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978-0-521-76373-8 - Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary
Debates and Perspectives

Edited by Karim Murji and John Solomos

Excerpt

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1 Introduction: situating the present

Karim Murji and John Solomos

When we started a conversation about putting together an edited collection on *Theories of Race and Ethnicity*, we had in mind the need for a more up-to-date overview of the field of race and ethnic studies than the one provided in John Rex and David Mason's (1986) *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*. That volume had come out in the mid 1980s, after a period of passionate, and often conflictual, debate about the changing boundaries of the study of race and ethnicity. Rex's opening statement to his chapter provided a sense of this contestation. He wrote, 'The study of race relations, in common with other politically charged areas in the social sciences, seems beset with feuds and conflicts of a quite theological intensity' (Rex 1986: 64). The book set out to provide an overview of key theoretical lines of analysis in the field and to engage with some new and emergent perspectives. It contained 14 chapters covering the disciplines of sociology, social anthropology and social psychology as well as sociobiology. There were macro-level approaches to race and ethnicity drawing on class analysis, the study of plural societies and Weberian and Marxist perspectives, alongside micro-level approaches such as rational choice theory and symbolic interactionism. In other words, it combined and crossed over from traditional sociological perspectives to views from related social science disciplines; it ranged across biology and sociology, and it considered ethnicity and race in a variety of settings.

In hindsight, it is also worth recalling that the Rex and Mason volume came out at a relatively early stage in the emergence of race as a distinct field of scholarship and research within the contours of British sociology and that sociology led most other social science disciplines in engaging with race and ethnicity. While social anthropology focused mainly on the study of societies and communities in Africa and Asia, and social psychology was concerned with issues of prejudice, there had been relatively little research in this field before the 1960s. When the British Sociological Association held its 1969 annual conference on the theme of 'Race

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Relations', it was more as a statement of intent than as an indication of the centrality of the study of race and racism within British sociology (Zubaida 1970a, 1972). There was a noticeable development of research on race issues during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly as a result of support from the Social Science Research Council (which was later renamed the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC) (Banton, n.d.; ESRC 2007). Despite this expansion of research and a broadening of research agendas through the 1980s, publication of the Rex and Mason collection came at a time when scholars were searching for new conceptual tools to further our understanding of key facets of race relations in contemporary societies (Banton 1991; Brotz 1983).

The current volume inevitably shares a number of common elements with its predecessor, which should signal that, although there are considerable changes in social theorising and debates around race, some of the same questions and issues continue to recur. However, the context of scholarly work on race has, in many ways, been transformed in the time-lapse between the two books. By the time we started to think about our edited volume, well over two decades had passed since the publication of the Rex and Mason volume. In this period, new theoretical models emerged, often inflected by wide-ranging political and social mobilisations and changes in the world and civil society. Characterised initially by an engagement with Marxism and post-Marxism, such perspectives were also influenced by the wider cultural wars around feminism, cultural studies, post-structuralism, critical race theory and post-colonial theory (Back and Solomos 2009; Essed and Goldberg 2002; Goldberg and Solomos 2002). As a result, we have seen a rapid expansion of both theoretical and empirically focused research on race and ethnic relations; although this includes research that has a more global and comparative frame, there is still, however, a significant degree of methodological nationalism in studies of ethnicity and race.

We felt, therefore, that there was a need for a volume that would both reflect on the changing boundaries of race and ethnic studies and bring together in a single volume a diverse range of viewpoints and perspectives. It is with this overarching idea that we began work on this book. As, unfortunately, some contributors could not deliver their chapters according to our original plan, we had to make changes to the structure of the book; this has also led to some lacunae, which we have sought to fill by means of the introductory and concluding chapters that we have crafted as editors of the volume. Nevertheless, we hope that the end result provides an accessible resource for both scholars and students alike and engages with a range of audiences.

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History and context

The study of race and ethnic relations has been part of the social sciences since the beginning of the twentieth century and the work of sociologists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Robert Park and E. Franklin Frazier (Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1947, 1968; Park 1950). In the aftermath of these classic studies, in the period both before and after the Second World War, a number of approaches to the sociological study of race and ethnicity started to take shape. This is not the place to retrace that history or to evaluate the impact of these approaches, because our focus here is on the past four decades rather than on the historical background to the growth of this field of research. It is worth emphasising, however, that a wealth of research and theoretical reflection about race and ethnicity forms the background, to some extent, to the more recent controversies that are the concern of this chapter (Collins 2007; Stanfield 1993; Stanfield and Dennis 1993; Winant 2007). Yet it is also clear that, even in the American sociological tradition, the study of race, racism and ethnicity remained a relatively marginal sub-field of scholarship in sociology and anthropology and did not exercise much influence in other disciplines for a significant period of time.

