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978-0-521-12438-6 - British Racial Discourse: A Study of British Political Discourse About Race and Race-related Matters

Frank Reeves

Excerpt

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Introduction

The overall aim of this book is to provide some explanation for the kinds of discourse used in dealing with racial issues. The central task throughout is to combine the insights offered by a theory of ideology with an analysis of examples of actual discourse about race and related matters. Because of the immensity of the task of trying to account for all kinds of racial expression, the study is confined, in the main, to an examination of political discourse, and further, to the political discourse of a limited number of national politicians belonging either to the Conservative or to the Labour Party.

There are a number of reasons for selecting political discourse about race and race-related issues as a subject for study. Such discourse is related to decision-making or to the absence of decision-making, which gives it a little more significance than that of a casual conversation in a public bar. Also, it is the language of persons who are accustomed to making public pronouncements and are aware, to some degree, of the likely consequences of their utterances. And, because of the ideological setting in which it occurs, political discourse may reveal more consistency and regularity of feature than other kinds of speech. Force of circumstance probably encourages politicians to develop, enlarge upon, and systematise their views on various topics. There is also likely to be variation between different schools of political thought, enabling useful comparisons to be made. For reasons, then, of its association with significant decision-making, its regularity of feature, and the availability of comparative and contrasting data, political discourse was chosen as the focus for the project.

The study is further limited to an examination of what Conservative and Labour politicians have to say about race – thus omitting the more sensational racial declarations of Right-wing groups such as the National Front. For similar reasons (though without implying, in the manner of psychologists such as Eysenck, that Right- and Left-wing attitudes should be classified in tandem), the strong anti-racist stances of communist and Trotskyist groups are neglected. This does not mean that the menace posed to the black community* by the National Front's vicious, Right-wing

* For a discussion of the terminology used in this study to refer to racial minorities, see Appendix 1.

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propaganda and other action is unrecognised. Rather, the central purpose of the study is to concentrate on the mainstream of British politics in the shape of the Conservative and Labour Parties, which must be held responsible, inasmuch as responsibility can be attributed in this sphere, for making (by inclusion or omission) most of the political decisions that have affected race relations and racial minority groups. This state of affairs is likely to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. And yet, while there is much literature on fascist ideology, including a recently published *Fascists: A Social Psychological View of the National Front* (Billig, 1978) surprisingly little has been written by social scientists generally, and sociologists in particular, about British Conservative or Labour Party ideology, and even less about those ideologies in relation to racial matters.

One common view is that party political consensus has removed race as an electoral issue, yet within their parties and to their electorate politicians are forced to justify their action or inaction to pressure groups and individuals that challenge them. The aim of the study is to examine the regular features of the justificatory systems adopted by mainstream politicians. Such a study has political relevance: it should provide insights into the relationship between racial and other party values, into the stability of the ideological structure as a whole, and into whether there is much potential or room for further policy initiative in the field of race relations within the present political context.

Despite the decision to limit the study to an examination of political discourse, the task was still sufficiently grandiose to require further focus. This was accomplished by the choice of theory and by the selection of particular cases for analysis.

The explanatory theory adopted was drawn extensively from current sociological studies of ideology with a heavy emphasis on the tradition developed from Marx and Engels's *Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks* (1973). In particular, there is an attempt to relate racial discourse to the general process of capitalist state legitimation described by Habermas (1976). But ideas are also drawn eclectically from the works of Pareto, Gramsci, and Shils, to provide a theory of ideological levels in which the specialist discourse of politicians can be distinguished from the discourse of the general population. It is recognised that the discourse of politicians has an important justificatory function which, in the examination of empirical data, best serves to exemplify its ideological nature.

A series of logical and philosophical distinctions is also employed. The sentences that go to make up an ideological complex are classed as descriptive, evaluative, or prescriptive, while the process of explanation is carefully distinguished from justification. Many arguments in the area of

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race relations are enthymematic, meaning that they are not stated in full. Premises or conclusions are suppressed because they are already accepted as common knowledge by the population and because enthymemes are often rhetorically more persuasive than full argument.

The empirical data selected for analysis were drawn from the debates on the Immigration Bills, as recorded in Hansard, and the debates on immigration, race relations, and other kindred issues recorded in Conservative and Labour Party Conference Reports.

The book is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 examines in detail the meaning of terms such as 'racism' and 'racialism' and whether these concepts are adequate for describing the complexities of discourse dealing with race. The meaning of the term 'racism' is explained and three different usages – a 'weak', 'medium' and 'strong' – are distinguished. There is some discussion of the means by which racist discourse might be identified, and Professor Banton's arguments on this point are subjected to criticism. The critique of the concept of racism aims to show that it is generally inadequate as a means for analysing discourse about racial matters.

