Identity, race and ethnicity

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Introduction: historical and intellectual development of race, racism and ethnicity

Race and ethnicity have been at the centre of the major cleavages of the modern world, supporting, organising, explaining and frequently justifying the claims of identity (including national identity). Many argue that race is still central to identity and social organisation, even if its manoeuvrings are hidden or obfuscated in an era that has seen the concept of biological race intellectually challenged and overturned, and racism and discrimination discredited in favour of non-discrimination and human equality. While race has been dismantled as a scientific concept, authors frequently assert its continued importance in social life as a marker of identity. People experience their physical differences as significant, in terms of how they identify themselves, the groups to which they belong, and the experiences of privilege, dis-privilege and discrimination in any given ‘racialised’ society. Ethnicity is seen by some to be equally as, or even more important than, race in understanding the sources for group identity in the contemporary world. As biological racism has been discredited, ethnicity has also returned to prominence as a major justification for discrimination and exclusion (Fredrickson 2002: 144–5). An influential branch of recent theory sees ‘dominant ethnicity’ as more important and pervasive than race in the contemporary world, and especially important for understanding the nature of identity conflicts. From this perspective, ‘white racism’ or ‘white supremacism’ are seen as more historically and specifically related to certain periods and regions of the world than ethnicity (Kaufmann 2006).

Race and identity

Central to the politics of imperialism, used as a justification for slavery, racial classification of identity held sway for large parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Western world and its colonies and possessions. Race as an explanation for human groupings (typically four or five racial types) consolidated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though notions of race existed long before then. The modern idea of race involves belief in the permanency of the relationships between biology, culture and type. In the nineteenth century, ‘racial science’ (for example, eugenics) brought a new form of legitimacy to the association between race, character,
superiority and inferiority. Race was also an everyday understanding of the nature of the world and its peoples, their achievements and level of civilisation, of the unequal access of some races to the world’s spoils, justifying the rule of some over others. Though race thinking became an important way of explaining the world in the nineteenth century, ‘racism’ as a term only really came into common usage as late as the 1930s, to describe the theories and practices of the Nazis in Germany (Fredrickson 2002: 5).

In the first phase of thinking about race, the scene was dominated by white European thinkers including Robert Knox (1791–1862), Arthur de Gobineau (1816–82), and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927) and white Jamaican planter, historian and defender of the slave trade Edward Long (1734–1813) who argued that ‘blacks’ were a separate, inferior, bestial and servile species fit for slavery and domination by the white race (Jordan 1969: 491–4). In the main (with exceptions) these writers viewed the races as arranged in a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, with the white race sitting at the top and the black races at the bottom. Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78), for example, while he avoided a strict hierarchical arrangement, noted that while Europeans were ‘acute’, ‘inventive’ and ‘governed by laws’, blacks were ‘crafty, indolent, negligent . . . Governed by caprice’. The father of physical anthropology, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), who was the first writer to trace the origins of the white race to the Caucasus, while regarding race in terms of biological characteristics and not attaching moral or intellectual qualities to these differences, displayed his own ethnocentric bias when he described the ideal type of the ‘Caucasian’ as the most beautiful of the races and the original form from which the other races diverged or degenerated (Fredrickson 2002: 56–7). It is well known among historians of race thinking that such images of beauty were of major importance to the development of notions of superior and inferior races.

This phase of ‘white supremacism’ involved, as noted, whites writing and theorising about other ‘races’, but a major development occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century as writers from the other side of the colour line began to produce their own thoughts on race, most importantly, arguing about the specific character and experience of the races deemed inferior by whites. In the US, black writers, leaders and activists such as former slave Frederick Douglass (1818–95), Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), and pioneering black feminist Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) wrote against slavery and racism, and critiqued continued white discrimination in the post-slavery period. Some, such as Garvey, wanted to ‘purify and standardize’ the black race (Gilroy 2000: 231–4) and advocated black separatism and a return to an African homeland, while Du Bois and Washington, also pan-Africanists, sought forms of black accommodation and prosperity in America. At the same time, these writers articulated the uniqueness of black identities, including specific African American identities. They were precursors to later black men and women who made significant contributions to critiques of racism and discrimination, often in the process articulating the nature of black identities and experiences, and highlighting the white fantasies of blackness and race.

Before, during and after the Second World War, there were also important, detailed social scientific examinations of the relationships between racism, white race consciousness, caste, class and economic and social discrimination in the US. Pioneering works included John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Gunnar Myrdal’s hugely influential survey *An American Dilemma* (1944), and Oliver C. Cox’s *Caste, Class and Race* (1948).

In the 1930s, social anthropologists such as Franz Boas seriously challenged the concept of biological race, arguing that social differences were the result of environment and culture. Biologist Julian Huxley and anthropologist Alfred Haddon, in their famous and influential 1935 book *We Europeans: A Survey of ‘Racial’ Problems*, challenged the use of the race concept, which
they found hopelessly confused and scientifically wrong, and argued for its replacement by ‘ethnic group’, better suited to signalling the cultural and social explanation for group sentiment and differences (Fenton 2003: 54–7). Nazi atrocities before and during the Second World War, justified by a virulent racist ideology and racial laws and practices, including the extermination of Jews and others deemed unworthy of life and racially dangerous or inferior, led to the further discrediting of racial classification and scientific racism after the Nazi defeat. Race as a scientific category was largely dismantled in the second half of the twentieth century. Racial science, including eugenics, collapsed as a discipline.

