treatment.

Alignment of policy and practice was masterminded during apartheid: apartheid ideology permeated everyday life through legislation, the economy, politics, and education and thus was very successful in its indoctrination and oppression. Critics claim that postapartheid educational changes have been implemented too quickly and with little to no attention given to the disparities that continue to exist as a result of apartheid. While the policies mentioned previously have considered apartheid-era injustices, their primary purpose is to signify uniformity and equality (to redress the separate and unequal status during apartheid), but such an approach, when pursued in isolation from oppressive everyday realities, cannot lead to equity. The government used OBE, the NCS, and CAPS as evidence of a social justice agenda for decolonizing, yet these policies reflect neoliberal globalizing and market-oriented trends more than transformative social justice ideologies. These educational policies and practices demonstrate how local, national, and global layers of power relations play off each other in complex ways to generate different and contradictory effects of a social justice effort.


43. There is not sufficient space to delve into these policies here. For more on them, see Yusuf Sayed and Jonathan Jansen, eds., *Implementing Education Policies: The South African Experience* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2001); and Spreen and Vally, “Education Rights, Education Policies and Inequality in South Africa.”
As a result, what began as a social justice initiative ultimately has unintended side effects that serve to uphold apartheid’s system of racial oppression and separation.

Aslam Fataar captures how neoliberalism works its effects on educational policy:

Our political landscape was “over-determined” by a nebulous politics of transformation. We became ensnared by a neoliberal, globalised discursivity and quasi-market dynamics in the distribution of educational opportunity. A productive policy platform for social justice in our schools struggled to emerge. Transformation was trumped by empty formalism, devoid of discursive traction.44

In addition, South African educational policy in relation to school efficiency, the curriculum, and student achievement — that is, the governmental standardization and expectations of educational output — still lies within the divisive, discriminatory, and disparate educational environment that iniquitously maintains the apartheid status quo and works to counter its decolonizing intentions.45 These insights derive from research by Fataar in which he develops a localized understanding of educational policy in a South African township.46 In a subsequent study, Fataar discusses how the ongoing devalued education in townships causes black students
to travel long distances to enter schools that are culturally incongruent and, in many instances, unwelcoming to them. The inclusion of these [black] children in educational institutions all over the city, across the racial spectrum, is therefore accompanied by cultures of exclusion at the awaiting school, university or college, informed by the reworked and deracialised hegemonic “ways of being.” Race lives on, now transmogrified into “cultures of being,” articulated by newer forms of class expression.47

Additionally, Fataar’s study on youth subjectivities and schooling points to how black youth struggle with their subjectivity as they fail to articulate with the normative expectations of national imaginaries — in this case, the nation-state model of “unitary rainbow subject.”48 This study produces a rather complex understanding of the interplay of race, class, and space in educational contexts that seems absent from South Africa’s articulation and model of a unitary, raceless rainbow nation.

Clearly, school choice has not transcended its connection to apartheid’s racial legacy; rather, postapartheid educational policy has reinvented a racialized school

44. Fataar, “A Defamiliarising Scholarship of Hope,” 88.
47. Fataar, “A Defamiliarising Scholarship of Hope,” 90.
48. Ibid., 88.
choice option that is connected to class. As Fataar posits, elements of choice in schooling also have implications for the unfolding of the South African city, which comprises characteristics of both apartheid and postapartheid regimes; specifically, neoliberal reforms such as school choice can entail rethinking the possibilities for postapartheid cities. For example, while there is continued sociospatial segregation between white enclaves and racialized black townships, schooling complicates and disrupts the racial binary. School choice is determined by a complex interplay of factors based on geography, racial reinscription, and the cultural production of images of individual schools. Despite the fact that in postapartheid South Africa one cannot completely escape from existing oppressive colonial residues, it is important to consider what productive spaces have been created by South Africa’s social justice educational efforts. In racialized apartheid neighborhoods, educational quality and resources paralleled group status and power; therefore, school choice in postapartheid South Africa represented the government’s desegregation efforts by opening privileged white schools to all racial groups. As with individual freedom of choice with regard to racial/social identity discussed earlier, school choice is characterized by an individual-market orientation. Thus, in the context of neoliberalism, it seems, school choice plays a pivotal role in managing difference through subjectification, humanization, and dehumanization.