Chapters 2 to 4 attempt to locate discourse dealing with race in the framework of the social structure, and for this purpose draw extensively upon various theories of ideology, making use in particular of themes drawn from the work of Marx and Engels. Initially, the meaning of ideology and its relationship with discourse are set out in detail. Then, an economic structural explanation of racial division, postulating a 'square of alienation', is offered for consideration. It is argued that while economic explanations of race relations might throw light on the reason for racial responses generally, they are unable to account for the many complexities of political discourse dealing with race. Specialised political discourse is best understood within the context of the political legitimation process in which the representatives of particular social classes or class alliances seek to persuade the population that they are acting for the public good and in the general interest. Although this might seem a very obvious point to make, it differs from the widely accepted view that 'racism' can be simply explained in terms of action in pursuit of economic interest. While the underlying dynamic of capitalism has to be recognised, the contending classes pursue their interests at different institutional and discursive levels. The actual content of any example of racial or racist discourse is likely to reflect the true complexity of the decision-making process in which politicians seek to maximise a whole range of benefits and to minimise losses.

In Chapter 4 a typology of Conservative and Labour values is devised to describe the specialised political discourse of the two major political parties. The aim is to show that what is said about race issues is tempered by

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the predominant class values of British ideology as a whole; values that arise from the antagonism between the classes and class alliances of a capitalist society. Racial expression, then, is subject to the constraints of class values, and must avail itself of the forms and categories that Right- and Left-wing class ideologies provide.

Chapter 5 constitutes an attempt to show how the analysis provided in the previous chapters can be applied. The values of Conservative and Labour are paired, and their contrasting ideological and policy implications described. Examples are drawn from the historical legacy of Conservative and Labour classics and from the Party Conference Reports. Conservative traditionalism and organicism is contrasted with Labour rationalisation and commitment to structural change. Nationalism is contrasted with internationalism, imperialism with anti-imperialism, the maintenance of class stability with the pursuit of egalitarianism, social order with social justice, laissez-faire and the rejection of state interference with social ownership and the advocacy of government intervention, the emphasis on self-reliant individualism with welfare collectivism, and the limitations of human nature with the possibilities offered by nurture and education for human improvement. And finally, Right- and Left-wing 'bogies' – communism and 'extremism' of any kind for the Conservative camp, fascism for Labour – are mentioned in respect of their consequences for racial views and policies. Throughout this section, attention is devoted to the ways these values have affected opinions and positions adopted towards black people.

Chapter 6 is concerned with how discourse, which, at face value, makes no use of racist or racial categories, can be used with racial effect or to disguise racial intent. There is the straightforward situation where practices resulting in inequalitarian racial consequences are justified, consciously or unconsciously, by recourse to arguments of a non-racial or racist kind. Alternatively, there is a form of deracialisation, described here as 'sanitary coding', in which persons speak purposely to their audiences about racial matters while avoiding the overt deployment of racial descriptions, evaluations, and prescriptions.

The arguments used by Members of Parliament for justifying Commonwealth immigration control (which had clear racial consequences) are grouped into seven categories: personalised dispositional and agential, abstracted social process, populist, economic, *pro bono publico*, reciprocity and means-orientated, together with accompanying rhetorical modes. In general, deracialised discourse is defensible against the accusation that it is racist, but is capable, nevertheless, of justifying racial discrimination by providing other non-racist criteria for the differential treatment of a group distinguished by its racial characteristics. 'Sanitary coding' is another

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rhetorical device which provides absolution from responsibility for racial evaluation and prescription, but here the politician self-consciously shares in a conspiracy with an audience. In order to conceal his racial message he uses the techniques of equivocation and stress as well as attempting to project mental images for others to interpret. As a whole, Chapter 7 is meant to illustrate in detail, and by using a specific issue, i.e. black immigration control, how the ideological facade (the claim that various actions are morally justifiable and are not merely undertaken in pursuit of self-interest) is constructed and efficaciously maintained.

For academic, technical, and personal reasons, the present *British Racial Discourse* is not the book I intended to write, nor the lengthy manuscript of 200,000 words that it later became. It was originally conceived as an empirical study of the discourse about race of national and local politicians, but such was the size of the enterprise and the inadequacy of existing analytical and methodological tools, that the work was forced to take an increasingly theoretical bent and, in combination with interpretation of the copious empirical material (drawn from the taped interviews with politicians), to grow like Jack's beanstalk. The correct solution was to prune unmercifully, which may have had the effect in a few places of disrupting the flow of argument.

All major reference to local politics has been omitted, although the interviews with councillors and other officials had such intrinsic interest that I feel the need to do justice to them in a subsequent publication. In addition to this major surgery, a chapter in which I criticise the usefulness of some social psychological approaches (those in which the concept of 'prejudiced attitude' is stressed to the exclusion of other considerations) was extracted and published as a Social Science Research Council Research Unit on Ethnic Relations working paper (No. 17, 1982). Nevertheless, I have continued to make some cursory reference in my conclusion to the inadequacies of examining discourse about race solely with the aid of the concept of race prejudice.

