

'Race' and Racism

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'Race' denotes the belief that humans can be grouped according to visible characteristics such as skin colour or hair type, personality, cultural traits, or all of these. This belief is the basis of 'racism' and 'racialism', two terms that we may usefully, if somewhat artificially, distinguish. 'Racialism' is a view that human beings are fundamentally grouped into races. 'Racism' starts from the belief that human beings are grouped into races and then adds the belief that these races are of differential intrinsic worth. Racialism does not necessarily imply ranking racial groups, but it always asserts that they exist in some stable fashion. This ideal-typical distinction would allow us to separate race-based world-views that are pluralist, from those which are invidious because they advocate unequal treatment on racial grounds. Students of 'race' and racism differ on whether both are integral to modern Western thought despite the universalistic aspirations of the Enlightenment, or degenerate departures from an Enlightenment project that still promises the transcendence of racism. Contemporary theories of 'race' and racism fall into four main areas: race relations; Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches; social constructionism; and approaches influenced by feminist thought.

Neither biology nor genetics offers support for the idea of human beings being divided into distinct racial groups. Only a small fraction of our genetic make-up accounts for the visible differences that are seen to mark 'race'. Furthermore, any two randomly selected individuals from one 'race' will have greater genetic variation between themselves than that between any two randomly selected individuals of two different races. So, although visible difference is the means whereby 'race' is usually understood, genetics offers no reliable support for differentiating people on the basis of phenotype. The fact that people remain attached to the idea of racial groups suggests that we might usefully turn to history and the social sciences for explanations of what is therefore a social and cultural, rather than, strictly speaking, a 'natural', phenomenon.

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Racial thinking peaked in Western thought in the 19th century, when attempts were made to set it on scientific ground. This scientific racism was founded in the belief that race is rooted in biological difference and that racial characteristics were therefore inherited. Further, scientific racists sought to infer essential, inner characteristics from external, phenotypical differences. Though scientific racism as theory was dealt fatal blows by the defeat of Nazism and by subsequent developments in genetics, race is still often discussed as if it were a fixed biological category akin to species. Much racial thinking is based on an implicit notion of a natural group. An important question is therefore: how and why can race be seen as constituting a natural group? Guillaumin (1990) makes a distinction between a natural group as understood biologically (say a species) and a social group regarded as natural. For Guillaumin, the conventional mark (length of hair or cut of clothing) preceded naturalization of a system of marking (where some biological attribute such as skin colour is taken as a permanent thus natural mark); the slave system (at least as old as civilisation) preceded taxonomies of living things, which themselves preceded racist theories. Racial consciousness and practice were the result of the coming together in the modern era of the social construction of natural groups *and* the system of marking of social groups, the latter having had a history which pre-dated the modern.

Although the historical processes by which 'race' came to be constituted as a fundamental characteristic of persons have been seen as modern developments, how racial thinking relates to modern thought is a point of contention. On the one hand, some writers argue that racism is deeply interwoven within Enlightenment thought (Gilroy 1993; Goldberg 1993); while on the other hand, others see racism as a degenerate by-product of post-Enlightenment thinking (Malik 1996; Miles 1993).

Those who see racist and racialist ideas as integral to modern Western thought point to the many instances of racist representations to be found in the work of key Enlightenment thinkers like Kant, Hume and Locke. They also draw our attention to the systematic oppression of non-Europeans under Atlantic slavery during the unfolding of European modernity. The coexistence of universalistic ideals of the Enlightenment and the reality of racial oppression are thus seen to demonstrate that racism and Enlightenment thought were not incompatible and indeed, that a

racialist world-view was refined into racist ideas and practices over three centuries of European

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modernisation and colonial expansion. Critics taking this perspective have also pointed to the conjunction of modernist high culture and extreme racism under Nazism. An opposed perspective sees racial thinking and racism as a degeneration of Enlightenment universalistic ideals. From this standpoint, the ideas of inclusive democratic citizenship without regard to 'race' (or class or gender) are still in the process of being struggled for. Overcoming racist thinking and practice, then, would entail striving to bring these ideals ever closer to full realisation.

Social and cultural anthropologists early in the twentieth century insisted that 'race' was a social and not a natural category (Montagu 1998[1964]). Many suggested 'ethnicity' or 'culture' might be a better marker for large scale differences between human groups (Banks 1996). The move away from biologically based notions of difference between human populations to one grounded in a concept of culture was pioneered by Franz Boas (Boas 1948). For Boas, what mattered in differentiating human groups was not what they looked like, nor some notion of 'race' understood through phenotype, but 'culture': a determining symbolic, belief, communication and reasoning system which shaped the individual. Human groups were different because culture manifested itself in different ways. Committed to human equality in general terms, Boas was the sponsor of modern cultural relativism, from which some strands of anti-racism have evolved.

The study of 'race' and racism has grown into a major area in sociology, political science, social policy and social/cultural anthropology since the 1960s, principally in the USA, the UK and France. The field may be divided into several theoretical approaches: a race relations perspective; Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, a social constructionist perspective, and a related body of work broadly influenced by feminism.

The race relations perspective is the longest established of these, especially in the English-speaking world, where it emerged in the 1950s. It understands racial conflict as resulting from a clash between groups with different cultures and histories (understood as races). This perspective takes the category of 'race' as a tool of analysis and not just an object of analysis. In race relations policy, racism is to be combated by a policy of eliminating discrimination in the public sphere and by fostering good relations between the races through public education. Race relations rests on the liberal assumption of tolerance on the part of a supposed racial majority toward various

minorities. The main criticism of race relations theory and practice and is that it does not have a

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sufficiently critical and theoretically sophisticated understanding of 'race'.

The second and third approaches emerged as critiques of the race relations approach. Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives on 'race' and racism begin with a structural analysis of political economy and the history of racial domination under European colonialism. They see 'race' and class as closely interlinked. The social constructionist perspectives have been informed by class analysis as well as feminism, but the principle influences have been those of participant fieldwork and ethnography, and more recently, structuralism and post-structuralism. In this perspective 'race' and racism are examined in terms of subjectivity, identity and representation; 'race' and racism are seen as made and re-made in practice: in communication, and in disciplines and representations of the body. Since the 1970s a vibrant body of work has grown up out of a critique by Black feminists of the gender blindness of much early work on 'race', as well as the 'race' blindness of much pioneering feminist theory and politics (Collins 1990). There are close affinities between much recent constructionist and feminist work on 'race', in that both see racial discourse and racist practice as constantly being constructed and reconstructed on an everyday basis in contexts shaped by gender, while remaining sensitive to changes in the way racial identities are mapped and negotiated.

Ideas of ethnicity are increasingly employed to gloss over the continued fuzziness of racial classification. This development is theoretically inadequate in that it uncritically replaces, rather than questions, the underlying assumption that 'race' is a valid and reliable way of grouping human beings. Critical observation, the life sciences, and even simple logic deny the existence of 'races' as clearly defined groups of people. Yet, the idea that 'race' is somehow natural and even immutable retains much currency. This remains a key area for social research.

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