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“Poor Whites” Do Matter

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I found Francis Nyamnjoh’s recent article (2012) in *Africa Spectrum*, as well as Isak Niehaus’ response to it (2013), of great interest. Nyamnjoh argues that ethnographers should not only study “down” to poor people, but also look “up” at the elites. While I genuinely find his point of great importance to the whole field of anthropological and ethnographical research, I have to concur with Isak Niehaus’ opinion that Nyamnjoh’s paper does not really treat its main example, the study of white South Africans, fairly.

Since both Niehaus and Nyamnjoh mention my work in their papers, and since I pointed out similar problems in my 2004 doctoral thesis, I feel obliged to participate in this discussion and to elaborate in the most constructive of spirits on certain issues. I do so in the hope that this will help Nyamnjoh improve on and focus his valuable argument, which still lacks sufficient strength and convincing support.

The most obvious problem with his article is the lack of necessary homework, which Niehaus addressed thoroughly and accurately in his response. This refers to Nyamnjoh’s very limited, or selective, reading on the topic. However, there are also contextual inaccuracies that Nyamnjoh should take into account when revising his ideas.

On page 70 of the article, he builds his argument on my work, among that of other scholars:

What little anthropological research does exist is largely unpublished and mostly on non-English-speaking whites (cf. van der Waal and Robins 2011) or on “poor whites” (cf. Teppo 2004).

In this rather important sentence, with which he justifies his point in the article, he makes several incorrect statements. I therefore also have reason to find his justification wanting.

To start with, I would like to address certain inaccuracies: In the text, Nyamnjoh referred to my work as an “unpublished” study of poor whites and Afrikaners. My work on “poor whites” has been published (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2009a) as well as extensively quoted by others working on similar topics in South Africa. I have also produced more work on South African whites – a very simple Internet search would have shown this within seconds. After my study of poor whites, my postdoctoral study concentrated on examining the ways white South Africans (including middle-class and English-speaking people) established or breached spatial and racial boundaries in their religious practices in post-Apartheid Cape Town (Teppo 2009b, 2011).

In addition, Nyamnjoh emphasizes the crucial importance of studying English-speaking whites. This is true, but whether the need to study them exceeds the need to study Afrikaners is questionable. According to the latest (2011) census, of the 4.5 million white South Africans, 2.7 million speak Afrikaans as their first language.¹ Moreover, the Afrikaners are still a very influential minority who, for decades, both held the keys to power and largely defined South African whiteness.

The most serious mistake here, however, is Nyamnjoh’s implication that studying “poor whites” is only of marginal importance. It is simply not true.

First, historically speaking, the 1929–1932 Carnegie Commission’s “poor white project” was an exceedingly significant case. It not only stimulated South African social sciences, but also led to one of the first major social-engineering projects. This project was, of course, ethically untenable as it preferred whites to all other “races”, but it remains very well known. One would think that the head of the anthropology department at UCT would acknowledge the significance of the “poor white project” as essential for gaining a deeper understanding of social sciences in South Africa today.

Second, the whole discourse around “poor whites” has a lot to do with class fragmentations, political identity and political mobilization around the “poor white” issue. They might at first seem like a small and “marginal” group of people, but a closer look at their history, and the interest surrounding them, shows this is not the case.

The third point regarding poor whites concerns my doctoral thesis, which questioned and examined the racial categorization that all South Africans – including whites – were subjected to. In my dissertation, I pointed out that these categories also disadvantaged the whites as they obliged them to be and behave like “good whites”, a demand that heavily stigmatized

1 Statistics South Africa (STATSSA) (2012), *Census 2011: Census in Brief*, online: <www.statssa.gov.za/Census2011/Products/Census_2011_Census_in_brief.pdf> (1 March 2013).

those who did not measure up to the norms of whiteness. Thus, the main problems examined were the stigmatization of “poor whites”, the attempts to make them “good whites”, and the ways they were used as examples of how not to be “white”.

However – and this is spelled out many times throughout the thesis – the “poor white” project was not orchestrated by the poor whites themselves, but by the middle-class white South Africans – especially politicians, social workers and intellectuals, native speakers of Afrikaans and English alike. They were also the ones whose agenda was critically scrutinized in my dissertation. Even today, being a “poor white” in South Africa is not exactly the same as being poor and white elsewhere, and being middle class still defines whiteness in South Africa. While being white meant being a beneficiary of Apartheid, there is a twist to the story: Even if one were white, the consequence of not being a “good” one was harsh stigmatization – being a “poor white” is an ugly label that has hardly lost its negative connotation since the end of Apartheid. Not only do other whites look down on those considered poor, but South Africans of all shades despise them. Thus, this work should also be read as a critique of cultural essentialism to which whites in South Africa subjected not only people of other “races”, but also other whites. Furthermore, in its small way, the dissertation demonstrates how essential it is to address the vexing issues around “poor whites”. These issues are indeed far from trivial – they are charged with socio-political significance and symbolic meaning. This is also the reason that Jacob Zuma frequently visited poor white areas before and during his election campaign – to extend a symbolic hand toward the white electorate, which sees the fate of poor whites (among others) as a sign of whites in general being cast out in the new South Africa.

While I sympathize and identify with Nyamnjoh’s frustration over the continued white dominance in many areas of life in South Africa, I think that by chastising anthropologists studying whites he has not only identified the wrong culprits (as Niehaus showed), but done so on incorrect grounds.

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