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Introduction. Controversies and continuities in race and ethnic relations theory[1]

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The papers collected in this volume are, with the exception of those of Jenkins and Solomos, revised versions of papers presented to a conference on Theories of Race and Ethnicity held at St Catherine's College, Oxford, between 19 and 23 March 1984. In convening the conference it had been the aim of Professor John Rex, then Director of the SSRC Research Unit on Ethnic Relations, to bring together in dialogue a number of eminent scholars representing a range of apparently competing theoretical traditions. Part of his object was to test whether there were points of convergence or continuity between theoretical standpoints which might usefully be explored and exploited to the benefit of the subject as a whole.

For a number of reasons, including the inability to attend of some of those originally invited, there is no sense in which the papers collected here can be said to represent every theoretical strand and tendency presently to be found in the field. Nevertheless, the following papers do present the work of a number of the most prolific and influential writers in the specialism. In so doing they raise, collectively and individually, a number of crucial and recurrent themes and points of controversy. It will be the purpose of this Introduction to identify and clarify some of these themes.

The nature of theory

The most obvious starting point for any overview of the volume is the question of theory itself. What do we mean by a theory of race or ethnic relations? It will become clear, even from a brief perusal of the contents page, that the authors assembled here have diverse and often divergent views about the answer to that question, although they do not all consider it necessary explicitly to discuss these issues. For some a theory

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is little more than a set of working concepts or hypotheses by means of which observations may be classified and ordered. For others a theory is a set of interrelated and structured propositions whose purpose is pre-eminently etiological. For some a social theory needs to be as complex as the phenomena to which it relates, while for others social theory should aim to meet the same criteria of inclusiveness, economy and elegance which is traditionally taken to be the hallmark of theory in the natural sciences. Yet others, while sharing this as an ultimate aim, are content to build towards such an objective by means of smaller steps; what Merton would have called 'theories of the middle range' (Merton, 1968: 39–72). Finally, all of the theorisations represented here involve conceptions of the relationships with other theories. For some the relationship is one of superiority/inferiority, adequacy/inadequacy. For others the question is one of complementarity. It will be convenient to begin our discussion with a consideration of these competing views.

There are, I think, three principal answers presented in this volume to the question: 'What is the relationship between my theorisation and that of others?' They may conveniently be summarised as the 'grand theory', the 'mosaic' approach and the 'pyramid' approach.

According to the grand theory position, the purpose of social theorising is to develop sets of interrelated propositions which approximate ever more closely to an all-embracing theoretical system capable of providing causal explanation of all available observations. Those versions of grand theory which explicitly invoke the natural science model frequently aspire to the derivation of law-like generalisations. Indeed social theories sometimes appear to go further and to imply that they have the capacity to explain as yet unmade observations. To the extent that they do this they are often accused of departing from the natural science model by being, in effect, unfalsifiable. Theoretical systems like Marxism, Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Parsonian functionalism have all been criticised on these grounds.

Whether or not they invoke natural science, however, grand theories share a search for, and typically claim to have found, the underlying basis, deep structure or central dynamic of human social life. Often they are also involved in the search for the origins of this dynamic, although this search is not exclusive to grand theory. Grand theory does not always claim successfully to have established itself in terms of the high goals that it sets itself, but it is distinguished by its claim both that such goals are, in principle, attainable and that it is approaching them. The proper relationship among theories, then, is competitive. One theory is to be preferred to another only if it can be shown to be better; that is, if it

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explains more observations. In the case of those invoking a natural science model the additional criteria of economy and elegance are also typically invoked. (We should note here that it is possible to argue that the grand theory aspiration is anathema to the natural science tradition. Certainly it is not only grand theorists who invoke these criteria.)

Grand theory in social science does not always follow this model, however. The claim to have discovered the most important dynamic in social life frequently structures the range of questions to which answers are sought. In such cases, theories are to be judged according to whether, and how effectively, they answer such questions. Other questions are relegated to the status of epiphenomena with the assumption that their causation can be traced to the central dynamic even if at present sufficient attention cannot be diverted to this secondary task. In effect such a position involves what Michael Banton in this volume characterises as a meta-theoretical decision. Banton, in fact, implies in his discussion that it is pre-eminently Marxism, with its Hegelian metatheory, which is thereby restricted in the range of questions which it may, or at least does, address. My own view is that there are myriad opportunities within what Banton calls the Kantian tradition for similarly restricting decisions of a meta-theoretical kind. Thus not only many variants of Marxism but also Freudian psychology and some versions of sociobiology (to name but two) may suffer similar restrictions.

