

CHAPTER I

Introduction

A curious form of collective amnesia has, until quite recently, obscured the centrality of intellectual racism in Western thought during the early part of the twentieth century. Although the existence of racist attitudes has been widely acknowledged, and notwithstanding the importance of several pioneering historical studies of the subject, there has been a considerable underestimation of the extent to which theories of racial difference form part of mainstream international intellectual traditions. This silence is now being addressed by a rapidly growing body of sophisticated historical writing, much of it focused on Britain, Europe and the United States.¹ As a result it is becoming increasingly evident that, in the first half of this century, racial preconceptions were both endemic and taken for granted. There were, of course, always people who questioned the truth of race superiority, but these critics were compelled to argue within the established terms of what amounted to a dominant racial consensus. Whereas today the word 'racist' is almost universally recognised as a term of abuse and condemnation, this was not the case in the first decades of the century. The contrast with the present – in which racism is so socially unacceptable that racists feel compelled to deny they are such – is compelling.

A principal cause of this huge shift in perceptions has been the traumatic experience of the Nazi Holocaust which alerted humanity as a whole to the terrifying consequences of politicised racism. Yet, in doing so, the horrors perpetrated by Nazism have also had the effect of disguising the extent to which similar racial ideas were

¹ See, e.g., D. J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (New York, 1985); M. Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, 1987); N. L. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (London, 1982); E. Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* (Cambridge, 1992). Two classic accounts of racial attitudes during the age of imperialism are those by Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison, 1964) and Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes towards the Outside World in the Imperial Age* (London, 1969).

current in European and American thought in the pre-war generation. There has been a comfortable tendency to see the expression of racial theory as something distinctively German, represented by a tradition of thought leading directly from writers such as Count Gobineau and Houston Chamberlain to Hitler. This particular lineage of thought was, however, only part of a complex pattern and the fact that the above-mentioned names include both a Frenchman and an Englishman should alert us to the Europe-wide nature of the racial phenomenon.

Although formalised racial science was probably not as strongly represented in South Africa as it was in some overseas countries, racial theory was nevertheless present to a much greater degree than has been generally acknowledged. Given the fact that race consciousness is so central an element of the South African experience, it is especially surprising to find that there has been so little academic exploration of the intellectual roots of racism. Apart from the important recent contributions by Paul Rich and a chapter in Leonard Thompson's *Political Mythology of Apartheid*, there has been no sustained attempt to survey the modern history of scientific racism in South Africa.² A number of specialised studies have made important contributions to aspects of the conceptualisation of human difference, for example, in the fields of criminology, penology and medicine. In addition, there is important work in progress on the process of racial 'othering' in the early and mid-nineteenth-century Cape, particularly as reflected in the colonial encounter of the frontier and in missionary and theological discourse.³ However, the period with which such work is concerned considerably predates the emergence of full-fledged biologically based scientific racism in the late nineteenth century, an era that is of particular relevance because it coincides with the rise of social imperialism in Europe and the emergence of modern segregationist thought in South Africa.

² P. Rich, 'Race, Science, and the Legitimization of White Supremacy in South Africa, 1902–1940', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23/4 (1990); *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge, 1986); *Hope and Despair: English-speaking Intellectuals and South African Politics 1896–1976* (London and New York, 1993); L. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven, 1985) chap. 3.

³ See J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revolution and Revelation: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), vol. I; C. C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-industrial South Africa* (Cambridge, 1992). Also relevant are doctoral theses by Doug Stuart and Andrew Bank which are currently in progress.