Under the allegedly transformative educational policies that tout equal access and choice as social equalizers, a question remains: Who are the current educational policies privileging? Shedding light on this question, Linda Chisholm and Leon Tikly have identified the formation of a new middle class in South Africa that includes not only the historically advantaged groups, but also the new black middle class. Chisholm articulates that current educational policy is skewed in favor of this new black [and previously oppressed] middle-class group while also maintaining the privilege of the previously advantaged white population. Tikly argues that the current form of educational policy, with its “advocacy of neo-liberal ‘solutions’ to the education crisis … is likely to further entrench the interests of the middle classes including the new Black middle class and in this sense plays a legitimatory role in relation to [neoliberal] interests.”

It would seem that in its attempt at equalizing schools and schooling through its various educational policies, the South African government has actually fallen into the Western [neoliberal] archetype that carries the legacy of


50. Tikly, “A Roadblock to Social Justice?”


colonialism and of aligning the function, organization, and product of schools to corporations. Such corporatization of education reflects a global capitalist agenda that seems contradictory to using education to further the social justice intention of disrupting apartheid divisions. The transformative policies and curricula have not significantly improved educational equity and access — based on race — in South Africa. Fazal Rizvi and Laura Engel argue that the discursive “construction of access and equity is fundamentally ideological because it assumes minimalist understanding of the principles of social justice.” They claim that this construction of access and equity is framed within a “hegemonic characterization of globalization, which is not only reshaping economic and political relations around the world but is also transforming the discursive terrain within which educational policies are now developed and enacted.” In the case of South Africa, its key precept of social justice — to rehumanize — becomes reframed against hegemonic, globalized forces, as evidenced in South Africa’s preoccupation with capital accumulation, which seems to be the only way to free oneself from oppressive racial formations and allow for freedom of choice.

Just as choice (as a construct for achieving social justice or equity) has actually produced and maintained racial inequities, neoliberal educational policy, disguised as a tool for achieving global equity, has changed the internal discourse and implementation of educational social justice efforts in South Africa. This change is illustrative of the problem that concerns Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard when they argue for the importance of recognizing “the asymmetries of power between nations, and … their colonial and neocolonial histories and post-colonial aspirations.” Postapartheid South Africa provides a salient example of the complex conditions and contradictory elements of neoliberalism and marketization.

Global, neoliberal social justice discourse on education is clearly linked to the global knowledge economy that prizes market efficiency, standards, and corporate-style accountability. In the case of South Africa, this discourse also clearly undermines the fundamental social justice efforts undertaken to redress apartheid oppression and to rehumanize black South Africans through recentering indigenous knowledge (culture, language, ritual) as a valuable component of the fabric of society. As Tikly implies, neoliberalism incorporates social justice discourse as much as colonialism incorporated missionary discourse, and in so doing it subordinates and subverts the social justice efforts in South Africa. Because South Africa is positioned within the global market as an economic and

54. See Gulson and Fataar’s study on school choice, “Neoliberal Governmentality, Schooling and the City,” which captures the neoliberal logics of choice in education. Gulson and Fataar assert that school choice is part of neoliberal globalization.
political leader on the African continent and cannot avoid this neoliberal effect, the country exemplifies the contemporary challenge of this neoliberal condition of contamination (as a result of its integration into the neoliberal regime) while addressing the racialized apartheid marginalization that persists and revisiting its redress social justice efforts that were deeply rooted in claiming one’s humanness. This ambiguity, this impossibility, is what the South African case brings to complicate current social justice discourse.

Implications of “Defamiliarizing” Social Justice in a Neoliberal Era: The Context of Race and Education

