Constructing Common Cause: A Brief History of ‘Race’

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Seminar 2003/25

Paper to be presented at 16:00 on Friday, 3 October 2003, in Anthropology and Development Studies Seminar Room (D-Ring 506)
This chapter forms the background to a study on social definitions of racism. The study makes use of a number of problematic and emotive terms. It examines these phenomena not as actions, but as attitudes that respondents hold as reflected by their perceptions of newspaper reports. While an attitudinal study is a very practical approach to gaining information on the conceptualisation of racism, for analytical purposes it is necessary to examine the concepts more closely. The terms ‘race’, ‘racism’, ‘xenophobia’, and ‘racial discrimination’ are all used extensively in the literature, little consensus has been reached with respect to their meanings.

‘Race’ has been exceptionally controversial in South African legislation through different dispensations. This has fuelled a great degree of sensitivity around the labelling of ‘race’ groups. The result is that writers and analysts are constantly faced with questions on how to handle ‘race’ in their work. Do they use terms such as ‘black’, ‘black African’, or ‘African’ when they want to refer to black people in South Africa? Does the word ‘African’ include or exclude people of mixed heritage, ‘Indians’, ‘coloured people’ or ‘white people’? Does specifying ‘race’ create opportunity for redress, or perpetuate stereotypical thinking and action? More specifically, should newspaper reports that refer to Jews, Nigerians, or Afrikaners be included in a study on race attitudes in South Africa, or is it impossible for ethnic and national groups to be victims of racism?

Questions such as these are not limited to South Africa, however. Along with the concept of ‘racism’ examined in this study and several other relevant terms, these issues have long been contested, as a brief look at how the scientific community has grappled with them will show.

**Development of the Idea of Race**

Bonnett (1993: 15) effectively sums up some early thoughts on race.

“Before the turn of the eighteenth century, the word ‘race’ ... was primarily used in the sense of ‘lineage’; differences between races resulted from the

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1 This is a draft chapter of a mini-dissertation towards a structural masters in Sociology.
Barzun (1937: 33) interprets this rise of reactionary theorists in the 1800s as a backlash against the achievements of the French Revolution, arguing among other things that they broke down the concept of inherent rights for individuals and replaced it with rights for groups. This meant that group needs rather than individual needs were to be taken into account in laws and social hierarchies (Barzun 1937: 33). When Darwinian theories of natural competition between and within species therefore gained popularity in the latter part of the nineteenth century, they became “tied to an already firmly established mythology of white superiority” (Bonnett 1993: 15).

Even authors holding conflicting views on the meaning and validity of the concept of ‘race’, agree that from the post-Darwinian period up to the end of World War II racist ideologies were used as a front to attain political or economic ends (Barzun 1937: 250; Cox 1938: 323; Benedict 1942: 150). In discussing World War I as a racial war, Barzun points out that “[f]or people who had been measuring skulls and scanning features as a means of discovering the alien race, the War of Nations must have been an especially severe blow. Race and Nation had never been wholly comfortable in each other’s company, mainly because internal politics split nations in half while race united people living under different flags. … But the shock of mobilization … was so great, that the rearrangement of race-ideas was amazingly swift and smooth. … In Germany, the belief in Russian barbarism was as strong as was in France the belief in German barbarism“ (Barzun 1937: 232-4). Thus, ideas on and definitions of race changed tremendously during this relatively short period of violent political turbulence. He therefore views the “combination of racialism, militarism and cultural nationalism that our (his) generation thinks an innovation of the Nazis” as ”an old attitude that found perfect expression … in Imperial Germany” (Barzun 1937: 210).

Ahead of his time, Barzun (1937: 270-1) forges ahead to deny the existence of race in a work titled Race: The Modern Superstition. Arguing at length that race cannot be defined, and that even those who insist that it exists cannot agree on a definition of ‘race’, he holds that the concept was merely a useful tool for politicians and military leaders who wanted to “boost their own ‘racial type’ at the expense of all others”
Barzun 1937: 3 – 17). He concludes that “[m]odern Germany taught the world at least one useful lesson, namely, that race-theories generally have a practical political purpose” (Barzun 1937: 27).