Nevertheless, while racism officially collapsed, the effects of race and racism continue to be felt in many countries. The violent racist regime of Apartheid in South Africa, in fact, only consolidated after 1948, and survived until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War (Fredrickson 2002: 109–10). Despite the proven emptiness of the concept of biological race, racial conflict and racialised communities have not disappeared. At the level of popular understanding and everyday life, race remains meaningful and socially significant. In the US and in many European countries, white racist nationalism remains on slow burn, flaring up in acts of terrorism and violence. The 1990s saw a rejuvenation of white racist and/or neofascist politics and explosive acts of racist violence in several countries. This was especially notable in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, and in the former Soviet Union, but was not exclusive to them. From the late 1990s far-right political parties, riding a wave of anti-immigration and anti-asylum seeker sentiment, had considerable electoral success in countries including Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium and France. Britain saw a noticeable increase in reported acts of racial violence and abuse from the early 1990s.

The global division of the world and of its privileges, it is arguable, is still based on the cleavages of race, with people of ‘colour’ disproportionately relegated to the ranks of the dispossessed or, in Frantz Fanon’s famous phrase, of the ‘wretched of the earth’. While many countries officially moved away from explicit forms of racial discrimination, it is far from clear that racism has been defeated, or that race is no longer part of the common-sense repertoire of many of the world’s people.

**Ethnicity and identity**

While race refers to physical differences and their consequences (i.e. for character, temperament, culture, intelligence, ability, etc.), ethnicity has been viewed as a more culturally based phenomenon. But the distinction between race and ethnicity has never been clear or absolute. Nevertheless, from the 1950s onward ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’ became increasingly popular terms in the social sciences used to define and characterise large groups previously designated by the term ‘race’ (Fenton 2003). In the US, ‘race’ and ‘racial problems’ continued to be the terms used to describe the African, Hispanic and Asian American experiences, while ethnicity was used to define and explain the communities and experiences of European immigrants. In many other countries ‘ethnicity’ is the term used to describe what is called ‘race’ elsewhere.

In his essay ‘What is an ethnic group?’ (in Guibernau and Rex 1997: 15–26), Max Weber famously defined ‘ethnic groups’ as:

> those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists.
>

*(Guibernau and Rex 1997: 18–19)*
In understanding group life, Weber placed the phenomenon of *ethnie* alongside other important forces such as class, status and party. Each of these different categories could be a basis for group formation.

Fundamentally for Weber, common ethnicity relied upon subjective consciousness of differences as the basis of group formation and closure against others. Ethnicity was not based upon biological characteristics or actual blood relations, as race was believed to be at the time Weber was writing. Ethnic groups were formed through historical and social circumstances. The differences (i.e. in language, appearance, dress, mores, customs, beliefs and ways of life) that emerged from these circumstances gradually took on a life of their own and achieved a level of importance in the lives of ethnic group members, and for others who perceived them as different.

Politics was important for Weber in turning the perception of those so-called 'ethnic differences' into a self-conscious group thinking of itself as ethnic. Members had to be politically organised and mobilised around their ethnic identity for it to be designated an ethnic group. Once ethnic groups had been constituted in this way, even if the political organisation faded away, or was crushed by some other power, the sense of ethnic belonging tended to live on as powerful memories and desires. Ethnic groups were historical, and developed a historical consciousness of a common past, an attachment to a particular territory, and certain traditions or a way of life. Through the use of symbols and myths, ethnic groups came to think of themselves as related by blood, as if they were small kinship groups where intermarriage related every person to every other person in the group. This belief in 'blood' relationship was simply a belief and not physically true, as all large groups involved physical mixing beyond kin relations. But it was nevertheless a powerfully held belief.

This Weberian concept of ethnicity has been adopted by more recent writers, such as Anthony D. Smith, who has written extensively on ethnicity and nationalism, and who defined ethnic communities as 'named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity' (Smith 1986: 243). Guibernau and Rex (1997: 8) point to the dual nature of ethnicity. On the one hand, there are the internally held meanings of ethnicity for its members: what the ethnic community means to its members and how they describe and understand the character of their own community, usually in the context of a larger society and in relation to other ethnic communities. On the other hand, there is the external meaning of ethnicity: the conception of its characteristics, and arguments and views about who belongs to a particular ethnicity, as applied to an ethnic group by others, especially by the state or a dominant society. Importantly, they argue, an ethnic community can incorporate into its own self-understandings as a culture and community, some of those meanings imposed from the outside.

The concern with ethnic groups and ethnic conflict became more important for scholars after the Second World War when it became apparent that earlier assumptions of modernisation theory – that modernity involved the dismantling of ethnic communities and traditions and the production of a more homogenous, individualist and rationalistic culture – broke down in the face of reality. Most people did not simply give up their sense of ethnic identity and belonging when they migrated to new societies, or even when they stayed put as their own societies were transformed by industrialisation, urbanisation and mass education. Even where they relinquished traditions and languages, people maintained a sense of identification with an ethnic group, a phenomenon Gans (1979) termed ‘symbolic ethnicity’. Fredrik Barth (1969) had also redirected attention away from the cultural contents of ethnic groups and towards a consideration of the centrality of boundary maintenance and identification with ‘in–groups’ and controlled relationship with ‘out–groups’. Ethnic groups might be in many respects culturally similar to other ethnic groups, but distinguish themselves by selectively emphasising and highlighting...
small cultural features as ‘symbols and emblems of difference’ (Barth 1969: 14). Ethnicity, then, is centrally organised by relationships between groups and the processes of differentiation that arise through these relationships. Ethnicity also became an important term for social scientists in the 1960s in the context of decolonisation and national liberation, used to explain the more positive senses of cultural attachment (Guibernau and Rex 1997: 1).

