

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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PART 4 RACE

4.2 Race, racism and ethnicity

Race, racism and ethnicity are complex phenomena that have been analysed extensively from a multitude of perspectives. There is no intention here to summarise the history of sociology of race or the debates about the nature of race, racism and ethnicity. Instead some of the general features of these concepts and their interrelationships that characterise critical social thought will be outlined.

Race, racism and ethnicity are interrelated concepts but it is important that they are not elided in critical research. In one sense, race is a meaningless concept in critical social research because such research denies any inherent notion of biological characteristics and traits attributable to racial origin.² In this sense, race and racism are intertwined because racial attribution is seen as fundamental to racism. Such attribution is social and not natural. The social construction of race and the development of racism are concrete historical processes. Racism is not natural or inevitable. It takes many forms, each with its own history and structure of meaning. Race is not an *empirical* social category but it is social in as much as it is an *ideological* construct signifying a 'set of imaginary properties of inheritance which fix and legitimate real positions of social domination or subordination in terms of genealogies of generic difference' (Cohen, 1988, p. 23). When 'race' is naturalised racism is viewed as an external problem not an integral part of capitalism.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to the linguistic and cultural practices through which a dynamic sense of collective identity is produced and transmitted from generation to generation (Bulmer, 1986). Ethnicity does not necessarily connote innate characteristics although race always implies ethnicity. It does so in two ways; either by reducing linguistic or cultural identity to biology, or by naturalising linguistic or cultural identity within a fixed hierarchy of 'social traits'. In other words, ethnicity is racialised in either social or cultural terms.

Critical social research, in arguing for the social construction of race rather than race as a biological category reflecting innate characteristics, denies that racism is just skin deep. 'Names and modes of address, states of mind and living conditions, clothes and customs, every kind of social behaviour and cultural practice have been pressed into service to signify this or that racial essence'. So a critical social research perspective does not simply see racism as rooted in natural biological differentiation. On the contrary, racism is an ideological code that seizes, opportunistically, on various ideological signifiers that work most effectively at any point in time to naturalise difference and legitimate domination. Racist imagery does not merely reflect, in a distorted form, observable ethnic attributes. To suggest it does is to provide racism with a common-sense

rationale that serves to bracket out historical reality (Lawrence, 1982a; Cohen, 1988). On the contrary, racist constructs have an internal structure that cannot be deduced from, or reduced to, the empirical characteristics of the populations against which they are directed.

There are broadly speaking four critical approaches to the analysis of 'race' and racism.³ The first supposes that economics has primacy in determining the character of race politics. It tends to project blacks as an 'underclass' (Glasgow, 1971; Rex & Tomlinson, 1979), 'sub-proletariat', 'class fraction' (Edwards, 1979) or 'reserve army of labour'. Racial structuration is imposed by capital, which needs racism for the sake of capital (Sivanandan, 1982). Struggles against racism are thus struggles against capitalism. This view emerges in various ways in both Joyce Ladner (1971) and Lois Weis (1985).

The second is an anti-race relations position (Phizaclea & Miles, 1980; Miles, 1982), which not only denies biological races but also critiques all uses of the concept 'race' as descriptive or analytic tool. 'Race' is regarded as an ideological effect that threatens class unity. The proponents of this approach want to see race dissolved into class.⁴

The third approach focuses on social policy issues. It sees race and class as fundamentally split with issues of racism having no contact with class politics. The policy approach supposes that radical theorists of race and racism should produce critiques of official race policy and formulation of alternatives (Gabriel & Ben-Tovim, 1979). The plausibility depends on two things: an idea of racism as 'popular democratic and divorced from class'; and a positive evaluation of the capacity of state institutions. Gilroy (1987, p. 26) suggests that the favoured vehicles of this approach involve 'black para-professionals' in the development of race relations legislation, multicultural education policies and racism awareness training, (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1981, 1986).

A fourth approach is sceptical of the multiculturalism of social policy initiatives and suggests an alternative view of the relationship between class and race (Gilroy, 1987; Cohen, 1988; Duffield, 1988). Whatever the actual social and economic conditions faced, for example, by Black or Jewish people they do not constitute, for all time, an 'underclass'. The privations and abuse they suffer is a function of hegemonic racism and to analyse them as an 'underclass' both falsifies the historical process and reifies the negative stereotype (Cohen, 1988, p. 27). What is necessary is to see racism as a process that is neither detachable from issues of class nor subsumed under it. This view brings the contemporary debate within Marxism about the nature of class struggle into the analysis of race. The former cannot be reduced to the latter. The processes of race and class formation are not identical. Class analysis can help to illuminate the historical development of racism provided it is not just applied in anachronistic ways. The potential of a unified working class must be addressed not assumed in simplistic applications of economic determinism to race. Class analysis must be modernised; the capital-labour distinction is inadequate. Class struggle cannot be reduced to productive relations but also involves gender, racial and generational divisions of labour.⁵ The issue becomes one of how race materially relates to class through social action at any given historical juncture. Race is potentially a feature of class consciousness and class formation and is likely to be 'a more potent means to organize and focus the grievances of certain inner-city populations than the languages of class politics' (Gilroy, 1987, p. 27).