During this same period Benedict (1942: 6) defines race as “a classification based on … traits transmitted by heredity which characterize all the members of a related group”. While she explicitly denies the superiority of any race group (Benedict 1942: vii, 1), she accepts the division of humanity into distinct race groups (Chinese, Negroes and Caucasians) and specifies that race was not based on language differences (Benedict 1942: 6). Faulting Barzun, she concludes “Race, then, is not the modern superstition. But racism is“ (Benedict 1942: 97). She bases this observation on the belief that racism cannot be investigated scientifically in the way that race can (Benedict 1942: 97).

Benedict (1942: 138) agrees, however, that racist doctrines, which arose in national or class conflicts in Europe, were appealed to for political purposes, whether in the Third Reich or anywhere else. She brings power relations into her definition of race in the following words: “Racism remains in the eyes of history … merely another instance of the persecution of minorities for the advantage of those in power” (Benedict 1942: 150). Pointing out that the use of racial reasoning in persecution serve no purpose in homogenous environments but is convenient because modern cities are cosmopolitan, she maintains that "for conflict to arise, there must first be contact" (Benedict 1942: 149-150). Despite her acceptance of race as a category, Benedict (1942: 155) argues that “[t]he only trustworthy objective in any colour-line programme is the ultimate elimination of legal, educational, economic, and social discriminations”.

Up to the end of World War II in 1945, Benedict’s viewpoint is more representative of European thinking than that of Barzun. Holding that racism feeds other purposes, however, post-war revisionist writing, which places race squarely within the framework of the forces of production, deviates from the views of both writers. In the first place, it does not conceive of race as operating independently of class. In 1948, Cox contends that for sociologists the social definition of race is more important than the definition of the biological characteristics of race, since socially accepted definitions are linked to relations (Cox 1948: 319-320). While acknowledging that there is no universally accepted definition of race, he does not explicitly deny the existence of race, but accepts that sociologists can work with common understandings
of what race entails. Noting that racial antagonism arose in “modern times” along with capitalism and nationalism, Cox ascribes the beginning of racial antagonism to “the capitalist exploitation of peoples and its complimentary social attitude” (Cox 1948: 321-322). He adds that “racial exploitation is merely one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labor, regardless of the color of the laborer” and that “[t]he capitalist exploiter … will devise and employ race prejudice when that becomes convenient” (Cox 1948: 323). This is most obvious in a society using slavery, where slaves are defined as “chattel” and “[t]he master may consciously decide to use up his slaves because their replacement is cheaper than their conservation” (Cox 1948: 357). In this way he also defines racism as a power tool in the hands of capitalist exploiters (Cox 1948: 323).

As this line of arguing does not adequately explain the immediately preceding Third Reich treatment of Jews, however, Cox explicitly denies Benedict’s view of anti-Semitism as a form of race prejudice, and he offers an alternative argument. As race prejudice exists for the purpose of exploitation, it is not racism, he contends, but intolerance that is at work in anti-Semitism (Cox 1948: 393).

While emphasising the anthropological view that there is no inherently inferior race in the world and that opportunity rather than genes are responsible for differences, Landis (1958: 250 - 2) nevertheless still accepts the division of humanity into three race groups (“white”, “negroid”, and “Indian, Chinese, Japanese and all other races”). He makes these distinctions on a purely physical basis. Although he describes the groups according to their skin pigmentation (light, dark and yellow) and accompanying characteristics, Landis (1958: 250) betrays some sort of cultural predisposition when he holds that any race can learn the culture of another if given the chance. While relying on physical characteristics to distinguish between races in his explicit definitions, therefore, he conceptualises distinct races as having distinct cultures.