There are hints of grand theory in a number of the contributions in this volume. The various Marxist accounts outlined by Solomos clearly share such an aspiration, while the claims to theoretical superiority of both sociobiology and rational choice theory have more than a hint of grand theory about them, whatever the ambivalence on this issue expressed by van den Berghe and Hechter. Even the apparently more open, revisionist Marxism of Wolpe, by insisting on the privileged status of the mode of production, seems to retain a claim for Marxism as the ultimate grand theory.

What I have, for convenience, called the mosaic approach to theory is one which is probably represented by the majority of the papers in this volume. It is consistent with an ultimate aspiration for grand theory (as expressed by Yinger at the start of his paper), with agnosticism as to its possibility or desirability and with a commitment to cumulative understanding through the complementary examination of social life from a variety of vantage points. This last orientation is not unlike the position of Weber and involves the implication that the complexity and multifaceted character of social life must be matched by open-mindedness and a willingness to learn from others on the part of the theorist (cf. Freund, 1968). Such a position does not, however, involve the acceptance that all

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theories are equally adequate. While writers may self-consciously embrace this tradition as an epistemological position, a commitment to theories of the middle range, 'grounded theory' or a more limited search for a conceptual armoury which facilitates research may be an unremarked and taken-for-granted background assumption. Indeed in the present volume the papers by Lal, Murphree and Smith do not explicitly address these issues. What they write, however, would seem to be consistent with their categorisation under this heading, together with the papers by Rex and Wallman.

The pyramid approach to theory, represented in this volume by the work of van den Berghe and Yinger, is in the end difficult to distinguish from the other types listed above. I have separated them out principally in order to draw attention to the facts that each has something to say explicitly about the relationships between different modes of theorising and that each seeks to identify some systematic schema for relating different approaches. Thus van den Berghe invokes the principle of causal distance to identify the roles of different modes and levels of theorisation, while Yinger explicitly discusses the complementarity of different strands of race and ethnic relations theory and endorses the ultimate aspiration for grand theory. Indeed there is a sense in which the positions taken in both of these papers could dissolve into grand theory.

The imperialist tendency in the sociobiological approach is notably strong and the perspective would thus seem particularly to lend itself to grand theory building. This is so despite the ambivalence which van den Berghe exhibits towards such a project (an ambivalence which interestingly, is shared by Hechter). One reason for this affinity with grand theory is the ease with which sociobiology lends itself to the search for the origins of aspects of human behaviour. In the case of the study of race and ethnic relations this is particularly important because of the long-standing question of primordialism alluded to by Yinger. Moreover, since sociobiology appears to combine an approach to the question of origins with an emphasis on the continuity between 'nature' and 'nurture', it is not surprising that it has come to be seen by some of both its opponents and its advocates as providing a 'biological' rationale for racial and ethnic stratification. Indeed it was precisely this that caused Michael Banton during the discussion to ask whether this danger was not too high a price to pay for any advances in understanding which the sociobiological perspective might offer. Van den Berghe's answer, which is spelled out clearly in his paper, was that such a danger could only be a product of misunderstanding, not of the sociobiological perspective itself, and that academics did themselves, and the societies they served, a disservice by subordinating the search for truth to political and ideologi-

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cal pressures of whatever kind. I shall return to the question of the relationship between academic research and political action in due course. For the moment it will be appropriate to consider further the question of origins.