Major claims and developments of the field, and key contributions

Race

W.E.B. Du Bois was a towering intellectual figure from the late nineteenth century through to the time of his death in the mid-twentieth century. He made a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between race and identity, and the course of his long career is suggestive of the ways in which race thinking changed across time. Du Bois wrote in the late nineteenth century under the assumption that there were different races, with a sort of resignation that some racial antagonism was inevitable, and set about finding ways for the ‘black race’ to find its true spiritual centre and reach its true possibility of ‘racial’ achievement. ‘We believe’, he wrote in his 1897 essay ‘The conservation of races’, ‘that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilisation and humanity, which no other race can make’ (Du Bois 1986: 825). For this reason, he did not see the solution to the Negroes’ problems in America as dissolution and absorption into the white race, or that they should simply become Americans. Importantly, however, he did not arrange these ‘races’ into a hierarchy, and concluded that, as white and black Americans shared certain fundamental religious and legal ideals, as well as language and economic arrangements, there was no reason why they could not develop side by side in the one territory, even striving together for their independent racial excellence. His advocacy of university education, aimed at the spiritual and educational support of the elite ‘Talented Tenth’ of the African American population, pitted him against that other major African American intellectual and leader, Booker T. Washington, who advocated the alternative approach of establishing an African American foothold in the American economy through vocational training, moral self-improvement and accommodation with white America (Du Bois 1986: 842–61). Du Bois accepted the need for somewhat separate lines of development for the ‘black’ and ‘white’ races, and in his reflections on his own life he explained, with great poignancy, the reasons why he appeared diffident to whites and had never developed truly deep friendships with white Americans (ibid.: 1117–27). He was always acutely aware of the way in which the colour line marked all interactions between black and white in the US, and it was only in his travels in Europe that he perceived the possibility of more easeful relations between the races.

Later black writers and activists have also exhibited both inclusivist and exclusivist positions on race and identity. Malcolm X (1925–65) initially argued for the superiority of black racial identity, and advocated for the exclusivist black Nation of Islam and for separate group and institutional life for blacks. In the last phase of his life, as he travelled abroad to Cairo and Mecca where he confronted different cultural environments and people, including white Muslims, he began to move beyond race. He was still a black man, but he felt himself becoming de-racialised, no longer locked into the American prison of race that pitted superior against inferior, black against ‘white devil’. Martiniquean psychiatrist, revolutionary and theorist of decolonisation Frantz Fanon (1925–61) first experienced the full brunt of racism when he moved from Martinique to France, but argued against exclusivist understandings of race and identity. He wrote of the need to move beyond ‘Negritude’ – a major movement of black identity at the
time he was writing his masterful *Black Skin, White Masks* (1968) in the 1950s. In the 1980s, ‘Black Atlantic’ scholar Paul Gilroy wrote about and argued for forms of black identity and consciousness in the context of British politics, but has more recently called for a post-race understanding of ‘planetary humanism’ and questioned the continuing relevance of any monolithic notion of black identity (Gilroy 2000).

Du Bois’s most famous contribution to the understanding of black identity came with his notion of ‘double consciousness’. In *The Souls of Black Folk* he outlined the peculiar fate of African Americans who felt the contradictory pull of their Americanness and their blackness (or Africanness), evident in the much-quoted passage:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

*(Du Bois 1986: 364–5)*

Double-consciousness also meant that black Americans were gifted with particular insights into race relations, and also into the hidden aspects of white consciousness, including the ‘public and psychological wage’ of whiteness explored by Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* (especially for poor white labourers), and in essays such as ‘The souls of white folk’.

A second major figure in the understanding of racial identities was the aforementioned Frantz Fanon. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1968), Fanon made a significant contribution to our understanding of the injuries of race with his deft blend of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, culture and history. Locked into a vicious racist social and economic system, he argued, white and black misrecognised each other, assigning potencies drawn from images in the long history of thought about colour and race: ‘the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the Black man. And conversely’ (1968: 161, footnote). For each the other became a strange and hallucinatory object that was at once desired, hated and feared. Notably, the white person saw the Black other in biological terms, at the level of repressed, wild sexuality, which he or she secretly desired – themes later explored extensively by the psychoanalyst Joel Kovel in his classic text *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (1970). But Fanon’s most original contribution was to the understanding of the trials of black identity within imperialist racist social systems, including the way in which ‘whiteness’ also became the ideal for black people, an ideal impossible to achieve because of their blackness. This was the ultimate degradation, the way in which black people, torn from their own cultures and social systems by imperialism and colonisation, came to view themselves through white eyes, and through the social imaginary of the white world. Fanon gave this a deeply personal inflection, vividly explaining his own immersion in white ideologies of blackness. In his chapter ‘The fact of blackness’ he depicts how his own self-perception, including his bodily perception, under the all pervasive eyes of white people, came to be dominated by white perceptions of the black man, how his own bodily self-image underwent a seismic shift as he moved from the colonies to the white world of France where he felt the full brunt of white scrutiny. He knew what they were thinking and was swept up in their view of his body’s negativity:
I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by
crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed.
Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid
bare. I feel, I see in the white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new
kind of man, a new genus. Why, it’s a Negro.