An interesting difference of emphasis occurs in 1969, when Dressler proclaims emphatically that “[p]rolonged and intensive research has produced very little, if any, evidence that races differ in non-physical characteristics, such as ability to learn human behaviour or to develop complex cultures” (1969: 518). While Landis’s position highlights the fact that different peoples have different cultures, this position therefore uses the same argument to emphasise the universality of the human state.
It is during this same period that Frantz Fanon enters the debate with his fierce critique of colonialism and its particular brand of racism. A psychotherapist, Fanon exposes the brutality of colonial racism and its inherent inconsistency with humanist values, both on the level of society (1963: 27-165) and in the mental problems experienced by its individual members (1963: 200-250). This contradiction is the reason that colonised peoples reject European values and culture with such venom, argues Fanon (1963: 33). While Fanon fails to explicitly deny the existence of race in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he nevertheless argues (1963: 28) that colonialists are responsible for the existence of the colonised by systematically linking a series of characteristics associated with “natives” to a series of ways in which indigenous peoples are subjugated under colonialism (Fanon 1963: 29-84). He demonstrates how colonialism dehumanises its subjects by removing the minimum requirements for a humane existence (1963: 30), setting the example of acting in an inhumane manner (Fanon 1963: 31) and casting the subjects as less than human (1963: 32-3). He illuminates (1963: 122) the direct causal relationship of colonial subjugation with the failure of post-colonial governments to improve the plight of the majority of indigenous people. Fanon (1963: 31, 74) comes to the conclusion that only violent revolution that purges a colonised society of all remnants of the colonisers, including their neighbourhoods and administrations, can begin to restore the self-respect of the formerly colonised.

This perspective permeates the mainstream debate to some extent when by the following decade, economic capacity or incapacity is drawn into the argument more explicitly, and social scientists begin to include non-physical aspects in their concepts of race in a new way. They no longer conceive of these characteristics as inherent, but as inherited from past actions that were based on misconceptions or intended exploitation. There is a growing recognition that racial differentiation and discrimination are the cause of the distinct positions of ‘race’ groups in society, instead of the other way round.

Hartman & Husband (1974: 20-34) explain the prevalent prejudice among British people, for example, by tracing the stages of Britain’s relationship with “non-white” people. Here political domination caused a situation where colour correlated closely with wealth and power, which underscored beliefs that different races were not entitled to the same “status and resources”. As the authors (Hartman & Husband
1974: 35) point out, “[i]t is important to appreciate the connection between those traditional cultural assumptions and the present-day position of non-whites, both in Britain and elsewhere”.

This argument is one of the first to posit explicitly that systematic socio-economic subjugation is the cause of the dramatic differences between the class situations of most white and black people. It also suggests that while the subjugation may initially have been political, the political position was used to maintain and later increase economic domination. It further suggests that economic domination serves to fulfil the prophecy of the prejudice on which it is built. A perpetuated inferior economic position for any defined group would mean that the prejudices that accompany ethnic, cultural or religious differentiations are strengthened across generations. Concurrently, those who participate in the perpetuation of the differentiation would feel increasingly justified in accepting the situation as evident. If two generations of a community have not had the opportunity to learn to read, for example, the children in the third generation could lag behind peers who have the help of literate parents. When these differences are linked to colour, it becomes easier for the literate community to overlook the historical differences in resources, and to believe that the children of the illiterate community must be inherently less clever. If they are less intelligent, it could seem evident that they will one day not be able to do certain jobs as well as others. Denied access to certain positions in society, another generation’s opportunities are limited. In this way, one fallacy supports another.

Recognising the ways in which differentiation can become part of a systematic self-fulfilling prophecy, as conceptualised by Robert Merton (Kaufman 2003: ¶1), social science therefore sees a new approach to race rearing its head. By 1993, Bonnet (1993: 7) notes that placing the word ‘race’ in quotation marks has become a “useful device” for those who recognise that the use of the term ‘race’ could have “racist implications” in itself. One question about this view is how something that is not real can have concrete results. Arguing that difference between “white groups and non-whites” is a social construct, and tension the result of the construct, Giddens (1997: 205) interprets the practice as an indication of the scepticism with which the term is used.