It was only in the aftermath of the civil rights and black power movements in the 1950s and 1960s, and of the student unrest and race riots of the 1960s, that the study of race and racism became an important field of research in American sociology as well as in other disciplines (Blauner 2002; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Omi and Winant 1994). Its broad parameters have been shaped by the publication of both theoretical and empirical research, the work of key scholars and thinkers. Empirically, such research focused on issues of racial inequality, institutional racism and patterns of racialised discrimination. Initially framed by the neglect of race in debates about integration via the ethnic ‘melting pot’ debates (Glazer and Moynihan 1963), such work has developed to ask about the ‘declining/continuing significance of race’ (Wilson 2012) in the USA and, furthermore, to explore the contours of contemporary racisms (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Winant 2001). In Britain and other parts of Europe, the impact and consequences of post-war and post-colonial migration, as well as the ongoing and deepening struggles around unequal development and exploitation between the northern and southern hemispheres of the globe, provided important spurs to research on race and racism. Thus, it is now evident that the study of race and ethnic relations has become an established part of both the teaching and the scholarly culture of a number of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

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A proliferation of books and specialised journals since the final decade of the twentieth century has been the basis on which we have seen the emergence of a growing number of undergraduate and post-graduate courses on race and ethnic relations. These transformations have been evident in the USA, through the growth of university departments of ethnic studies, African American studies and Asian studies, among others. But there has also been a noticeable expansion in research and scholarship in this field at a more global level, across a range of disciplines and in terms of both conceptual analysis and empirical research.

The study of race, racism and ethnic relations has been transformed quite markedly over the past three decades since the Rex and Mason volume. This is reflected in the wide range of approaches and empirical research studies that have helped to shape this field of academic and policy research. In this introductory chapter, we want to explore how new research agendas and debates have helped to transform this field of scholarship and research, which new perspectives have come to the fore in recent years and the impact of these transformations on the setting of research priorities. In exploring these issues, the chapter also explores the question of which key theoretical and empirical issues need to be addressed in developing both current and future research agendas. A particular theme that runs through the chapter is the need to rethink both the boundaries of this research field and how to make our research agendas relevant to current political and civil society debates.

Surveys of current scholarship and research have noted this expansion and also highlighted the diversity of conceptual perspectives that have come to the fore in recent years. We have seen intense debate in sociology and other disciplines about the role of race and ethnicity as categories of social analysis, the role of racism in contemporary politics and culture and the impact of migration processes and multiculturalism on national and social cohesion. Certainly, in the context of Britain and, in different ways, other European societies, questions about race, ethnicity and religious differences have become a recurring theme in both academic discourses and wider policy and political debates. It is in relation to this changing environment and political context that our chapter outlines some key points about theorisations of race and racism in contemporary social theory. This is an important issue to include in any analysis of theories of race and ethnic differences, because it seems evident that questions about race and ethnicity are inevitably part of political discourses as well as embedded in academic and scholarly research.

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Changing theories, perspectives and debates

The study of ethnic and racial relations has seen many transformations in the period since the 1960s. From being a relatively small field of research and scholarship – with the possible exception of sociological analysis in the USA – there has been noticeable growth, as we noted earlier. The past three decades since the Rex and Mason (1986) volume have seen the development of a diverse range of research occurring across the globe on aspects of race and ethnic diversity. These changes in research agendas are in many ways not surprising, because these decades have witnessed intense social and political debate about race and ethnic issues in various parts of the globe. It is because of this changing geopolitical and social environment that we have seen strong arguments about the boundaries of what it is that we study when we research race and ethnicity in the contemporary environment. Thus, researching questions about race, ethnicity and racism inevitably draws scholars into questions about the nature of the social, cultural and economic realities that are being examined (Goldberg and Solomos 2002).