Introduction

3

Why has the history of intellectual racism in South Africa been so ignored? One reason is that racial theory has been summarily rejected as ‘pseudo scientific’. The tendency to dismiss racial theory in this fashion initially arose out of the post-war anti-racist consensus which utilised the findings of modern population genetics to declare that ‘race’ was a biological ‘myth’ whose meaning was socially constructed rather than intrinsic. Increasingly framed as a sociological issue, the problem of racism came to be sloughed off from the concerns of traditional science and was absorbed instead into the domain of social science where it took shape as the study of ‘race relations’. Paradoxically, as race became centrally part of the science of sociology, its place in the sociology of science was ignored; only relatively recently have leading figures in the international scientific community come to recognise that the formulation of the concept of race is in crucial respects a product of the scientific imagination.⁴

It is neatly ironical, therefore, that tagging racial science as ‘pseudo scientific’ has proved mutually convenient to scientists and sociologists alike. The label ‘pseudo science’ is, however, highly problematic. For one thing, it begs the question of what *true* science really consists of, and often bears the assumption that scientific enquiry proceeds in a linear progression and that knowledge and rational understanding are perfectible. The notion of a royal road to truth provides the neat opportunity to ignore discredited or dead-end scientific research, a tendency which is reinforced by those who rewrite the history of their own disciplines to reflect an approved ‘great tradition’. Moreover, to dismiss racial science as bogus is to suggest that it was somehow peripheral to mainstream scientific investigation. This assumption is often misleading: just as alchemy contributed much to the development of chemistry, and the abandoned early nineteenth-century science of phrenology formed part of the early foundations of psychology, so eugenics can be seen in some respects as a forerunner of modern genetics – no matter that many of its key premisses and unwarranted assumptions have since been shown to be misguided or reprehensible. It should also be remembered that many racial scientists were prominent intellectuals who occupied influential positions and generally conformed to the accepted standards of academic rigour of the day.

⁴ See, for example, S. J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Harmondsworth, 1988) as well as the 1991 Reith Lectures delivered on BBC Radio 4 by Dr Steve Jones.

Even if they now appear to us as hopelessly prejudiced, this was not necessarily how they were judged by their contemporaries.

There are particular reasons why the history of scientific racism in South Africa has been overlooked. In the struggle to create a common society the non-racial political tradition of opposition to apartheid – which has drawn heavily on the universalist claims of Christianity, liberalism and Marxism – has deliberately downplayed the issue of race. On account of its divisiveness, the salience of race has at times almost been wished away. In the major academic debates about the origins of segregation and apartheid, controversy has centred on the relative primacy of race and class as appropriate analytical tools for the conceptualisation of South African society. This is underlined by the shape of the so-called ‘liberal–radical’ debate which dominated historiographical discussion from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Simplifying somewhat, the crux of the argument has hinged on the functional utility of ‘race’ in the development of apartheid, with radicals suggesting that racial prejudice operates as a disguise for the promotion of capitalist interests, and liberals denying the existence of any intrinsic relationship between capitalism and apartheid.⁵ In pursuing this argument, however, there has been a distinct tendency to avoid taking serious account of the content and internal logic of scientific racism.

Liberals have pursued this comforting line because of the impulse to place the sole responsibility for segregation onto Afrikaner nationalism. In addition, they have sought to avert largely justified accusations that English speakers – some of whom formed part of an identifiable South African liberal tradition – played an instrumental role in the formulation of segregationist ideas earlier this century. For their part, Marxist theorists have also shied away from considering the content of scientific racism on account of the problematic conceptual status of ‘ideology’ in historical materialism. Although the Marxian base–superstructure model has been extensively contested by Marxists themselves, it has retained a lingering appeal and, however attenuated, has encouraged the view that non-material factors are of secondary or limited importance in the task of historical explanation. Some writers, building on the post-war view of race as a biological ‘myth’, have adapted this idea in a way that is consonant with Marxist sociology. Thus there is a widespread

⁵ There is a large literature on this topic. For an effective discussion see D. Posel, ‘Rethinking the “Race–Class Debate” in South African Historiography’, *Social Dynamics*, 9/1 (1983).