Despite the evolution of debates around the appropriate definition and use of the term ‘race’, the rejection of the inherent inferiority or superiority of any race, and the
historical explanation of socio-economic differences, mainstream social scientists have not explicitly denied the existence of race up to this point. The literature can therefore usefully be divided into primordialist thinking, in which race predetermines certain outcomes, and social constructivist approaches, in which communities are understood to impose certain expectations and outcomes because of perceived race differences.

An important recent development is that the view of race as a fictional category, or the denial of the existence of race (a point made earlier by Barzun), has gained a great deal of support (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 356). Guillaumin quotes Ruffié's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in December 1972, in which he asserts that “despite numerous and rigorous studies”, the reason for the great disagreement on racial categories is that race does not exist (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 357).

While Guillaumin thinks that it is essential to show that race has no basis in natural science, however, he does not agree that the concept should be removed "from the mental universe” (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 361). The problem he poses is that while race is not a natural biological or psychological condition, the consequences of perceptions of race are so brutal, that it simply cannot be denied. Reflecting the dilemma, he concludes: "No, race does not exist. And yet it does.” (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 362).

Some writers who support this view contend that defining ‘race’ could work destructively rather than constructively. Michel Wieviorka (1995: 1) argues convincingly, for example, that sociologists of religion would not be demanded to express a position on whether God exists or not. In the same way, “[t]he sociology of racism (or anti-racism) can only be developed by resolutely distanced itself from studies of, and polemics on, race: as Guillaumin has so aptly put it, imaginary and real races play the same role in the social process and are therefore identical as regards their social function” (Wieviorka 1995: 1).

For Wieviorka the distinction between bases for and manifestations of racism is a more important question than a definition of race. This view appears to be echoed by Borja and Castells (1997: 68 - 89), who do not even bother to attempt a definition of race or ethnicity before they use racially descriptive terms to describe the problematic of urban segregation and racialisation. Goldberg also supports the view that a precise
definition of the term ‘race’ is unnecessary if the aim is to address racism (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 363). He explains that “[i]t makes little sense to ask which came first, the concept or the disposition to distance and exclude that inheres at least historically in this (Goldberg’s emphasis) constitution of otherness”.

While not grappling with the term may make perfect sense in an environment where people understand race as a social construct, Bob Blauner (Bowser 1995: 127), identifies the following problem: “[I]n the 1960s and especially in the 1970s, the words racism and racist entered into the nation’s common parlance with vengeance and transformed the way Americans talk about race relations - but not necessarily the way we think about race”. Not even thinking about the term ‘race’ could in other words allow an important process to stagnate, since a position of grappling with or opposing racism does not necessarily exclude particular ways of conceptualising it.

Similarly problematic, the term racism, like race relations, could be understood to imply or confirm the existence of race itself. Along with social scientists, policymakers and others therefore struggle to find a working definition of ‘racism’. If the use of derogatory terms for race groups is defined as racist, for example, a newspaper could be accused of racism for quoting a derogatory term, as happened when rugby boss André Markgraaff’s use of such terms in a secretly taped conversation was quoted by newspapers in 1999 (Butler 1999: ¶9). However, few people would consider the report as such, racist. When an AWB farmer, however, relates that his best friend had gone to “drop off the boys” after a day’s work, it may well be experienced as racist by many. In the same way, it could be difficult to distinguish with certainty between a satirical remark and serious insult, although this depends on the audience.