(Fanon 1968: 116)

Caught within the white racist ideological fabric, while a powerful sense of alienation and dehu-
manisation was felt, resistance was blunted by the existence of a vacuum into which to plunge
should one forsake the white world. For, through colonisation, the past to which one might
have had recourse had been destroyed forever: ‘However painful it may be for me to accept
this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the Blackman there is only one destiny. And it is
white’ (ibid.: 12). Nevertheless, in later work, including *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), Fanon
was to articulate a form of national cultural resistance that did involve a recapturing, reinven-
tion or reassertion of older cultural elements as colonised people sought to free themselves of
the colonial yoke.

The work of writers in the UK grouped around Stuart Hall and the Contemporary Centre
for Cultural Studies in Birmingham (CCCS) was influential in the 1970s and 1980s in revisiting
issues of race from an innovative Marxist and cultural studies perspective. One of Hall’s chief
insights was to see that ‘race’ was the ‘modality’ in which class was lived and experienced in
modern, capitalist societies, including contemporary Britain, a point he had made in the col-
laborative work *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Hall and other CCCS writers argued their way beyond
the Marxist economic reductionism that reduced ‘race’ to issues of ‘class’, and instead gave full
weight to the importance of race as an ideological and cultural phenomenon that was relatively
autonomous from the capitalist economic base, but which was also always interrelated with
class. This position was explored at great length in *Policing the Crisis* and in the CCCS book
*The Empire Strikes Back* (1982). In later work, influenced by arguments about the ‘decentering
of identity’ within psychoanalytic, post-structuralist and postmodern thought, and also by the
transformations of the world brought about by the fluidity and movement of intensifying glo-
balisation, and the cultural hybridity it stimulated, Hall (1992) also suggested the break-down
of relatively fixed racial identities (or any categorical identities for that matter), emphasising the
play of difference in identity – never fixed, always in formation, oriented by historical and con-
temporary experiences. He questioned the negative aspects of and silencing (of other, including
Asian, histories, gender oppression etc.) involved in the construction of a collective, all-encom-
passing black identity in the political struggles of the 1970s, and suggested that this was no longer
tenable as a stance, as it involved its own oppressions. Young third-generation Caribbean blacks
in Britain wanted to recognise the differences concealed by a monolithic black identity, and to
hold together British, black and Caribbean identities, without necessarily privileging or denying
the relevance of any of them (Hall 1991).

Since the 1980s, there have been three major developments in thinking around race. The
first is the idea of the ‘new racism’; the second concerns the elaboration of black feminist argu-
ments about racism and racial identities; and the third is the introduction to the scene of ‘whiten-
ness studies’.

First, since the early 1980s, sociologists of racism have made a distinction between an older
biological and a newer differentialist or cultural racism (Barker 1981; Taguieff 1993–4). Barker
(1981) used the term ‘new racism’ to explain the new forms of racism that, responding to the
success of anti-racism struggles and the intellectual undermining of the concept of biological
race, asserted that different cultures were incommensurable and that, therefore, some cultures
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could not assimilate into, for example, British culture. This, he argued, was a form of cultural racism. He saw the phenomenon as especially relevant to the right wing of the British Conservative party which articulated grievances against the large Afro-Caribbean and Indian subcontinent immigrant communities in Britain, whose presences were seen to threaten the British national way of life. This form of racism was especially concerned with issues of national identity, conceived as strong cultural affiliation. Barker argued that the new racism was distinguished from the old racism in that it did not need to adopt notions of racial inferiority and superiority, it did not need negative stereotyping of groups, and it did not need to blame the country’s economic and social problems on ethnic minorities. However, the new racism was concerned with the impact of rising cultural diversity within Britain, largely brought about by post-Second World War immigration from the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent, seen to threaten Britain’s capacity to preserve itself as a distinct nation with a bounded cultural identity. The new racism tended to essentialise cultural differences, so that cultures became reified rather than historical, changing phenomena.

Against later critics who argued that ‘new racism’ was a misnomer, Tariq Modood has made a strong case for ‘cultural racism’ as a new and important form of racism in modern Britain. Its meaning, he argues, is only obscured by writers or anti-racist activists who see it only as a cover for biological assumptions about culture and society. The new ‘cultural racism’ builds onto the antipathy, exclusivity and unequal treatment of people involved in biological racism a ‘further discourse which evokes cultural differences from an alleged British or “civilised” norm to vilify, marginalise or demand cultural assimilation from groups who also suffer from biological racism’ (Modood 1997: 155). While post-war British racism is simultaneously built on biological and cultural ideas, it is the latter which in fact predominate, with the former acting as a superficial marker which allows the more important and influential ideas about cultural clash to be set in motion. Anti-racists are wrong to underestimate this transformation, since they ‘misread’ the concerns of the ‘New Right’s “new racism” of Enoch Powell and the Salisbury Review’ as biological concerns without giving full allowance to more salient arguments about cultural distinctiveness and the inability of some cultures to assimilate into British culture (ibid.: 169). One must, as Modood correctly asserts, take seriously the beliefs that animate ‘cultural racism’. Included within this category would be much of the phenomena referred to as ‘Islamophobia’.