The role of racial and ethnic differences in British society has been a source of policy and scholarly debate since the 1960s, including landmark surveys of racial discrimination (Rose 1969) and the emergence of sociological attention to race and racism (Banton 1967; Rex 1970; Zubaida 1970b). In terms of public policy, this has been evident in the development of policies aimed at controlling immigration and promoting the social and cultural integration of racial and ethnic minorities, in anti-discrimination legislation aimed at tackling racism and in the promotion of a multicultural idea of Britain. This mixture of measures to integrate minorities while expanding legal controls over potential new migrants has been regarded as the ‘liberal hour’ in British politics (Rich 1990). These debates marked a growing political and scholarly awareness of Britain as an increasingly complex multicultural society; the intensity of public debates about issues such as immigration, race-relations policies and the changing boundaries of Britishness and national identity in the 1970s are captured in two landmark books, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982), along with Barker’s (1981) analysis of ‘the new racism’.

This is not to say that discussion and dispute about race and ethnicity can be seen simply as the product of recent developments and changes. Indeed, part of the expanding scope of ethnic and racial scholarship has been the opening up of historical research framed by Britain’s role as a major global power and territorial empire over a number of centuries.

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Issues of race and difference have, in this sense, been part of its national history and culture. Ongoing debates about transatlantic slavery, the role of William Wilberforce on the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain and the memorial to slaves in the city of Bristol, in addition to the reaction to ‘foreigners’ over the decades, attest to this (Rice 2003; Winder 2005). These issues are now part of a rich body of historical work which has analysed the ways in which ideas about race have taken shape in specific societal and political environments (Hall 2002; Panayi 2010). Although other analyses of the legacies of European and Western colonialism provide additional examples of racial formations in various contexts, there is a sense that much contemporary social science literature on race and racism remains somewhat national in focus. This has resulted in a lack of reflexivity about the historical background to the emergence of modern racism and a failure to come to terms with the transformations of racial ideologies and practices over time and space. Yet what is also evident is that, without a clear understanding of the historical context, it is unlikely that we shall be able to fully come to terms with the question of how racial ideas have emerged out of and become an integral part of specific societies and how they operate across national and international boundaries.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the primary focus is on the contemporary period, specifically on how questions about race and ethnic relations have been discussed within academic discourses and beyond. The study of race, racism and ethnicity has become a core theme in the British sociological tradition in the period since the 1980s. The work of key scholars such as Michael Banton and John Rex helped to establish the study of race and ethnicity within British sociology during the 1960s and 1970s (Banton 2001; Small and Solomos 2006). The expansion of scholarly research and debate which followed brought the study of race from the margins to nearer to the centre of sociological concerns in the United Kingdom. Such work was often influenced by radical and Marxist forms of sociological theory and shaped by the political and social transformations that marked the global economic crisis of the 1970s, and the ways in which race, migration and crime were often linked in popular and political racist discourses (Hall et al. 1978; Miles and Phizacklea 1984). Events such as the urban riots of the 1980s (Benyon and Solomos 1987; Keith 1993); new patterns of migration and minority formation, including the emergence of ‘new ethnicities’ (Cohen 1999; Hall 1988); and new racist movements and public tensions about religious and cultural diversity and multiculturalism, initially after the Rushdie affair in 1989 and, more intensely, since 9/11 and 7/7 (Lentin and Titley 2011; Modood 2005; Rattansi 2007), have all been significant in influencing new

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scholarship and public debate around the politics of difference, Islamophobia and changing patterns of ethnic and racial identification and racism in Britain. While reflections on the relationship between race and religion, owing to the controversies around Islam, have become significant, there has also been continued and renewed interest in the understanding of contemporary anti-Semitism. This has taken it from the preserve of historians and scholars of the Holocaust and more into the social sciences. Although still focused on the Holocaust, Bauman's (1989) book is a significant marker, whereas more recent deliberations examine the linkages between anti-Semitism and anti-racism, which Fine and Cousin (2012) argue have become lost, and the use of the concept of racialisation as a framework for locating anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Meer 2013).

