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978-0-521-36939-8 - Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations
Edited by John Rex and David Mason
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Comparative ethnic and race relations

Theories of race and ethnic relations

This book brings together internationally known scholars from a range of disciplines and theoretical traditions. In setting out the various theories it demonstrates the range and diversity of approaches to race and ethnic relations current in the field. As well as identifying important and persistent points of controversy, however, the collection also reveals much complementarity and indicates the potential for a multifaceted approach to theorisation.

The theories represented include contributions from the perspective of sociology, social anthropology, sociobiology, and social psychology. These range from the macro-level approaches of the theory of the plural society and Marxian and Weberian forms of class analysis to the micro-focus of rational choice theory, symbolic interactionism and identity structure analysis.

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211 USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1986

First published 1986
First paperback edition 1988
Reprinted 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Theories of race and ethnic relations. –
(Comparative ethnic and race relations)
1. Ethnic relations 2. Race relations
I. Rex, John II. Mason, David
III. Series
305.8 GN496

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Theories of race and ethnic relations.
(Comparative ethnic and race relations)
Bibliography.
1. Race relations – Congresses. 2. Ethnic relations –
Congresses. I. Rex, John. II. Mason, David (David J.)
III. Series.
HT1521.T47 1986 305.8 86-6126

ISBN 0 521 36939 8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

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Preface

JOHN REX

The papers contained in this book arose indirectly from the work of the Research Unit on Ethnic Relations, of which I was Director between 1979 and 1984. Although that Unit was originally founded to do fundamental research in the field of ethnic and race relations, pressures were put on the Unit by its parent body the Social Science Research Council during the years involved to engage more and more in policy-oriented research. It became more and more apparent to me as Director that, if we were not to become simply technocrats researching on the means thought necessary to achieve Government ends and if we were to be able to maintain the independence necessary to look critically at those ends, we needed to have a comparative perspective, and that perspective was in turn dependent upon the understanding of theoretical issues.

On the face of it the development of a universally argued theory and an agreed paradigm for race and ethnic relations research seemed impossible. Not merely were there several disciplines involved, but within the main ones, namely sociology and social anthropology, there seemed to be a number of competing if not warring schools. None the less it was thought worthwhile to try to bring together some of the major internationally known scholars to present their ideas as to possible conceptualisations of the field in order to see whether what appeared at first to be irreconcilable conflict could in fact be replaced by a sense of complementarity.

My own perspective suggested to me that an important starting point would be the confrontation of Marxism, Weberian forms of class analysis and the theory of the plural society. I therefore sought to invite four major theorists from the number in Britain who had defended a Marxist perspective, and others, especially from the USA, who had contributed to the development of plural society theory. I intended myself to defend a Weberian concept of class analysis.

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If this was the core of the programme envisaged, however, a number of other theories on different levels of abstraction suggested themselves. I thought that we should confront at the outset precisely this problem of different levels of abstraction and then, against this background, bring in a number of what claimed to be more fundamental types of analysis than the macro-theories of class and pluralism which had been in my mind central. To this end it seemed desirable to look at the paradigms suggested by the theory of rational choice, by social anthropology, by social biology and by social psychology, as well as the micro-sociological approach of symbolic interactionism.

Finally, however, it did seem necessary to look at the question of how the issue of race and ethnic relations looks when there has been a revolutionary transfer of power as in the Communist countries and in post-colonial societies. It also seemed desirable to consider the problems of societies which have in recent times set out to eliminate social inequalities.

The Marxist papers given at the conference were those of Harold Wolpe, who has been especially concerned with the sociology of race and class in his and my native country, South Africa, and of Gideon Ben-Tovim, John Gabriel and their colleagues whose actual paper dealt with the levels of political action to which, as they saw it, a Marxist perspective should lead. Stuart Hall was unfortunately prevented by illness from attending, and it was decided after the conference to invite John Solomos, a member of the Research Unit staff, to contribute a paper which might suggest an overall Marxist perspective.

M. G. Smith, who with J. S. Furnival is generally recognised as one of the founders of the theory of the plural society, gave a paper in which some of the propositions of plural society theory were put to an empirical test, using comparative material from Africa. My own paper on the other hand engaged with plural society theory, arguing that the relationship of the ethnic segments was often a class-like one, and also with orthodox Marxist theory to suggest more flexible concepts of class and class struggle.

To set the whole conference in perspective and to discuss the question of levels of abstraction in sociology we welcomed J. Milton Yinger, whose book on racial and cultural minorities has influenced a whole generation of younger scholars, but we were disappointed that Richard Schermerhorn, who has made one of the most masterly attempts at systematising the study of race and ethnic relations in his book *Comparative Ethnic Relations*, was not able to be with us.

Rational choice theory is a trend of rising importance in social science, including the study of ethnic and race relations, and two of our partici-

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pants, Michael Hechter from the United States and Michael Banton, were invited to present papers on this theme. Both came, but Banton chose to present a paper on the even more fundamental question of the contrast between Kantian and Hegelian epistemologies in social science. The latter topic was important in that it provided links with my own Weberian paper and with the Marxist papers.

