CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH
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PART 4 RACE

4.1 Introduction

The studies examined in this part of the book focus primarily on racial oppression. The terms 'race', 'racism', 'black', 'Afro-Caribbean', 'Asian' are all, of course, politically charged and dynamic concepts. The lack of any clearly non-repressive signifiers (Bulmer, 1986) means that the selection of terminology is both transitory and to some extent arbitrary. When referring to other commentators, and in the studies reviewed below, the terminology used by the authors will be adopted. Otherwise I shall refer to white and black (to include all non-Whites, sometimes split into Asian and Afro-Caribbean). This is not to imply any phenotypical characteristics or hierarchy. On the contrary, the terms used merely represent socially constructed notions of 'race' (discussed in section 4.2). Furthermore, although accepting the ideological nature of the term 'race' itself, I shall only use the inverted commas when referring to specific usage in this form by another author.

Traditionally, in both the United States and the UK, non-whites have been viewed as 'a problem'. American sociology, well into the 1970s, was characterised by the 'pathological model' of blacks. British analyses of race since World War Two have mainly focused on the 'problem of immigration' (Rose, 1969) without examining wider socio-economic structures (Zubaida, 1970; Lawrence, 1982b).

The four studies reviewed are critical of the pathological view. They agree that the notion that blacks comprise a problem is at the core of racist reasoning. They adopt a wider structural perspective but do not see race in isolation as a system of oppression. Rather they see the lives of non-whites in Western society as effected in the *first instance* by issues of race rather than class or gender. In *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, Joyce Ladner (1971) argues that race is a much more powerful variable in American society than social class. She undertakes a detailed analysis of the growing into womanhood of black girls from a St. Louis ghetto. Her study is critical of dominant sociological perspectives that type blacks as deviant, and of approaches to data collection that reproduce forms of oppression. She explores the lives of black women in the broader structural context of institutionalised racism.

Lois Weis (1985), in *Between Two Worlds*, takes up directly some of the issues raised by Ladner in her ethnographic study of a predominantly black community college. As the title suggests, she examines the ways black ghetto students balance the world of the ghetto, which supports them, with the world of (white) academia, which offers them a tenuous escape from the ghetto. She shows that such students (like Willis's, 1977, lads) are on the one hand able to penetrate the racism of the community college system while

on the other are limited in their critique and engagement with the system because of their dependence on ghetto-based black culture.

Unlike Ladner who found herself torn between scientific 'objectivity' and active involvement, Ben-Tovim *et al.* (1985) in *The Local Politics of Race* are quite clear that social researchers should act to engage racial oppression. Their action-research approach saw the research team becoming directly involved in local action to counter racism. Rather than see this as a hindrance to disciplined and detached scientific enquiry they see direct involvement as crucial to the understanding of the local political machinations that bear upon issues of racial equality in Britain.

Mark Duffield's (1988) study of Indian ironfoundry workers in the West Midlands, *Black Radicalism and the Politics of De-industrialisation*, is critical of piecemeal, institutionalised approaches to anti-racism seeing them as part of the cultural hegemony that sustains racist oppression. His critical study is a detailed historical analysis of the social, political and economic reasons that led to a concentration of Indian workers in the foundry industry in the West Midlands. He reveals how institutionalised racism provided the basis of an alliance between unions, employers and government to defeat the radical Indian shopfloor movement.

All four examples are concerned with colour prejudice rather than with anti-Semitism[1] or forms of ethnic oppression that have, for example, characterised the attitudes and actions of North Americans towards Latin Americans (Briggs *et al.*, 1977), Russians towards national 'minorities' in the former USSR (Karlkins, 1986), Japanese towards Koreans (Dower, 1986), and the English towards the Irish (Lebow, 1976). This is a methodology book and so no apology is made for failing to provide a definitive analysis of different forms of racism. The examples included illustrate forms of critical methodology used to analyse and engage racism.

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[1] Anti-Semitism and colour prejudice are distinctive modalities of racism. (Cohen, 1988, p. 15)