The problem of origins

The problem of origins has long dogged the study of many aspects of human behaviour. It takes on special significance in the field of race and ethnic relations. This is because of the persistence of the question of primordialism. There are several ways in which this question may be approached. One is the position adopted by Yinger who uses the term 'primordial' to refer to that aspect of ethnicity which expresses 'genuine culture' to which a sense of long-standing attachment is experienced. As his paper makes clear, he sees this as only one of a number of sources of ethnic strength. It is, however, redolent of a persistent strand or tendency in the academic discussion of ethnicity which Gabriel and Ben-Tovim have traced to the work of Max Weber. In an important paper they have identified an ambivalence about whether phenotype and/or culture have some independent effect or whether they are mediated by meaning, i.e. represent one of a number of potential bases for action (1979, see especially the discussion of Weber's usage of the concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity': 191–4). It is this strand which highlights the second way in which the question of primordialism may be approached. It may be summed up in the question: 'Are those forms of human behaviour associated with the racist beliefs and practices characteristic of the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe and its offshoots unique, and hence explicable in terms of some aspect of that history, or are they merely one form taken by a primordial ethnocentricism?' Clearly, if the answer to the second half of this question is 'yes', then not only will there be limits to the capacity effectively to challenge patterns of mutual antagonism founded upon ethnicity and race but also those benefiting from the resultant inequalities will have a powerful ideological excuse for their oppression of others — its 'naturalness'. This brings me to the third way in which primordialism may be approached – from the apparent immutability and naturalness of race as a criterion of differentiation. It is important to note here that, whatever our answers to the questions posed above, the concept of 'race' does have a discernible and traceable history. It is clear that it grew up hand in hand with the scientific exploration of human origins (Banton, 1967; 1977) and that, where it was incorporated into racist theory, it purported to offer an explanation of and justification for the exploitation and subordination of

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blacks by whites in terms of those origins. It is precisely for this reason that the term 'race' is increasingly questioned as an appropriate analytic category in sociology just as it was earlier in biology (see Miles, 1982).

Paradoxically, given this apparent unanimity across disciplines, M. G. Smith has chosen to incorporate race as one of the central variables in his analysis of pluralism in African societies. By 'race' he means not some loose sociological concept but 'aggregates whose members are objectively distinguished from others by certain gross hereditary phenotypical features' (below, p. 192). Responding to the surprise and unease which this usage evoked among conference participants, Smith has provided, in the revised version of his paper published here, an extended and robust defence of his position. Essentially he argues that the conventional wisdom of modern biology and genetics is a misplaced and illegitimate deduction from the study of monogenetic characters such as blood groups and that it flies in the face of common sense and observation. It is essential to maintain the concept, Smith argues, because 'unlike ethnic identity, racial identity and/or difference is immutable, manifest and *normally* unambiguous in multi-racial societies and contexts' (below, p. 191; emphasis in original). This is not to say that folk ideas of race or ethnicity will necessarily correspond with 'manifest biological differences' (below, p. 191), rather that understanding demands the confrontation of folk concepts with objective evidence.

The point I believe Smith wishes to make here is that it is important not to confuse principles of stratification which have a negotiability from those which do not. Put another way, there are myriad opportunities for boundary crossing and 'passing' where the criteria of group differentiation are capable of being concealed or rendered invisible, and where individuals or groups may in some sense 'choose' whether or not to display or maintain a particular cultural characteristic. By contrast, gross phenotypical differences, such as colour, are difficult, if not impossible, to conceal and can serve as markers of status whether or not other 'cultural' differences are present. Because they have a genetic foundation, they are both permanent and hereditarily transmitted and thus inferior or superior statuses are transmitted across generations. It is because he recognises the power of such markers that Smith wishes to avoid the implication he detects in the claim that such differences are *merely* socially constructed: that they are readily maleable and deconstructed. He rejects the conflation of race and ethnicity, noting that even where a group is culturally indistinguishable from others, phenotypical markers might well serve to differentiate it in terms of rights.