**Analysis of Related Terms**

In the face of these challenges, Ernest Cashmore collaborated with other major authors on race of the last twenty years, such as Michael Banton, to produce a comprehensive range of definitions in the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* (Cashmore 1984). “Stereotypes” are, for example, defined as exaggerated beliefs associated with categories. Pilkington agrees with Rex that a race relations situation exists when a group of people behaves to another in a way which denies them equal
access to social resources, when those groups are recognised by unalterable signs and when the unequal relationship is justified by deterministic beliefs, but adds that this only becomes problematic when one group can impose its definitions on others (Pilkington 1984: 11). Almost any unqualified statement about a group can be a stereotype. Clearly, qualified statements like “Blacks are more violent than whites”, can also be stereotypes. Stereotypes are “shared beliefs about person attributes, usually person traits but often also behaviours of a group of people”, say Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron (1994: 3, 11), and they usually have both descriptive and evaluative components (1994: 13). As such, argue the authors (Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron 1994: 14-15), they have a negative generalising side, which has received unjustifiable emphasis, while much like scientific theories, stereotypes can also be useful and creative hypotheses giving meaning to the world, when they are flexible. Because it is so difficult to draw the line between negative stereotypes and legitimate or common sense generalisations based on fact or statistics, the concept is not a useful scientific tool and has not been used much for the last twenty years (Cashmore 1984: 294-5).

Among those attempting to pin down the concept of “racism”, Feagin defines it as an ideology that considers a group’s unchangeable physical attributes to be linked directly to intellectual attributes, and that therefore ranks races (Feagin 1978: 6). Giddens (1989: 246) defines it as “falsely attributing inherited characteristics of personality or behaviour to individuals of a particular physical appearance”, adding that “a racist is someone who believes that a biological explanation can be given for characteristics of superiority or inferiority supposedly possessed by people of a given physical stock”. Marger (1994: 27) also defines “racism” as the belief that humans are divided into hereditary distinct, innately different groups that can be ranked.

Sociologists have not always defined racism as neatly as suggested here. Up to the late 1960s, the term was used to refer to a doctrine, after which it was expanded to include practices and attitudes as well as beliefs, along with a complex array of factors that produce discrimination or disadvantage. While several authors hold that there is no reason why the term cannot have different meanings, and that the approach depends on the tradition, Cashmore (1984: 247-9) argues that accepting too broad a definition renders the term “analytically meaningless”, as noted in Chapter 2.
Pilkington (1984: 11) distinguishes between racism and racialism. According to him, racism consists of deterministic beliefs that certain negative characteristics inevitably belong to people of a race, while racialism consists of practices that disadvantage people based on race. Banton (1988: 28) also subscribes to a definition of racism as a doctrine and racial discrimination as practice, but cautions that the label “racist” should be used carefully, and attached to actions rather than to people, as calling actions racist leaves the possibility that people may be capable of non-racist or anti-racist behaviour as well. Calling someone - rather than something that a person did - racist, is a political tactic, which makes no attempt to illuminate the causes of racism, he argues.

Since academics have generally used “racism” for belief and “racial discrimination” for practice, “racialism” became more of an everyday term than an academic term to denote practices expressing racism (Cashmore 1984: 245). In general, ‘racial discrimination’ refers to discrimination in an adverse manner, rather than a neutral distinction, such as for analytical purposes, between different groups.

According to George Friederickson (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 70), the popular definition of racism as beliefs of biological superiority has gradually been replaced by “patterns of action which serve to create or preserve unequal relationships between racial groups”. This new understanding of the term is concomitant with the development of a so-called ‘new racism’. As Paul Gilroy (2000: 32) explains: "Whereas in the past raciology had been arrogant in its imperial certainty that biology was both destiny and hierarchy, this persuasive new variant was openly uncomfortable with the idea that ‘race’ could be biologically based. Consciousness of ‘race’ was seen instead as closely linked to the idea of nationality. ... Conflict was visible, above all, along cultural lines." This view of New Racism is particularly applicable to Europe, where the Roma people and Jewish people, who often do not conform to the old-worldly imperial stereotypes of skin colour, or intellectual and cultural inferiority, have nevertheless been subjected to racism. But Gilroy argues that “new racism” is already being replaced as the dominant racism by a new form of socio-biological racism (Gilroy 2000: 34).