A further chapter analysing the parliamentary debates on the Race Relations Bills, entitled 'The practice of racialism, versus the rhetoric of racial tolerance' has been deleted in another attempt to tackle the persistent problem of length. This has had the effect of reducing the number of convincingly worked examples of deracialisation, although the far more valuable theoretical chapter on that subject has been retained.

Short résumés of some of the arguments advanced in the missing sections have been included in the conclusion which tries to knit together in a more even fashion the various threads running through the book.

The manuscript as a whole is now far leaner and more realistic in the demands it makes on the reader. It aims to provide a partial account of

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British racial ideology as it is practically experienced in the form of political discourse, as well as to offer some theoretical understanding of its relationship to the social structure and in particular its relationship to inter- and intra-class divisions. Such a massive undertaking is likely to be inadequate in many respects, and the work, when read as a whole, may appear on occasion to be either repetitive or unsatisfactorily synthesised. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it does attempt to provide an overview of the nature of British racial discourse, and to bring one or two original concepts to bear on the task. There is undoubtedly a need for further extensive academic work to be conducted in this area.

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The meaning of ‘racism’: its limitations in the study of discourse dealing with racial issues

Terminological difficulties beset the whole field of race relations and, particularly, the study of racial discourse. Before setting out to describe the characteristics of British political discourse about race, I shall try to explain the meaning of ‘race’, ‘racism’, ‘racialism’, ‘racist’, and ‘racialist’. I shall examine in detail the use of the word ‘racism’ as this description has been widely applied to the kind of things people say about race. Because of a general vagueness and ambiguity in the meaning of all these terms, the exercise requires a great deal of arbitrary legislation, influenced in part by the needs of the subsequent study. In the course of analysis, various confusions, lurking in everyday and previous social scientific usage, are revealed. It should be stressed, however, that the whole area is a semantic ‘battlefield’, in which Wittgenstein’s analogy of word tools does not come amiss. But the social and political ramifications of ‘category legislation’ are more akin to the deployment of tanks and barbed wire than to the use of the hammer, pliers, and saw of Wittgenstein’s homely tool-box. The use of words has political significance: their application in social context reveals something of a person’s scheme for ordering, understanding, and acting in his world.

The reality of race consists in the first instance of perceivable characteristics of groups of people. ‘Perceivable’ in this context means ‘capable of being perceived’ (‘perceived’ = ‘made available to the senses’). Pigmentation, physique, descent, historical or geographical origin, dress, language, and cultural norms and expressions are perceivable at what philosophers have called the level of the material field. But although perception by itself would appear to require the capacity to differentiate, the recognition of racial difference requires some form of classification, comparison, and judgment of categorial significance. A recognition of racial difference involves a comparison of different pigmentations, physiques, etc., and their acceptance as indicators of a general racial category that acquires significance in conjunction with a broader system of thinking

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about the world. Perception of itself does not reveal the existence of race. Perceived differences become imbued with significance inasmuch as they act as an anchorage for a set of beliefs, and individuals have cause to consider their position in the light of that set. This idea is superficially similar to the Kantian idea of an object being conceptually determined or grasped by means of a concept, the concept acting as the condition of experience, although it is not clear whether Kant is referring to the conditions of perception or of understanding. It is the overall framework of ideas into which 'race' is inserted, therefore, which provides it with significance for social existence and understanding.

In its everyday usage the term 'race' is both vague and ambiguous. The limitations to the word's usage are rarely clear, and even if they are it is not always apparent which of the word's recognised usages is being used in a particular context.

Is a race 'a group of people of common origin or descent', 'a division of mankind based on certain physical differences', 'one of the divisions of living creatures', e.g. 'the race of man', or something else again? In zoological literature, stipulative definitions of race have been offered which derive from and may also affect everyday usage if they become popularised. There is obviously a connection between race defined as 'a group regarded as of common stock' and as 'a population within an animal species possessing a distinct gene frequency'. The sociologist's approach has been to study the definition of 'race' in popular usage in a given society. 'Race', then, is seen to be a social classification based primarily on perception of physical differences, although these physical differences need not be demonstrably genetically based.

Lachenmeyer (1971, p. 10) points out that:

linguistic symbols must at certain points represent observable attributes, properties, and relations. A term's referential meaning consists of the points of contiguity between it as linguistic symbol and the observable attributes, properties and relations that it represents. Thus, referential meaning is the most relevant 'meaning concept' for a consideration of scientific terminology.

The sociologist, then, identifies 'race' not merely by the use of the linguistic symbol but by its referential meaning. I may recognise others' discourse to be about race, when it employs a category which I am able to identify as having a referent corresponding to that designated by my own understanding of the term 'race'. It is not to be recognised solely by the occurrence of one particular linguistic symbol.