Taguieff, who coined the term ‘differentialism’ when explaining the rise of ‘new racism’ in France, saw the French new right’s ‘praise of difference’ as its most effective ideological ploy, largely replacing the former reliance upon ‘inegalitarian racism’. He argued that through it the new right had outflanked left criticism by seemingly taking up one of its most cherished ideals from the 1980s. This new differentialist racism was heterophile rather than heterophobic, emphasising the distance between cultural communities, even their incommensurability. This new racism was mixophobic, ‘haunted by the threat of the destruction of identities through inter-breeding – physical and cultural cross-breeding’ (Taguieff 1993–4: 101 for quote).

The second major development has been the emergence of non-white feminism, including more generally the confrontation of non-Western women with what was seen to be a white dominated, middle-class feminist movement that did not represent the experiences and striving of women of colour, and the emergence of black feminist thought in the US, centred upon figures including Toni Morrison, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. This has involved the elaboration of a strong identity-politics around the specific racial experiences of black women that has meant that in certain situations the black experience and identity take precedence over the gender experiences that second-wave feminism had characterised as universal.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues for a black feminism that is Afrocentric, and for claims to truth that are contingent, but based in particularistic experiences of black women. The
argument is that only through the development of such a discourse and practice can the standpoint of black African American women be heard and validated, against the white male validation procedures that oppress black women and silence them. White, patriarchal, male Eurocentric cultures dominate academic debates and, like broader white-dominated society, have embedded within them taken-for-granted negative stereotypes of black American women. Black women’s culture, and black culture more generally, carries traces of African culture: particular forms of family, particular values, particular ways of thinking and acting, and particular conceptions of religion and religious practices. Black Americans, she argues, have a distinctive way of using concrete experiences, including everyday experiences, as criteria of meaning and for establishing truth (Collins 1990: ch. 10).

Bell hooks has written of the continuing ‘terrorism’ inflicted by white supremacism: ‘All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness’ (hooks 1992: 175). She has also been a strong critic of white women and white feminists, highlighting that, historically and contemporaneously, white women have also oppressed black women, as employers (in homes and elsewhere), as co-workers, as fellow feminists and in everyday life (hooks 1981: ch. 4).

Because of the way they highlight racial differences and articulate the specificity of black identities that are often antagonistic to white society and culture, these writers have been troubling for white males and females, including liberal whites who strive to see the different peoples of the world as simply humans who should be treated as the same. They challenge the assumption that we live in a post-race world. But they have also been troubling to black people, especially males, for the ways in which they highlight not only white, but also black male misogyny. They have often occupied difficult political positions as they are faced with and challenged by other blacks for revealing unpleasant facts of contemporary black communal life, in particular black on black male oppression of women, including physical and sexual violence.

Third, from the late 1980s a new phase of race studies emerged around the concept of ‘whiteness’. Characterised as ‘whiteness studies’ or ‘critical whiteness studies’ and building on the insights of black writers such as Du Bois and James Baldwin, this area sought to examine and reveal the previously hidden operation of whiteness as a ‘social construction’ organising the perception of other races and the operations of racism or racialisation. This was a turning of the spotlight away from the ‘races’ thought of as others, to the ‘race’ doing most of the ‘othering’. Pioneering works in this field were by American historians and sociologists such as bell hooks, David Roedeger, Ruth Frankenberg, Michael Omi, Howard Winant and Theodore Allen, and also the novelist Toni Morrison who, in Playing in the Dark, asserted that ‘until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white’ (Morrison 1992: xii). The achievement of this essay was to read closely the play of images of blackness, and of black people, operating in fictional texts, as revealing of the work of whiteness. Morrison asked the crucial question of the role that this ‘whiteness’ played, not only in literature, ‘but in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”’ (ibid.: 9). This Morrison characterised as a turning of the critical gaze away from the ‘racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served’ (ibid.: 90).

Whiteness studies as an emergent field has attempted to articulate what it means to occupy the position of whiteness. One of the central claims is that whiteness operated as a hidden universalist position from which other races were scanned and characterised, while the contours of whiteness were kept from view, almost as if there was no such thing. Societies dominated by whiteness were institutionally organised around white understandings, norms and practices. Whiteness studies aims to reveal the specifically ‘white’ nature of these understandings, norms
and practices that parade as universal and unexamined, and the hidden privileges that this societal structure affords whites. As Ashley Doane points out, because whites are a majority, hegemonic racial group in countries such as the US, they often experience their privileges not as privileges at all, feel that they are simply part of the norm, and do not experience themselves as race subjects: ‘Given that what passes as the normative center is often unnoticed or taken for granted, whites often feel a sense of culturelessness and racelessness’ (Doane 2003: 7). The relativising of the white position is seen as one of the major purposes of this whole approach. It is also seen as a movement revealing and challenging the working of white hegemony.