An overview of the literature shows that many contemporary social scientists (Bowser 1995: 126; Giddens 1998 247; Marger 1994: 408; Sanderson 1991: 317) now broadly agree that “prejudice” entails belief while “discrimination” entails action. Pilkington
(1984: 11) argues that the distinction is important, because attitudes are not necessarily expressed in actions, and actions are not necessarily born out of prejudice – they can also come from conformity to social norms. Kitano also says that many people link prejudice and discrimination causally, but this is not always a true reflection of the facts. He prefers to limit discrimination to practices that have a harmful effect (Kitano 1980: 56-7). In a society where people are free to think as they please as long as they do not infringe on the rights of others, prejudice is only important to the extent that it is linked to actual discrimination, Levin and Levin (1982: 81-85) agree, arguing that attitudes are often constructed to make sense of events, while Cashmore (1984: 227-230) explains that “[p]rejudice’ is learned beliefs that lead to bias, whether positive or negative, invariably derived from inaccurate or incomplete information, which can crucially influence behaviour,” and Giddens (1998: 247) points out that “[a]lthough prejudice is very often the basis of discrimination, the two may exist separately”.

The argument put forth by Borja & Castells (1997: 89) (see Chapter 1) that unfavoured nationalities and ethnic groups become scapegoats in racist perspectives, illustrates that the distinction between racism and xenophobia is both difficult and inconsequential. In contrast, Sanderson (1991: 316) points out that racism is a much more recent development than ethnocentrism and argues that the difference is significant because ethnic prejudice is based on notions of cultural supremacy, while racism is based on notions of biological supremacy. A proto-typical question in this regard is whether racism or xenophobia was at work when black South Africans petrol-bombed the shack of a Zimbabwean immigrant in Zandspruit, Johannesburg, in 2001 (Misanet/IRIN 2001: ¶1-8).

Castells (1983: 316) suggests that a "major tendency of the capitalist mode of production in its new industrial development at the world level was to incorporate workers from different ethnic and cultural origins in such a way that they would be much more vulnerable, socially and politically, to capital’s requirements than the native citizen workers of core countries. Furthermore, the split introduced within the ranks of labour could lead towards the ethnic fragmentation of the working class that had been so successful in the formation of American capitalism."

Such differentiation is by no means unique to the United States of America. More recently Solomos examined “the entrenched nature of racist immigration controls” in
Great Britain, and came to the conclusion that “major structural changes are clearly required to make the promises of reform a reality” (Bowser 1995: 177). Issues around migrant workers have also penetrated the politics of the European continent, where Bowser (1995: 196) sees race perceptions as legitimating “the widening class inequalities of the capitalist nations of Western Europe”. This concern was underlined by the victory in the first round of the 2002 French presidential elections of French nationalist politician Jean-Marie Le Pen over left-winger Lionel Jospin (BBC News 2002 (1): ¶1-3), who is on record (BBC News 2002 (2): ¶16-17) as having said in public addresses that the holocaust is but a “detail of history” and that immigration puts France at risk of being “submerged”.

To determine the difference between racism and xenophobia, we are therefore drawn back into defining ‘race’. However, the difficulty experienced in answering the question demonstrates how difficult it could be to distinguish xenophobic from racist behaviour. Wieviorka’s argument shows that if racism is the object of our interest, these kinds of questions may cause us to digress from the issue. As Guillaumin points out (Bulmer & Solomos 1999: 355), a definition of racism can be of very little value in any but a colonial context when it is restricted to a “colonial model” of white domination over black people.

While sociologists therefore broadly agree on definitions of race, their interpretations of implications of race still contain important differences. In addition, the terms discussed above constitute emotive language. As such, they matter very much to many people. The debate on Zionism and whether it should be termed racism is a case in point. The polity of the latter is so controversial that it greatly influenced the latest United Nations’ World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa in August 2001 (United Nations: undated (2) ¶2; Widlöcher 2001: ¶13). It was of such importance to the Bush administration that Zionism should not be equated with racism, that the United States government boycotted the WCAR rather than deal with the issue in an open forum (Labott 2002: ¶1-2). In response, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat risked the wrath of the USA by repeating at the conference that Israel was racist in its treatment of Palestinians and that the “American war machine” was supporting “racist colonialist” action (Arafat 2001: ¶5).