My theorizing of the South African case demonstrates the limitations of the dominant social justice frameworks to serve as models for making sense of non-Western countries, or as lenses through which to examine South Africa’s own complicities within and across these frameworks. As a way of theorizing the possibilities, limitations, and ambiguities of the social justice efforts in South Africa, I discussed one of the key tenets of neoliberalism: choice. Choice repeatedly surfaces in South Africa’s educational and racial policies and in its decolonizing and redress efforts. For South Africa, choice seems to be articulated only within the limits of one’s means and individual networks of relations. In postapartheid South Africa, the gap between wealthy and poor has become exaggerated, and there is a rapidly growing black middle class that was not present during apartheid. However, simultaneously, those who suffered under racial absolutism are the same as those who now suffer under racial secularization. This in itself makes evident the neoliberal globalizing impact on the centrality of race/racism: when racial discourse is no longer central, there is a move from racial absolutism to racial secularization — in the case of South Africa specifically, the move has been from all is race (during apartheid) to racelessness (postapartheid). This shift in the dichotomy moves postapartheid accountability away from the state to the individual. This is one of the key tenets of neoliberalism — its attempt at justice or leveling through moving accountability to individuals (by means of choice). South Africa is a case to show that choice as a means of redress actually forecloses upon itself by continuing racial oppression through the neoliberal logic of economics and class. However, as discussed in this essay, the logic of neoliberalism with regard to social justice becomes illogical within the South African context due to its social justice intentions. What is missing from this neoliberal concept of choice is the ability to capture a “thicker conception of social justice [that] also implies recognition of geographical and historical context”; in other words, to consider redress, one needs to consider both current and historical human experience.57

As noted earlier, the three dominant Western social justice frameworks — liberal humanism, market-individualism, and social democratic — often work in isolation of historical and social contexts and are instead preoccupied with individual rights, civic competence, and constitutional rights. My analysis in this

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essay moves beyond these considerations and reflects on the implications of social justice in the context of South Africa, a colonized nation with regard to race that has aimed at racelessness as a means for reclaiming humanity and dignity. I specifically analyzed the neoliberal concept of choice and how it figures within the discourse and practice of race and education in South African society.

Considering the neoliberal complicities within contemporary South Africa, I have questioned whether racelessness and choice (with regard to social identity and educational access) have become a global capitalistic commodity instead of a vehicle for social justice decolonizing through equity and human rights. The studies and scholarship presented here demonstrate that the South African government has fallen into the Western archetype of aligning the function, organization, and product of schools to corporations; that reflects a global capitalistic trend that seems contradictory to the government’s intention of disrupting apartheid’s divisions. However, such binaries don’t encapsulate the complexities of social justice that is imploding in South Africa. Goldberg poignantly analyzes the role of choice in racial oppression and has offered an opportunity for further theorizing around the connections among social justice, race, and choice. Similarly, Jessica Gerrard offers a nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and educational mechanisms involved in class reproduction and its implications for education and class struggles.\(^{58}\) This essay serves to build upon these alternative theorizations of social justice, as well as to defamiliarize the taken-for-granted, hegemonic Western social justice discourse.

Moving beyond binaries, this essay highlights those murky areas of doing social justice and articulates what they tell us about meta-analysis and narrative, resistance, spaces we have, strategies, complicities, infiltration, and the neoliberal il/logic of local–global histories. Dominant frameworks of social justice are often demarcated as if there is no overlap. However, the case of South Africa illustrates that these frameworks actually coexist and affect one another, creating new articulations because intentions and reality collide and render one model into another. Indeed, one could argue that South Africa’s social justice agenda started off defined by a combination of the social democratic and liberal humanist frameworks, was compromised through an imperial project of global competition, and now plays out primarily within the framework of market-individualism. This neoliberal il/logicality demonstrates that it is impossible for South Africans to escape from the postpartheid epistemological violence of being slated as the absolute other (just as under colonialism and apartheid).

Social justice in South Africa is fast becoming a trope of political symbolism\(^ {59}\) in which the complexity of social justice policy (with respect to curriculum, school choice, racelessness, identity) has “transmogrified” into what Kalervo Gulson and

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Aslam Fataar call neoliberal contingency, thus making unrecognizable the initial impetus of social justice redress in South Africa. Globalization has the capacity to appropriate acts of social justice and render them symbolic trope, to create conflict among indigenous decolonizing ideals, and to change the internal discourse and implementation of social justice in South Africa. There clearly is a need to make connections across history, politics, and context for local–global discourses on social justice to help us better understand contemporary social justice issues such as poverty, oppression, education, and race. A global South analysis of social justice offers an alternative lens through which the dominant and the marginalized can coalesce to examine the discursive nature of race, power, and knowledge and the possibilities such a project holds for rethinking the relevance of dominant frameworks of social justice to all contexts and peoples, irrespective of location.

60. Gulson and Fataar, “Neoliberal Governmentality, Schooling and the City.”