Whiteness studies has a historical focus, but is also focused on the post–Civil Rights era (in the US) and on the supposedly post-racial world, seeking to show that race still operates as a pervasive organiser of privilege in societies. It questions the extent of the shift in racial consciousness understood to have come about through the political achievements of anti-racist struggles to remove the vestiges of institutional racism and discrimination in many Western societies since the 1960s. In fact, it is the politics of this era that leads many whites to now see race as a non-issue, and to imagine that they now live in colour-blind societies. Colour-blind ideology itself acts to maintain and reproduce white racial privilege because it continues to hide the extent of racist discrimination. It shapes policies that appear race-neutral (in areas such as housing, employment and social welfare policy, etc.) but which in reality operate as forms of ongoing discrimination, because they do not recognise the impacts of institutional racism. It also results in a situation where it is seen by many whites as illegitimate to raise the issue of ‘race’ in discussions about culture, economy and society – as if to do so was in itself racist (Doane 2003).

**Ethnicity**

As noted earlier, social scientists came to argue in the 1950s and 1960s that ‘ethnicity’ had to be taken seriously as a major form of group identity in the modern world. One response to the continuing ethnic reality was to account for it by asserting that ethnicity was *primordial*: that it is so deeply rooted in individuals and cultures that it was almost like a biological essence. Ethnic roots extended back through time immemorial, and formed a kind of *mythos* involving memory and legend that stood at the heart of any large, unified group. Some theorists of nationalism, most notably Anthony D. Smith, argued that while nations were relatively modern, they relied for their coherence and the strength of attachment of their members on something much older, which he called the *ethnic core*, that stretched far back through history, tying identity to mythic places and sites.

Others responded by seeing the continuing assertion of ethnic identity and community as an example of *social closure*: an instrumental way for groups to commandeer resources. Here ethnic identity became a political resource, as argued most cogently by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan in the ‘Introduction’ to their edited book *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (1975). They noted that ‘ethnicity’ (as opposed to ethnic group) was a recent term, missing from standard dictionaries, for example, until the 1960s. They cited the first social science use of the term by the American sociologist David Riesman (author of *The Lonely Crowd*), in 1953. And they also argued that the use of this term – including their own – signalled that we were dealing with a relatively new phenomenon, a particular form of group expression tied to new social and political conditions: ‘there has been a pronounced and sudden increase in tendencies by people in many countries and in many circumstances to insist on the significance of their group distinctiveness and identity and on new rights that derive from this group character’ (Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 3), a claim supported by several authors (including Daniel Bell) in their book. Glazer and Moynihan argued that, despite earlier expectations, ethnicities were not necessarily
bound to disappear through processes of assimilation; instead, modern social forces and processes actually contributed to the ongoing reproduction of ethnic identities, as major sources of identity for people, with strong forms of emotion and identification involved. In trying to explain why this occurred, they provided two important answers: the first an instrumentalist understanding of ethnicity as a resource in the context of the changing role and approach of government, and the second seeing the assertion of ethnic identity as stimulated by inequality.

The first argument tied the prevalence of ethnicity to new government practices, in particular to the way in which governments, and especially the welfare state after the Second World War, began to organise policies in ways that recognised ethnic identities; so, for example, in the spirit of equality, demanding of various employers and institutions that they show statistics of the ethnic background of members, to see whether there were entrenched imbalances between ethnic groups. This meant that ethnicity became a focal point for thinking about government resources, and an avenue through which people could engage with government in pursuit of their ends. Governments, for example, would design their welfare policies in areas such as health to make provision in some circumstances for professionals of a similar ethnic background to be available to treat people of their ethnic background, and other forms of attention to ethnicity.

The second explanation was about inequality: that in any given society, mainstream cultural norms had been set up in such a way that it benefited certain cultures and went against certain other cultures; success in any given society depended upon access to and attainment of certain norms, and not all ethnic groups had an equal standing in this respect. Movements of people around the world through migration, mainly for economic reasons, exacerbated this situation by throwing together people from vastly different cultural backgrounds into very unequal cultural situations. This resulted in a battle over societal norms, often between ethnic groups operating from different, historically shaped, social norms. People from a disadvantaged group have the best chance of achieving their aims if they organise themselves as a group claiming general group rights, rather than as separate individuals trying to achieve change; having an ethnic identity becomes a ‘highly effective way to either defend the advantage or to overcome the disadvantage’ (Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 15).

Glazer and Moynihan conclude that forms of identification as diverse as religion, language and national origin all have something in common that means that we could use the term ‘ethnicity’ to explain all of them: ‘What they have in common is that they have all become effective foci for group mobilisation for concrete political ends challenging the primacy for such mobilisation of class on the one hand and nation on the other’ (ibid.: 18). Thus, despite the expectation among sociologists that class would become the main basis for group formation in the modern world, this had not happened. Nor had ‘nation’ simply subdued other group identities. While class and nation were still clearly important in explaining modern societies, and in explaining the mobilisation of group interests, we now had to add the dimension of ethnicity.