Introduction

5

feeling that the category of race is illusory – ‘no more than the ideological expression of alienated social relations’, as one recent critic has it.⁶

My objective in this book is not to state the converse, namely that ‘race’ has an objective ontological status in the scientific sense. Rather, it is to show how ‘race’, considered as a social and intellectual construct, has had a real and enduring existence for much of this century. My interest in the area of racial thought arises out of my experiences of growing up as a white South African under the competing influences of liberal and Marxist political philosophy. I am also motivated by a feeling that the time has come to reconsider the importance and possibilities of ‘history from above’. Many of the best examples of South African historical scholarship in the past two decades have been influenced by variants of social history. Their authors have positioned themselves firmly in an oppositional frame and have sought to recover the historical voice of the dispossessed. The uneasy paradox is that in many cases this has amounted to yet another instance of whites speaking on behalf of blacks. There is no immediate or simple way out of this difficulty. But it may now be appropriate for white historians to become rather more curious about their own collective pasts, not so much in the spirit of *mea culpa* as with a view to recognising *themselves* as historical agents and products. It must be possible to own one’s own history, though not necessarily to identify with it.

The chief concern in this book is with the concept of race rather than the experience of *racism*, that is, with the systematic expression and rationalisation of the idea of superiority and innate biological difference among distinct groups of human beings, rather than with the investigation of discrimination and prejudice in the context of the exercise or institutionalisation of power.⁷ Undeniably, racism has been, and remains, an inseparable part of the structure of South African society. Patterns of paternalism and prejudice have been deeply embedded in the collective mentalities of white South Africans, for whom notions of superiority, exclusivity and hierarchy exist as more or less conscious ‘habits of mind’. Together they

⁶ R. Fine, ‘Review Article: The Antinomies of Neo-Marxism’, *Transformation*, 11 (1990), 93.

⁷ See, e.g., the discussion of racism, racialism and racialisation in R. Miles, *Racism* (London, 1989). I am in general agreement with the analytical distinctions drawn by Miles, but have not attempted to follow him in his use of terminology. For a helpful discussion of the difference between ‘racism’ and ‘racialism’, see A. K. Appiah, *In My Father’s House* (London, 1992).

comprise a folkloric amalgam of popular beliefs and traditions in which the idea of human difference has been accepted as natural and incontestable. Ideally, patterns of popular racism as experienced in daily life should be analysed in conjunction with theoretical racism.⁸ However, this cannot be achieved until such time as we have a fuller understanding of the extent to which theories of racial difference formed part of the ideology of white supremacy in twentieth-century South Africa. In this connection – albeit in a different context – George Fredrickson has drawn a useful distinction between

the explicit and rationalized racism that can be discerned in nineteenth and early twentieth century thought and ideology and the implicit or societal racism that can be *inferred* from actual social relationships.⁹

As Fredrickson points out, the relationship between these two forms of racism is difficult to unravel. Ideological racism may be an intellectual response to, or formulation of, popular racist sentiment. It may at the same time help to construct and maintain such attitudes. In the case of segregation and apartheid, racist ideology both reflected and grew out of already existing notions of human difference. But, in helping to systematise and rationalise such assumptions, it also worked to entrench them legislatively and ideologically.

Intellectual history (or the history of social thought) is one area of South African scholarship that remains seriously underworked and this study is intended as a contribution to its development.¹⁰ The rationale for studying the idea of ‘race’ as an intellectual problem is twofold. In the first place, the problem is of intrinsic interest: the logic of racial ideology, its construction and organisation as a field of enquiry, has its own fascination – however repellent or absurd the racist writings with which one of need must engage. Second, the discourse of intellectual debate, with its well-defined conventions and forms, provides a valuable overall context in which studies of popular racism can be situated. (This is especially important

⁸ For a particularly illuminating discussion of paternalism and racism in the South African countryside, see C. Van Onselen, ‘Race and Class in the South African Countryside: Cultural Osmosis and Social Relations in the Sharecropping Economy of the South-Western Transvaal, 1900–1950’, *American Historical Review*, 95/1 (1990).

⁹ G. M. Fredrickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism and Social Inequality* (Middletown, Conn., 1988), p. 189.

¹⁰ Cf. Rich, who discusses some of the problems of writing intellectual history in the introduction to his recent collection of essays, *Hope and Despair*.