The debate on European racism provides another example of the intensity with which racism is perceived and acted upon. When its soldiers conquered Ireland and
displaced Catholic Irish landowners in the 1800s, England defined the Irish as a distinct race (Bowser 1995: 181). In contemporary Europe, Turkish workers in Germany are perceived to be treated differently from German workers (Bowser 1995: 182), which influences relations between the two groups in Germany. In Finland the Roma people have also experienced discriminatory treatment, even though racial discrimination is outlawed and prosecuted in Finland (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 1999: ¶24-28).

The examples above demonstrate that polarisation occurs not only on the basis of contested ownership, borders and rights, but also on the basis of conflicting definitions. And since it is often played out in arenas of power, such as parliament, international negotiations or the media, it is necessary also to consider some criticisms of the analytic work done to date.

Some Critical Issues

Three main criticisms may be brought against the discourse described above. Firstly, even though people may have internalised scientific findings negating any biological bases for concepts of race inferiority or superiority, they may well continue to act in a racist manner by choice or habit. Thus, while racism has largely graduated from dependency on the belief in significant biological distinction, the continued effects of racist behaviour should not be underestimated.

Secondly, all the definitions give the impression that racist ideas can exist without discriminatory action. This may be possible for individuals, but hardly for a society. Bulmer and Solomos (1999: 3) lament that “[t]he regrettable need for a book such as (theirs) is evident from the fact that … racism is very much a vibrant influence on current social and political movements and in some cases in state policies”. Even when it is merely a belief system, therefore, racism must not be underestimated as a harmless superstition.

Thirdly, the belief that racism is related to power (Pilkington 1984: 11) raises the question whether those without the power to uphold suppressive systems can be racist (Bowser 1995: 131; Eberhardt & Fiske 1998: 33, 49). Different notions are used to support the view that power is a prerequisite for racism, for instance that racism is structural, and therefore cannot be constituted by something as harmless as a person’s
personal beliefs, or that the translation of belief into action requires some kind of power. However, the potential harm by racism that is not supported by systematic subjugation might not be as limited as suggested. In South Africa, for instance, while the power to subjugate black people has been removed from white people at a political level, the systematic economic subjugation of the majority of black people continues, including deprivation along the lines of the self-fulfilling prophecy described earlier. At the time of the 1996 census, most black people were still poor, while most white people still had better access to income, higher education and potable water (Statistics South Africa 1999: ¶1). According to a 2002 overview of inequality in the country (Woolard 2002: 2-3), this is still the case.

Particularly Relevant Developments

In recent writings on race, racist discourse has become of particular relevance to academics. Van Dijk (1993: 17) points out that “[t]he power of elites is … defined by their privileged access to various forms of public discourse ...”. Employing what he terms the “logic of reproduction”, he argues that a multicultural value system must be pertinently internalised by society before racism can be eliminated and that many sociological studies underestimate the “cognitive aspect of social processes.” In other words, if the roots and manifestations of racism are to be eradicated, all forms of racism need to be understood. This means that the failure to fight racism actively contributes to keeping a racist system in place. "From a conceptual analysis of the mechanisms of social reproduction, we thus arrive at the elements of an applied ethics: Who is most responsible for the reproduction of racism?" (Van Dijk 1993: 26).

In answering this question, Van Dijk holds that elites - including the media and academia – have the greatest ability to determine whether racism is perpetuated or undermined. Since elites are in the best position to advance anti-racism, says Van Dijk (1993: 17-26), their apathy contributes to racism. Like the racist faction, the anti-racist faction is global and diverse. Citing the European anti-racist movement, where wide support comes from middle-of-the-road Europeans, Bowser (1995: 132; 294) criticises the assumption that white people have not been actively involved in anti-racism in the past, and states that this assumption is rooted in ignorance of historical and contemporary opposition to racism. Unlike racism though, anti-racism does not
have the benefit of being entrenched in existing and powerful hegemonies. Therefore, argues Bowser (1995: 303-4), the base assumptions of racism must be challenged, which lies within the power of both the modern media and academia. Blauner (Bowser 1995: 131) concludes that for anti-racism to achieve results, it must have significant white support also among its front-liners.