The late twentieth century, contrary to the predictions of many, produced an ethnic resurgence that has carried through into the twenty-first century. This had complex causes. In some circumstances, the assertion of ethnic identity and claims has been a defensive gesture in relation to the fragmentation, fracturing, disorientation and upheaval of globalisation. Ethnic mobilisation has emerged in response to geo-political shifts, such as the collapse of communism and the reordering of states, nations and societies that this unleashed in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was evident during the terrible ethno-national wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and also in the ethnic, tribal and religious conflicts in Africa since the 1990s. More generally and globally, the politics of ethnic identity has also been stimulated by the spread of racialised and ethnicised social structures resulting from the long history of colonialism and the uneven and traumatic movement to a post-colonial global reality (Fenton 1999: 234–8).
In terms of the study of ethnicity, important theoretical developments have included the arguments pioneered by Anthony D. Smith concerning the ethnic core of nations (mentioned earlier), and the work by authors including Walker Connor and Thomas Hylland Eriksen on ethnonationalism as an important source of political and social struggle and conflict in the contemporary world. There has been a recent turn towards theorising ‘dominant ethnicity’. Eric Kaufmann, among a group of like-minded writers, sees ‘dominant ethnicity’ as the main focus of group conflict in the world today, more important than racism (especially of the colour-coded variety). So many conflicts today, Kaufmann argues, can be understood as competition between dominant ethnicities (rather than races) in the same territories as non-dominant ethnicities. Dominant ethnic groups can be minorities or majorities in their territories, as can non-dominant ethnic groups. Though in some cases ‘race’ underpins perception of ethnic differences, in many cases (especially outside the West) differences are based less on visible physical differences (often these are absent) than upon religious, cultural and language differences supporting ethnic formations that assert, through memories and myths of origin, special and frequently spiritual relations with particular territories. The relationship between dominant ethnic group and nation is a major source of conflict around immigration in Europe; for example, where the argument is less concerned with protecting whiteness than it is about protecting the alignment of dominant ethnic group with territory, nation and control of the state (Kaufmann 2006: 14–15). Kaufmann has explicitly challenged ‘whiteness studies’ as a flawed approach that should be replaced with an emphasis on dominant ethnicity. Here, the argument should be less about the marking of boundaries than about the influence of major ethnic ‘collective narratives and iconography’ (ibid.: 7).

According to Kaufmann, concern with dominant ethnicity becomes more pressing in the contemporary world for two main reasons. First, under conditions of global migration and cultural exchange, coupled with the spread of cosmopolitan norms among the university educated elites of the West, many Western nations adopt a civic nationalism that threatens the alignment between dominant ethnie and nation, and thus the corporate identity of dominant ethnie, so that many dominant ethnies experience existential crises and push for immigration restriction and against multicultural policies (Kaufmann 2006). Second, outside the West, because of the end of the Cold War, there is increased instability in post-colonial nations, as the unity of states is exposed, and dominant ethnicities, sometimes having been created by colonial rule, are threatened.

Another important development has been in the burgeoning area of multiculturalism and multicultural studies focused upon the organised interactions between different ethnic groups within multi-ethnic societies. Influential writers such as Charles Taylor stimulated debates around multiculturalism by arguing in his essay ‘The politics of recognition’, about the importance of culture and ethnicity for group and individual identities, that all cultures should be accorded equal dignity and respect, and that failure to recognise the claims of culture can be one important form of oppression (Taylor 1994). Other writers in the field, such as Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh and Tariq Modood, from positions within or associated closely with liberalism, have argued for the need for various forms of recognition and accommodation of ethnicity, cultural difference and rights, in recognition of the significance and meaning of different ethnic identities. These forms of recognition call for state policies and laws concerning discrimination, and religious and racial vilification, other legal protections and exemptions, political representation and expression, education, housing, employment and social welfare more generally.

There have also been related developments in theories of transnational, hybrid and diaspora identities, reflecting on the impact of global migration. The British social scientist of race and ethnicity, Pnina Werbner (2005), argues that, at least initially, one of the appeals of a sense
of ethnic community for migrants is that it provides them with a way to gradually familiarise themselves to new conditions in a new and often fundamentally different society. Focusing on the experiences of Pakistani migration and settlement in the UK, she argues that a contradictory cultural process occurs. First, that in order to sink roots into the new society the immigrants begin by setting themselves culturally and socially apart from the host society, forming what she calls ‘encapsulated communities’. But those encapsulated communities, that develop a sense of boundary between themselves and the broader society, are not static, traditional, homogenous cultures. Rather, they represent fluid and dynamic cultural processes that involve important elements of adaptation to the new society. There is also much debate and conflict within these encapsulated communities, with the debate over culture and cultural expression experienced as a ‘powerful imperative’. In these situations, we might say, culture is not simply the taken-for-granted background of everyday life, but becomes something fought over out in the open, especially where there is a sense of conflict between cultural norms within the encapsulated community, and within the broader society outside; or, for example, there is discrimination experienced in relation to cultural norms and practices, including language and dress, and rituals.

Werbner’s argument is a direct challenge to those critics of multiculturalism who argue that, under its influence as an ideology and set of public policies, society is becoming a society of potentially or actually warring tribes. Her concept of ‘encapsulation’ suggests not simply separation, but also forms of engagement with and adaptation to mainstream society. Her account also suggests that ethnic identity is dynamic and changing; migrant culture becomes a hybrid mix of influences in Britain, and in terms of understanding such cultural practices and forms of community, one cannot simply seek explanation in cultures and places of origin. Instead, one must be aware of the new context in which culture and community is interacting; this includes class, intergenerational and gender struggles, the issues of power relations more generally, and the nature of transnational connections.