Smith goes on to make a further point. This is that the power and significance of phenotype as marker may well lead to situations in which

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folk concepts of race grow up, or are invented, in order to justify assigning a peculiarly permanent out-group status to some category of persons otherwise distinguishable only by some more equivocal marker. This is also an important point. In making it, however, I believe Smith has unwittingly carried his argument further than is necessary or sustainable. What is crucial about such situations is that folk concepts of race incorporate not merely presumptions about the immutability of phenotypical characteristics but also the belief that moral and intellectual differences parallel physical variation. The reason the Nazis wished to demonstrate the phenotypical specificity of Jews was in order to sustain an argument that their alleged intellectual, moral and cultural degeneracy was similarly rooted in an immutable biological heritage. It is precisely for this reason that modern biologists and geneticists have challenged the concept of race. Contrary to Smith's implication, they do not deny that phenotypical variation is genetically founded. Rather do they argue that the combination of intra-group variation with the polygenetic basis of phenotypical difference means that it is not possible to develop a scientifically founded racial classification. It is important to recognise and restate this point, I believe, because if we do not we may be forced to conclude, with the racists, that if groups differ systematically in physical appearance, why not also in intellectual capacity and moral worth? The geneticists' argument against this of course is logically the same as the one stated above: namely that the skills and capacities referred to are complexly and polygenetically determined and that there is thus no reason to assume that they all vary simultaneously along a single scale. The fact that this is also true of physical differences means that 'race' can never signify anything more than socially constructed ideal types in terms of which people are categorised.

Put another way, I would argue that the differences cited by Smith are neither objective nor unambiguous. Interestingly, he provides two different lists of 'races'. On page 189 he distinguishes 'Negroes, Asiatic Mongols, Whites (or Caucasians), Australian Aborigines, Amerindians, Pygmies, Bushmen and certain other populations'. On page 192 we are told that 'Altogether, in the African states discussed here, there are five racial categories, namely, Blacks, Whites, Indians, Pygmies, and a residual rather variable category of hybrids.' The difference between these two lists suggests to me that the distinction between 'folk concepts' and 'objective races' is a spurious one. Indeed Smith admits as much when describing his first list as deriving from differences that 'all men remark'. The fact that the two lists differ demonstrates that such distinctions are, indeed, socially contextual, however 'objective' they may appear. Why, we may ask, are phenotypical differences between

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Nubians and Zulus not regarded as gross while those between, say, Australian aborigines and pygmies, are? I suspect that the answer is not unrelated to the processes by which such classifications were first developed, processes rooted in European exploration and expansion and in the development of European science. As such there is a strong element of ethnocentrism about them. The fact that they are also not unambiguous is demonstrated by the fact that in all the most rigidly stratified societies in which 'race' is the principal criterion of social placement, it has been necessary to develop complex procedures for classifying the phenotypically ambiguous. (See the example cited by Yinger, below, pp. 21–2. Consider also the example of the system of administrative racial classification in South Africa.) It may be that it is this issue of classification which is crucial and that it is fruitful to follow Jenkins (below, p. 177) in distinguishing groups and categories. Categorisation, he notes, is intimately bound up with power relations and the capacity of one group ascriptively to classify another. It is precisely this process which is at the root of the incorporation of 'race' as a concept implying immutability into the systems of domination conventionally identified as racist. For this reason alone, it seems to me, we should be wary of resuscitating the concept without stronger grounds than those adduced by Smith.

In marked contrast to Smith, Wallman argues that there are no sound grounds for distinguishing the racial as a distinct form of identity. Arguing from the orthodox scientific rejection of the concept of 'race', she suggests that its persistence in folk models allows the anthropologist to see phenotype as 'one element in the repertoire of ethnic boundary markers' (below, p. 229).

Jenkins's discussion of groups and categories is designed to challenge Wallman's conflation. He argues that while ethnicity is more generally concerned with self-identification – 'us' – 'race' is best conceived as a matter of external classification – 'them'. This directly challenges Wallman's implication that the distinction between group and category is not clear-cut: ethnicity may be a matter of both external definition and self-identity. In fact Jenkins makes a similar point in referring both to categorisation in terms of ethnicity and to positive self-evaluation in terms of 'race'. It may be worth noting here that the ideology of *Herrenvolk* which he cites is not the only example of this process. Thus black power or consciousness movements pursue a strategy of resistance through an inversion of the negative categorisations of the racist (cf. Blauner, 1972). This points to a fruitful strand in the anthropological tradition which Wallman describes, namely the conceptualisation of ethnicity as a resource (see also Dhooge, 1981). This is a powerful and

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important counter to those approaches which see the oppressed merely as powerless victims of domination or, as in some versions of structuralist Marxism, as dupes of system forces over which they have no control. It is crucial to note that even the harshest systems of oppression rarely leave their victims with *no* channels of resistance (cf. Genovese, 1975) and that people do play a role in the making of their own history. Any alternative view must dissolve into either impotent pessimism in the face of oppression or the kind of paternalism of which white liberals are often accused (Blauner, 1972; cf. Rich, 1984).