In short, taking up the debate within Marxism about the nature of the revolutionary vanguard (Section 3.2, above) this approach suggests that revolutionary potential lies with those groups whose collective existence is threatened. 'Collective identities spoken through "race", community and locality are, for all their spontaneity, powerful means to co-ordinate action and create solidarity'. Because of this real radical⁶ potential 'race' 'must be retained as an analytic category 'not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes', but because it directs attention to collectivities that 'are the most volatile political forces in Britain today' (Gilroy, 1987, p. 247).

Much analysis of race and racism confuses race with ethnicity. This confusion leads to ethnicity being reified into a set of essentially defining traits and removed from concrete historical processes. Ethnicity becomes 'Jewishness', 'Irishness', 'Blackness', and so on, which are abstract expressions of an eternal trans-historical identity. Cultural identity has become naturalised. This is manifested in approaches that, in defining race as a cultural phenomenon, have turned it into a 'synonym for ethnicity' and a sign for the 'sense of separateness which endows groups with an exclusive, collective identity' (Lawrence, 1982b). While these trans-historical traits can be used successfully in anti-racist work (for example, positive images of Blackness), there is a potential to slip into the very epistemological modes (of the New Right) that are being challenged. This is the very foundation of racist reification of ethnicity that is the basis of what was referred to in the 1980s as the New Right racism (Gilroy, 1987; Cohen, 1988; Duffield, 1988). This racism asserted incompatible cultural differentiation. It was an argument used in the United States and in South Africa to support separate development and in its Powellist version (in the United Kingdom) predicted that the (white) British people would not tolerate alternative cultures in their midst. Thatcherism embodied a trivial version of Powellist racism in its call for an end to immigration in 1978 in order to avoid being swamped by alien cultures (Barker, 1981).⁷

Ironically multiculturalism has taken on the same epistemological presuppositions. By defining 'race' and ethnicity as cultural absolutes, blacks themselves, and parts of the anti-racist movement risk endorsing the explanatory frameworks and political definitions of the New Right.

Although still highly contentious, critical analyses of race must avoid replacing biological absolutism by ethnic absolutism. It must avoid the replacement of racism rooted in biological attribution to one rooted in intrinsic cultural traits.

² The nineteenth century attempts at an objective classification of the human species into biological groupings, or 'races' have been 'progressively discredited' and critical social research takes as axiomatic that discernible differences in skin colour, type of hair, or even gene frequency in no way provides the basis for the classification of people into racial subtypes. In social research in general the tendency is to see 'race' as the 'way in which members of society *perceive* differences between groups in that society and define the boundaries of such groups taking into account physical characteristics such as skin colour' (Bulmer, 1986, pp. 54-5, italics added). Critical social research insists that 'race' is an ideological construction.

³ This outline owes much to Gilroy (1987) and Cohen (1988). There are in addition idealist approaches that deal with race as an autonomous realm of scientific enquiry

(Banton & Harwood, 1975) An alternative tendency has, in defining 'race' as a cultural phenomenon, turned it into a 'synonym for ethnicity and a sign for the sense of separateness which endows groups with an exclusive, collective identity' (Lawrence, 1982a). For these writers, blacks do not live in the castle of their skin but behind the sturdy walls of discrete ethnic identities (Gilroy, 1987, p. 16).

⁴ Because this section sets out to provide examples of methodology, which see race as the major form of oppression, no examples from within this tendency are included.

⁵ This, of course, reflects socialist/Marxist feminist approaches unhappy with the way gender has swamped race, for example, Westwood (1984).

⁶ Radical in the sense of 'rootedness' that implies a return of power to 'grass roots' rather than the conservative usurpation of radical.

⁷ The identification of Thatcherism with racism was perhaps the reason for the demise and redirection of the National Front (in the late 1970s), which no longer had a distinctive policy (Edgar, 1977). Thatcherism has reinforced new popular images of racism, notably those around mugging (Hall *et al.*, 1978), and created a popular consensus that explained the 'riots' of 1980 and 1981 not as an economic failing but as street crime, indiscipline in the home, declining moral values, and falling educational standards, all of which were associated with young black people in the popular racist mind.