**Main criticisms**

The critiques of racial and ethnic understandings of society are quite similar, as the phenomena (including identities) addressed under the concepts of ethnicity and race have often been the same. The main critiques have been from those who argue that discrimination and prejudice based on race or ethnicity have largely been overcome in Western, democratic nations in the post-Civil Rights era, and that we now live in a post-race world. Complaints based on ethnicity or race are therefore seen as forms of special pleading, and criticised as such. Those who draw attention to ethnic or racial factors are criticised for ‘playing the race card’ in order to elicit sympathy for situations and actions that might otherwise result in condemnation of individual, group or communal failings. These criticisms are predominantly voiced by conservatives, who also articulated the critique of so-called political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against what were seen as proscriptions on language and expression, and forms of policy that took into account issues of race, racism and ideas of recognition and preservation of cultural, ethnic and racial difference. Critics of political correctness argued that racial and ethnic minorities, and their white liberal supporters, had been successful in countries such as the US in preventing the public discussion and rigorous debate of racially and ethnically sensitive matters (in relation to crime, welfare dependency, immigration, etc.) by inducing the fear of being accused of racism in societies and cultures where racism was publicly abhorred. This also involved the critique of ‘identity-politics’, by which was meant the pushing of political agendas based on racial, ethnic, gender and sexual identities. Conservatives assert that the state should ignore such
differences, and that policies should be universalistic rather than take into consideration specific claims based upon race, ethnic, gender or sexual identities and differences. Thus, anti-racist flag-bearer policies such as affirmative action or positive discrimination are deemed inappropriate in open, universalistic societies supposedly free of the discriminations of the past, where anyone can succeed based on merit, effort and talent. Similarly, multiculturalism came under heavy criticism for undermining social and national cohesion, for funding and creating cultural enclaves of backwardness and ethnic oppression, and for a dangerous cultural relativism.

The critique of identity-politics (and sometimes of multiculturalism) has also emanated from the social democratic left, though the reasons for the critique are different to those of the conservatives. Here the argument has been that too much emphasis on race, ethnicity or other forms of differential identity has led to more fractured social movements that are thus less committed to fighting common battles against societal inequalities, especially those based on class and economic deprivation.

There have also been critiques of developments in theorising race such as understandings of ‘new racism’ as cultural racism, or theorising ‘whiteness’. The criticism of theories of ‘new racism’ is either that it is not really new – that while it seems to be based on culture, in fact culture is merely a stand-in for biological essence – or that, if it really is about culture or religion, then it is not racism at all, but better understood as a form of cultural discrimination related to ethnocentrism and sometimes xenophobia (Fredrickson 2002). Criticism of whiteness studies includes claims that whiteness is not a predominant form of identity even in societies dominated by white populations, and certainly not relevant to studying inequality and identity dynamics in most other societies in the world.

Finally, it has been argued that use of the concept of race itself reinforces a racial understanding of the world, and leads to a false, reifying of identity as racially bound and organised. Similarly, arguments about ethnic identity, especially when they are linked to advocacy of multiculturalism and preservation of cultural diversity, are criticised by some as presenting a false picture of culture as a static, traditional phenomenon, when in reality we should think of culture and identity as dynamic and changing.

The continuing importance of perspectives on race and ethnicity, and anticipated future developments in identity studies

The, by now, long tradition of studying race and racism has clearly been important in shedding light on the dynamics of a fundamental historical cleavage and major source of violence, subjugation and exclusion in modernity. The question is whether we have moved to a situation where we are now living in a post-race world, where the concept of race has become redundant and unable to shed much further light on the major dilemmas and conflicts of the contemporary world. As suggested in this chapter, there are many contemporary thinkers who dispute the claim that we have moved beyond race, and in fact see in such a claim an ideological obfuscation of continuing race privilege, and thus a contributor to racist reproduction. Through arguments about ‘cultural racism’ and ‘whiteness’, these theorists and critics have argued for the continuing importance of race, and have emphasised the need to develop more sophisticated understandings of the often hidden workings of race and discrimination in many societies. One recent perspective here is the concern with examining the workings of ‘everyday racism’, in particular focusing on the perceptions and insights of people who experience directly the brunt of racist exclusion and discrimination in their everyday lives, perceptions and insights unavailable to the more racially privileged, many of whom continue to act in racist ways of which they are unaware (Essed 1991). Everyday racism is non-ideological, mundane but brutalising in its effects.
The understanding of ethnic dynamics is also still valuable, and indeed may be essential to understanding important forms of identity in the contemporary world. Arguably, it is better equipped than ‘racism’, or more specifically whiteness studies, to explain contemporary forms of resistance to asylum seekers, refugees and immigration of culturally, religiously and ethnically different others into nations still considered by populations as ethnic homelands (Kaufmann 2006). In an era of intensifying globalisation, the understanding of ethnic processes of identification, struggle and interaction will become increasingly important as societies become ever more plural.

However, in understanding the influence of ethnicity, and ethnic forms of identity, it remains the case that it must be understood as a dimension of complex social relations, and not necessarily always the dominant element of such relations. We must continue to ask important questions about the social, cultural, ideological and economic conditions under which ethnic identities and groups are formed, and are transformed across time, and the conditions under which they become important for social structure and action. Social scientists need to be alert to the dynamics of ethnic formation. Rather than assume that ethnicities represent the continuation of pre-modern phenomena, we must continue to investigate the ways in which they respond to and are shaped by late modern trends, including ongoing tensions between individual and communal/cultural life, private and public, universalism and particularism, emotion and rationality, and class-based and other forms of inequality (Fenton 2003: ch. 9).

References


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