Introduction

7

because so much of popular racism exists as a matter of unstated assumptions and unthinking responses; it often has more to do with the *absence* than the *presence* of considered thought, and is therefore particularly intractable to deal with.) Additionally, the study of race as a historical abstraction facilitates a sense of perspective that is much more difficult to achieve when approaching racism as social practice. Micro-studies of lived situations or close analyses of images and representations of difference constitute potentially fruitful lines of enquiry. But it is often difficult to situate them in a broader context.

The last comment needs amplification. Some of the most exciting approaches to the problem of racial difference in Western thought have been developed through the application of critical theory and literary analysis to the question of the 'other'. To mention just two outstanding examples, one might point to the work of Sander Gilman on converging stereotypes of sexuality, race and madness, as well as several essays by the South African novelist and critic, J. M. Coetzee, in his collection *White Writing*.¹¹ Consideration of the imagery and representation of non-whites in European thought is a highly effective way of understanding the deep structures of thought and metaphor that underlie the process of othering. However, if divorced from historical method, the deconstruction of texts and narrative structures frequently runs the danger of producing self-referential and circular forms of argumentation. When combined with hostility to history itself – as in the case of a recent article by J. M. Coetzee on the Afrikaner nationalist ideologue Geoff Cronjé – the results of post-structuralist discourse analysis are often unconvincing.¹² Words, images and metaphors are acutely revealing, but their meanings are subject to constant change and without careful contextualisation they are apt to suggest connections that do not or did not exist.

If intellectual history helps to contextualise the field of ideas, it often bears an uneasy relationship to social context. One of the problems, therefore, is how the expression of ideas in a formal sense

¹¹ S. L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca, 1985); J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing* (New Haven, 1988).

¹² J. M. Coetzee, 'The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907–)', *Social Dynamics*, 17/1 (1991). For a powerful critique of this article see J. Hyslop, 'The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of a Reactionary Populist Movement: "Purified" Afrikaner Nationalist Agitation for Legislation against "Mixed" Marriages', African Studies seminar paper, Wits, 1993.

articulates with perceptions or events ‘on the ground’. There exists no easy or general answer to these questions and formulaic answers run the danger of being facile. A common view is that ideas diffuse ‘downwards’ from intellectuals to ordinary people. This unthinking assumption is, ironically, often shared by elitists and populists alike, both of whom are inclined to draw easy distinctions between ‘the masses’ and their ‘leaders’. Conversely, there exists the conception that ideas are really stimulated ‘from below’ and that their formal articulation by intellectuals is in some sense, however mediated, an expression of societal forces rather than being independently generated. For those who subscribe to the Marxist base–superstructure model, even implicitly, ideas are somehow only valid or significant if they can be shown to have a more or less direct connection with concrete events or else if they are recognisably constitutive of popular ideology.

One of the weaknesses of both the ‘top–down’ and ‘bottom–up’ conceptions is that they oversimplify the transmission process. Ideas do not travel upwards or downwards like packaged messages in an old-fashioned pneumatic tube. At any one moment there are an infinite number of ideas or thought-structures in formation. Whether these are picked up and made fashionable by intellectuals, cultural entrepreneurs or politicians is largely determined by the extent to which they may resonate with wider social concerns. Yet there is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between the formulation of ideas and their popularisation. Those sceptical of the significance of theories of race may demand proof that what is being articulated at an abstract level is also reflected in popular discourse. However, this demand is naive insofar as it neglects the fact that popular ‘common-sense’ conceptions of the present often reflect discredited intellectual orthodoxies of the past. As one writer reminds us: ‘Yesterday’s science is today’s commonsense and tomorrow’s nonsense.’¹³

As has already been indicated, linguistic ‘keywords’ or root-metaphors provide a useful guide to understanding the dissemination and influence of an idea or set of ideas. In the case of racial ideology, words drawn from the vocabulary of the biological sciences were routinely applied to society from the late nineteenth century onwards. With the advent of the Darwinian revolution, as

¹³ F. B. Livingstone, ‘On the Nonexistence of Human Races’, in A. Montagu (ed.), *The Concept of Race* (New York, 1964), p. 59.