Having said that, it is important to note that the central focus of Jenkins's criticism of the anthropological approach which Wallman represents is its apparent neglect of asymmetrical power relations. Indeed Wallman admits as much when she argues (below, p. 226) that 'anthropologists are seldom professionally concerned with vertical relations between ethnic groups and macro-state structures, and they rarely undertake studies of social stratification and minority status as such'. Rather are they concerned with 'lateral relations at the micro-level'. The result is that the relationship between identification and categorisation is effectively neglected. Ethnicity may be a resource in the making of a group's history, but the process of categorisation, of which racism is the most striking example in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, illustrates that the superior capacity of some groups to define the circumstances under which that history is made is a crucial feature of asymmetrical power relations. Ethnicity is not, therefore, merely a counter resource to some other basis of power chances; it is deeply embedded in the overall power relations of the society, structuring and conditioning, for example, the development and outcome of class struggles. (Compare the discussions in the papers by Rex and Wolpe below.)

Race and class

The race/class debate has been one of the most enduring to be found in the sociological literature in the field. Most often it has been structured around a confrontation between Marxist and non-Marxist scholars in which the latter have argued for an independent causal role for 'race' while the former have insisted that 'race' is merely one manifestation of more fundamental class struggles. There are, in turn, a number of ways of conceptualising the priority of class from this perspective. Some of these are critically reviewed in Harold Wolpe's paper, in which he seeks to argue that the reductionism characteristic of many Marxist treatments of race and ethnicity is as profoundly un-Marxist as the insistence on the

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priority of racial identity found in the work of some of their opponents. By contrast Wolpe wishes to argue that Marxists must dispense with economistic conceptions of class and the economy and recognise capital accumulation as a social process with economic, political and ideological dimensions. This entails a rejection of any simple opposition between race and class. As he puts it: 'Race may, under determinant conditions, become interiorised in the class struggle' (see below, p. 123).

A number of conference participants had difficulty in discerning what was distinctively Marxist about the analysis offered by Wolpe. How, for example, did it differ from a Weberian approach to these problems? In the revised and extended version published here, Wolpe has implicitly responded to these questions and has made it clear that, although he rejects economic determinism, he still regards the mode of production as having a privileged status; that is to say, the ultimate locus of class struggle is conceptualised as the system of production. In this respect there would seem to remain a gulf between Marxists and Weberians in that, for the latter, class is to be more widely conceived as a category rooted in the market. This is clear in Rex's self-consciously Weberian discussion, where the centrality which he attaches to class relations is explicitly theorised in terms of the relations of employment. A further difference remains. Thus while Wolpe wishes to stress the interpenetration of the political, economic and ideological as determinants of class struggle, Weberians tend to insist on the analytic separation of what Weber called class, status and party. Hence Rex stresses the need to recognise the interplay of political and economic forces in the rise and demise of Empire, particularly with regard to the systems of forced labour to which it gave rise. He draws attention to the creation of estate as well as class relations under such conditions and to the consequences this has for subsequent relations with metropolitan societies following the growth of international migration. The significance of this stress on the need to maintain the analytic separation of class, status and party becomes clear when Rex refers to the possibility that ethnic phenomena may manifest themselves in the absence of any obvious class stratification. Here a theory of ethnicity would be necessary to comprehend the dynamics of the situation. We may go further, however, and suggest that an adequate theory has to provide us with the means to grasp the nature, location and, ultimately, origins of ethnic attachment whether or not we regard it as having been 'interiorised' within class struggle.

Whatever differences remain between Marxists and Weberians on these issues, however, the internal critique of Marxism described by Wolpe, and further attested in the papers by Ben-Tovim *et al.* and by

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