Anthropology was represented, apart from M. G. Smith, by Sandra Wallman who presented her views on ethnicity as a situational factor and demonstrated her approach by referring to her empirical work on networks in two London boroughs. Unfortunately both Fredrik Barth and Abner Cohen were unable to participate, and Richard Jenkins, a former member of the Unit staff, was therefore invited to submit a paper for this volume to set anthropological approaches in perspective.

Barbara Ballis Lal, a student of the Chicago School, reminded us both of the heritage of Robert Park and more particularly of the historical significance of the symbolic interactionist tradition which grew out of the Chicago School but which was above all represented in the work of Herbert Blumer.

Although the conference was primarily attended by sociologists and anthropologists, we were also concerned with the biological and psychological underpinnings of our work. Pierre van den Berghe was invited to argue the merits of sociobiology in this sphere and Weinreich, to talk about empirical research on the question of ethnic identity. Anders Lange and Charles Westin were invited to discuss, more fundamentally, the whole relationship between biological, psychological and sociological explanations. Lange and Westin, whose paper was regrettably too long to be included in this volume, indeed challenged the conference more than did any other speakers to be clear about what it meant by 'theory' and what it regarded as the *explanandum* in ethnic relations.

Then remained the question of race and ethnic relations in situations of political change. On this topic we were disappointed that W. J. Wilson of Chicago was not able to accept our invitation, but we saw Gabriel and Ben-Tovim's paper as dealing with this kind of question. Again we were disappointed that our colleagues Bromley and Koslov from the Soviet Union were not able to participate, but we did have the opportunity to hear an important paper by Marshall Murphree, who is President of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Ethnic Minorities and who has studied both minority and development problems in Zimbabwe before and after independence.

A number of other European scholars who did not give papers joined the meeting and the Unit was grateful for their co-operation. They included Andre Köbben and Hans van Amersfoort from the Netherlands

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and Yngve Lithman from Sweden. Other English scholars who participated were Hugh Tinker, Alastair Hennessy, Kenneth Kirkwood, Terry Chivers and Ceri Peach together with members of the Unit staff.

Being myself a party to the controversies which the book represents, I did not feel that I could also write an objective Introduction. For this reason I invited David Mason, whose judicious comments on trends in the theory of race and ethnic relations had appeared elsewhere, to join me in editing this book and to write the Introduction. Having assigned this task to David Mason it would be inappropriate for me to comment at any length on the papers or on his Introduction. Perhaps, however, I may be permitted to make three general points.

The first is that I see more coherence in what is written here than Mason does. As I see it there is considerable ground for agreement and interchange between the Marxist and pluralist theories and my own. I also think that many of the other theories discussed are not so much in opposition to these, but simply at a different level of abstraction. Thus the rational choice theory, sociobiology and social psychological theories of identity may be seen as explicating some of the macro-concepts in class theories and pluralist theories. Their publication here may in fact cause some of the macro-theorists to look more closely at their concepts to see whether they can be analysed in methodologically individualist terms. Slightly more difficult to bring into the general debate are the symbolic interactionist theories and anthropological studies of social networks. In part the answer may be that there is simply a need for micro-empirical studies after all the larger political and economic issues have been disposed of. But there is also another type of claim being made here and it is important that such theories of race and ethnicity should be argued about along with the theories which have been referred to above, some of which might be accused of reifying group concepts.

My second point is that the conference has led me to bring my own ideas closer to those of M. G. Smith and that there is no way in which I would wish to agree with the dismissal of pluralist theory in the way which Jenkins suggests. Indeed I think that if there is one central organising concept in this field it is that of '*de facto* differential incorporation'. If I have myself emphasised the engagement of racial and ethnic groups with each other as classes, I do also recognise ethnic estates as an important element in colonial societies, and would go further, by agreeing that political and legal structures are as important as economic ones.

My very last word, however, may seem a surprising one. It is that I am drawn to the conclusion that race and ethnicity as such, while they may be a basis on which men affiliate to or are assigned to communal

quasi-groups, are *not* the primary element in what is called racial and ethnic relations. The fact is that the large communal quasi-groups which are called ethnic and racial are the collective entities which are brought together in systems of class, estate, status group domination, caste and individual status striving. What disturbs us about what we call 'race and ethnic relations situations' is very often not the racial and ethnic factor as such but the injustice of elements in the class and status system. Thus it is not surprising that in revolutionary aftermaths the racial and ethnic question declines in importance at least for a time. Thus we find Marshall Murphree telling us that the concern in Zimbabwe is less with race relations than with economic development.

I should like to thank all those concerned with making our conference the success it was and with making this work possible. In particular, however, I should like to thank Ceri Peach for helping us to hold the conference in St Catherine's College and Norman Thornton who handled all the administrative arrangements with very great skill. To our sponsors the Economic and Social Research Council we are grateful for a generous contribution to travel and accommodation expenses.