This is by no means an inevitable extension of the argument of Van Dijk (1993: 17) and others that elite responsibility stems from the position of power. Black Consciousness, for example, rejects the view that white people are necessary in order to effectively oppose racism. Biko (1978: 19-26, 144) argued that black liberation had to begin with black independence from white liberals, who could not act as spokespersons for the black population in South Africa. Because they could never put themselves completely into a black person’s shoes, white liberal leadership would settle for an inadequate conclusion to the struggle for black liberation. Like Fanon (1963: 114-5, 153-5, 159), Biko therefore believed that education, both general and political, would be vital to true liberation (Biko 27-32, 144, 150). This argument does of course not extend to the removal of responsibility from others, including white people or elites.

However, Kushnick (Bowser 1995: 198) argues that proactive, bottom-up anti-racist campaigns have a much better chance of success than efforts lead by governments or elites. The anti-racist movement in Brazil managed to have racism classified as a crime in the country’s 1998 constitution, for example, and although the laws have proved inefficient, because the only way to ensure prosecution for racism, is to lay a charge for mistreatment (Bowser 1995: 205-6), certain victories of the anti-racist movement have been incorporated into the mechanisms of the state.

Another interesting recent example of such a groundswell is described by Nobles (2000: 129-162). During the debate in the United States of America on including “mixed race” as a category in the census form, activists argued that they were forced to choose between the different heritages of their parents, or deny all, by choosing “other” as their race category (Nobles 2000: 132). But, as Nobles (2000: 133) points out, “multiracialism presupposes monoracial identities”. While people are campaigning for the right to have authority over their own identity, by being able to self-select categories with which they are comfortable, this campaign, like Black Consciousness, requires race consciousness rather than non-racialism.
The presupposition of valid race categories may place these movements at odds with other anti-racist campaigns. Rex (1986: 117-8) notes that it is reasonable to defend systematic anti-racist and anti-racialist policies, since racist thinking and racialist practice are a natural part of “advanced industrial societies”. It seems, however, that neither advancement nor the experience of racism precludes a society from practising racism. We are in a position to combine lessons from Fanon, Gilroy, Van Dijk and others; to incorporate different perceptions, instead of allowing a specific cultural predisposition to remain the standard, but do we?

As Gilroy (2001: 10) argues, the “precious ability to imagine political, economic and social systems in which ‘race’ makes no sense is an essential, though woefully underdeveloped part of articulating credible anti-racism”. “Under the spell of Marxism for too long, critical thinking about ‘race’ consoled itself with the wish that racialised attachments and collectives could be disposed of by being shown to be unreal, insubstantial, invented and ideological in character,” argues Gilroy (2001: 11). History must be rewritten through a more credible anti-racist movement; one which not only systematically ‘de-natures’ race, but critically also confronts “the alienated modern sociality that drowns out the cries of those who suffer”, he (Gilroy 2001: 14) concludes.

**Conclusion**

Just as the struggle in social science has been to gain conceptual clarity on race, so the problem of this study has been to find a working definition of racism. Bulmer and Solomos (1999:4) provide such a definition when they write that racism is “an ideology of racial domination based on (i) beliefs that a designated racial group is either biologically or culturally inferior and (ii) the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the racial group’s treatment in society, as well as to explain its social position and accomplishment”. Although this definition captures more elements of the different types of racism, it misses the understanding of racism as “a system of power … systematic, structural and pervasive” (Bowser 1995:128). It also fails to account for Gilroy's point that racism does not have to involve a discourse of superiority and inferiority. Mere distinction can be enough to exclude certain categories of people.
This study is, however, not primarily about what academics write about race. The views above serve only as a backdrop to the opinions of the public or, more specifically, what young educated South Africans view as racist. Asking undergraduate students to evaluate discourse that occurs in the media, as is done here, is one possible measure of these views.
Bibliography