Introduction

9

Greta Jones points out, biology helped to ‘create the kind of moral universe in which nature reflected society and vice versa’. In the words of S. L. Gilman, description of the biological world became ‘the source of a universal explanation of causality through analogy’.¹⁴ The language of Social Darwinism was thoroughly impregnated with biological metaphors. Examples include ‘adaptation’, ‘segregation’, ‘degeneration’, ‘hygienic’, ‘fitness’, ‘hybridisation’, ‘stock’, and so on. The retreat from explicit racism in the post-war era has tended to inure us to the Social Darwinist connotations of these words, but earlier in the century they were heavily encoded terms with the capacity to convey a range of recognisable meanings and connotations that are somewhat lost on us today.

Many of the ideas of race that are discussed in this book did not have any immediate popular resonance. In other cases, most notably anxieties about miscegenation or concern with the ‘degeneration’ of poor whites, they were shamelessly deployed by politicians to mobilise support for segregation and apartheid. A writer such as Sarah Gertrude Millin, whose brilliant capacity for literary caricature and vignette is shot through with visceral racial prejudice, manages in her novels to articulate common fears about racial intermixture in a manner that is both accessible and seemingly erudite.¹⁵ Yet, even where ideas about racial difference could not easily be translated into a popular idiom – perhaps because of their technical complexity – the mere knowledge of their existence was significant. For a white public seeking to rationalise its social supremacy, it was not always necessary to have direct access to or understanding of the details of scientific debate; a broad awareness of the existence of a body of knowledge justifying racism was sufficient. Thus, claims by farmers to ‘know the native mind’ did not depend on intimate familiarity with psychological and anthropological projects designed for that purpose. Nor was it necessary to be conversant with the literature on mental testing in order to pronounce on the innate superiority of whites’ intelligence. Popular prejudice may not have relied on theoretical expositions, but it was certainly sustained by knowledge of their availability.

The converse also applied. Racial science was highly sensitive to

¹⁴ G. Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought* (Brighton, 1980), p. 147; Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, p. 204.

¹⁵ See, for example, S. G. Millin, *God’s Stepchildren* (London, 1924); and her *The South Africans* (London, 1926).

societal prejudices and its advocates were often motivated by the desire to provide a rational foundation for such attitudes. This is nowhere more clear than in the case of eugenics which was explicitly designed as a scientific solution to the perceived needs of society, namely, the need to promote racial 'vigour' and prevent 'deterioration'. Likewise, the fragmentation and ultimate collapse of the racial science paradigm during the 1930s and 1940s was not only determined by the inadequacies of its premisses or the emergence of the new science of population genetics alone; the impact of the rise of Nazism and the realisation of the ends to which eugenics could be put was at least as, if not more, important.

Precisely because they arise out of the desire to understand real-life situations, conceptions of 'race' are almost invariably related to social issues in some way. In a society such as South Africa whose political history has been explicitly structured on the assumption of racial differences, ideas of race are *ipso facto* related to social existence. Whether such ideas can be said to *explain* social existence or, conversely, whether social existence can be said to explain them, is quite another matter. The intention of this study is not, however, to explain the relationship between political segregation and ideas of race in causal terms. It is sufficient that correlations and connections be explored in the hope that the understanding of the ideological context in which segregation and apartheid were developed will thereby be enhanced.

The relationship between international and local centres of knowledge production raises special analytical problems. At first sight the colonial-metropolitan relationship seems to mirror wider patterns of power and control: local research was largely conducted within borrowed conceptual frameworks, whether or not these were appropriate to particular conditions; fieldwork tended to be dignified with authority only after it had been filleted by metropolitan-based experts; and publishing houses were overwhelmingly based in London with obvious consequences for the creation of patronage networks. Writing about the history of archaeology in Africa, Peter Robertshaw has referred to the complex relationship between theory as it developed at the metropolitan 'core' and practice or fieldwork at the imperial 'periphery'.¹⁶ Extending this analogy (which recalls the metaphor of dependency theory) one might

¹⁶ P. Robertshaw (ed.), *A History of African Archaeology* (London, 1990), pp. 3-4.