This also means that the boundaries that are placed around a given usage

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must be made absolutely clear if it is to be the arbiter of whether others are 'really' discussing race. Banton (1977, pp. 148–9) provides an example of the difficulties involved in boundary-drawing by distinguishing racial minorities ('created when opposition to the social incorporation of a minority is justified on the grounds of the minority members' hereditary characteristics, particularly those associated with skin colour and nineteenth century doctrines of racial typology'), national minorities ('people who are either citizens of another state or regard themselves as such and want the political map revised'), and ethnic minorities (dependent 'upon a belief among the minority members that the nature of their common descent requires or justifies their coming together'). The classification, he says, 'makes allowance for a minority's being both ethnic and racial and for changes in the relationship of the inclusive and exclusive boundaries'. It serves to distinguish a variety of groupings all of which might previously have been referred to as races: e.g. the black race, the Welsh race, the Sikh race, etc.

Definition must always involve questions of where to draw the line: when the line is drawn too tightly, much that others think about as 'racial' will be excluded, giving rise to a 'reductionism', and when drawn too extensively, it will take in far too much substance, resulting in 'expansionism'. When Cox (1970) distinguishes race prejudice against blacks from intolerance of the Jews, it could be argued that the line has been drawn too tightly. From the point of view of explaining the structural mechanisms of race relations, however, it is undoubtedly a most thoughtful distinction to make. The possibility of subdividing large general categories of diverse phenomena is probably of great importance in developing an understanding of, and providing explanations for, the race relations complex (which seems to suffer more from expansionism than reductionism). However, it involves lexicographical legislation with political repercussions. For example, are the speeches of Enoch Powell to be thought of as concerned primarily with nationhood rather than with race?

One rough and ready method of tackling demarcation disputes is to connect definitions to frequencies of usage in particular historical and geographical contexts. Thus, when British political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s is examined, it becomes clear that the categories that correspond most closely with Banton's definition of a racial minority (in terms of skin colour) – a definition which might usefully be adopted – are 'West Indians', 'Asians', 'coloured immigrants', 'immigrants', 'spades', 'wogs', and 'racial' or 'ethnic minorities'. In this context, it seems that skin colour is the decisive racial feature, despite the fact that the Jewish 'race' is also identified. In another era, however, the linguistic symbol, 'race', might have a somewhat different denotation. It is the referent, not the presence of

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the linguistic symbol, that is crucial, although there is in fact likely to be substantial correspondence in referential meaning between the sociologist's, and the 'man in the street's' linguistic symbols. The race category adopted here, then, consists of the class of phenomena designated racial by social scientists and referred to in common parlance under this and other designations, as indicated in Figure 1.

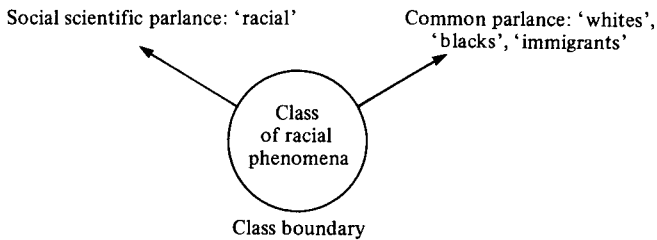


Figure 1. Racial symbol and referent

Racial discourse consists of spoken and written material (e.g. speeches, books, articles, debates, conversation) that makes use of a racial category. Quite how central the race category must be to the discourse, and how frequently it must occur, are matters to be decided by the researcher.

Racial discourse may constitute part of a recognised political ideology. ('Ideology' is defined in Chapter 3.) In attempting to provide a comprehensive map of political affairs, ideologies are likely to find a place for matters of race.

A political ideology such as the national socialism outlined in *Mein Kampf* is centrally concerned with racial explanations of social processes, evaluations, and political prescriptions, and is frequently described as 'racial' or 'racist ideology'. Furthermore, the ideology's adherents might proudly accept the accuracy of a 'racist' label. (But even national socialism deals with issues other than race.) The social observer must not allow the political ideologists' assertions or denials of 'racist' content to play much part in deciding whether the ideology makes extensive use of the racial category: he must decide by reference to content, although the assertions of adherents, particularly those in principal positions in political parties, will qualify as part of that content.

Political ideologies such as British Conservatism, Liberalism, and Labour beliefs, however, are not appropriately described as 'racial' or 'racist'. Very little of the discourse that goes to make up the totality of these ideologies deals in any direct way with racial issues. This is not to deny that the social scientist may be able to recognise the adverse effects of the fulfilment of these ideologies' prescriptions on racial groups. But the ideologies are not accurately described as racial in the sense of making wide use of racial categories, explanations, evaluations, and prescriptions. It is