Afrikaner, nevertheless: Stigma, shame & the sociology of cultural trauma

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Preface

For this book I spent many hours with Afrikaners, listening to them, recording their words, and interpreting what they told me. I strived to do justice to the emotional depth of their challenges and turmoil, in part by taking their emotions theoretically more seriously than most sociologists might. This study shuns judgments about individual pathology and prejudice, because I wanted to get beyond the customary dismissals in academia of their race talk as racism and their whiteness as defense of privilege. The research was grounded in six case studies of three different institutions and more than 100 interviews with Afrikaners who are young and old, male and female, rich and poor, progressive and conservative. Their descriptions, stories, and opinions are the basis of this book. My goal was to create a kind of map of the cultural and emotional landscape of Afrikaners after apartheid. I believe this book presents a map that is fair and balanced, while remaining critical.

However, upon completing this book I realized (partly through questions from colleagues) that I had spent too little time writing about my own positionality and experience. Maybe because sociology does not share anthropology’s colonial legacy or because South African sociology has a long tradition of fighting against apartheid, I had not confronted this matter earlier. Therefore, I would like to address this issue here. The problem of power differences and positionality cannot be conveniently swept under the rug of the method section, as if the pretence of objectivity or empiricism solves the problem.

In part, I chose not to include my voice directly in the text in order to inject as little of myself as possible in the Afrikaners’ narratives. Rather, in each chapter of this book, I portray how institutions shape the thoughts and feelings of Afrikaners after apartheid. I also had a pragmatic concern: There is only so much space in a book, and I wanted to let Afrikaners speak for
themselves. I don’t intend to imply that I was unaware of my role as interpreter but previous encounters with anthropologists and oral historians have made me weary of putting myself in the story. Indeed, a colleague suggested I write an appendix on my “confrontation” with “racist” white South Africans, which confirmed my intuition that I must distance myself from contributing to sensationalism or stereotypes about Afrikaners. All these concerns of course do not mean I can pretend my account is objective.

My encounters with Afrikaners led me to believe that my first responsibility as a researcher was to listen carefully and compassionately; many Afrikaners felt ignored and even disregarded. In the academic study of Afrikaners, there has been a wide gap between academic outsiders and Afrikaner intellectuals. Outsiders are often intrigued by this “white tribe” in Africa and focus on their aberrations and idiosyncrasies. However, Afrikaner intellectuals are hampered by concerns of intimacy and legitimacy. I hope I struck a balance between both approaches. As an academic outsider I worked hard to gain the confidence of Afrikaners, while always being open about my background, intentions, and opinions. I addressed the matter of trust explicitly in my methodology chapter. All Afrikaners cited in this book bestowed their faith in me, and I worked tirelessly to honor that trust in my writing.

The end of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid brought a period of great uncertainty. Afrikaners had to find their footing in the new desegregated world through a process of questioning and searching with conflicted feelings. I sought to understand how anxiety, anger, shame, and resentment impede tolerance and change. Some of the interviews were conducted in English but most were carried out in the Afrikaners’ native tongue, Afrikaans. As a Dutch academic, I studied Afrikaans diligently, but my understanding of it is not perfect. However, my Afrikaans was good enough to converse with Afrikaners in their mother tongue and preferable to both of us speaking a foreign tongue. Speaking and understanding the language also helped me grasp the cultural context and nuances, as well as the emotional undertones. The translation of the Afrikaans is my own, and due to space constraints I had to cut the Afrikaans footnotes.

At the heart of this study is a desire to give voice to a group of distinct individuals that we know very little about beyond the traditional macro-narratives about the South African transition. Nevertheless, as a qualitative researcher, I chose one story line over another and included some quotes while leaving out others. Some may conclude that I have sided with the interests of Afrikaners who are fearful about crime, poverty, and racial turmoil in South Africa. Others may deduce that Afrikaners are obsessed by race and ignorant of black, poor people, or may accuse me of being an outsider who is holding up Afrikaners as an object of ridicule. None of these interpretations is my intention.
My interest in the Afrikaners was triggered by the hopeful moral promise of the democratic transition. Change was possible, it seemed, and I was curious about how people are able to change their often deep-seated convictions—sociologically and psychologically. However, my general scholarly and sociological interest in identity change is also more specific and personal: As a white, male, upper class Dutch researcher, I am aware of my country’s long colonial history and its continued struggle with racism and Islamophobia. I do not see Afrikaners as the exotic last “colonial whites” nor do I want to use them as a foil to project Europe’s racism and colonial guilt. I see Afrikaners as a unique but penetrating example of similar struggles around the world to confront the legacy of colonialism and white supremacy.

Afrikaners are unique in that they must confront the racism in their language and thought, and must learn to live without the sense of entitlement to white privilege. Afrikaners are forced to change, and the consequences of this fact are a central thread throughout this book. My aim is to highlight and make explicit how Afrikaners’ stories of change and resistance are contradictory and layered. I do so while attending to the shifting institutional context in which these stories emerge and take shape. We cannot understand or critique their moral choices without considering the social context in which such choices are confronted. I aspire to retain the hopeful thread that sparked this research, without compromising a necessary critical perspective. I hope the reader finds helpful and persuasive arguments to bring the moral promise of change closer to fulfillment.