This period has also seen the emergence of an array of other perspectives and debates. A prominent one, particularly in the USA, is the advent of critical race theory (CRT) and its development via critical race feminism (Razack et al. 2010). Critical race theory, with its roots in legal studies, marks another way in which the field of race and ethnicity studies has become more multidisciplinary and, to some extent, inter-disciplinary. It has been taken up in sociology and other parts of the social sciences, mainly in relation to education and sport (Hylton et al. 2011; Taylor et al. 2009). Whiteness and white domination are both foci of CRT, and in that sense, CRT shares common ground with the emergence of whiteness studies in the wake of key works by Roediger (1991), Frankenberg (1993) and Jacobson (1998). However, both the idea of a field of 'whiteness studies' and the content and direction of some of what is studied in various approaches to whiteness have come under critique by scholars who argue that they have tended to become a diversion from addressing racism in its historical and situated forms (Garner 2007; Ware and Back 2002).

The other significant theme of recent times is around the idea that we have entered, or should enter, a post-race era, which, in the USA, is linked to the culture of black celebrities (Cashmore 2012) and particularly to the first presidential victory of Barack Obama in 2008 (although Ward 2011 notes a decline in post-racial rhetoric in the period which followed). Yet the meaning of the term *post-race* era is a slippery one, as Brett St Louis analyses in Chapter 7, and of much longer provenance than the past decade, not least in intellectual circles. The appeal to or claim for the post-racial combines political, ontological and biological-scientific dimensions and crosses over sociological and philosophical arguments; it includes agendas that we would regard as progressive as well as ones that are reactionary. As this suggests, *post-race* operates as something

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of a portmanteau term, and we hope that the chapters and debates in this volume help to clarify some aspects of it. A common method of responding to post-race claims is to regard them as an error that can or will be corrected by an insistence on the ‘facts’ of race – its continuing significance in shaping social worlds; the deeper analytical task, though, is to understand its (re)emergence affectively and ideologically, as Hesse (2011) suggests.

As the arguments around post-race indicate, one way of seeking to make sense of these diverse phenomena and strains of debate is to be clear about what is subsumed under terms such as *race* and *racism*. A key question that has shaped contemporary discussions is the following: How has the category of race come to play such an important role in shaping contemporary social relations? This is not to say that there is any concord about how best to answer this question. On the contrary, scholars and researchers show little sign of agreeing about what it is that we mean when we use notions such as race, racism, ethnicity and related social categories (Winant 2006). Many of the questions raised in these debates take us to the following: Is race a suitable social category? Is ethnicity preferable? What do we mean when we talk of racism as shaping the structure of particular societies? What role have race and ethnicity played in different historical contexts? Is it possible to speak of racism in the singular, or do we need to refer to racisms in the plural? Are we in a post-racial age? These questions are at the heart of many of the theoretical and conceptual arguments that dominate current debates. Yet what is interesting about much of the literature about race and racism is the absence of commonly agreed conceptual tools or even a common framework about the general parameters of race and racism as fields of study.

Ethnicity and *race* are terms often used in conjunction or in parallel to refer to social groups which differ in terms of physical attributes which are accorded social significance in the case of race or in terms of language, culture or place of origin – or common membership of a descent group without distinguishing physical characteristics in the case of ethnicity. However, despite many linkages, there is also something of a divergence between them, with conceptual and political discussions about ethnicity drawing on a different heritage and set of theories (Fenton 2003). Nonetheless, a core issue in ethnicity debates – the division between ‘primordialist’ and ‘constructivist’ approaches – corresponds loosely to arguments about essentialism and anti-essentialism around race. Significantly, though, there is no equivalent term to *racism* in relation to ethnicity. Perhaps ethnic conflict is analogous, but despite genocidal ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Europe and Africa in the past two decades, ethnic conflict

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remains more a descriptive term of certain consequences of patterns of migration and political mobilisations around ethnicity – as in the USA and, to a lesser extent, Canada. Racism as a concept is much more closely tied to the concept of race and is a reminder that, where members of society make distinctions between different racial groups, at least some members of that society are likely to behave in ways which give rise to racism as a behavioural and ideational consequence of making racial distinctions in the first place. Unfortunately, the opposite does not hold. A society or a nation which denied or did not formally acknowledge the existence of different racial groups would not necessarily thus rid itself of racism. Indeed, recent discussions on racial and ethnic classification in censuses, surveys and administrative records show that the identification of members of a society in terms of their racial, ethnic or national origin may be a prerequisite to taking action to counteract racism.

The growth in scholarship and research has, if anything, not only highlighted a certain lack of consensus but also led to sustained debate about the very language that scholars use in talking about race and racism. This lack of agreement, on one hand, makes the field of ethnic and racial studies dynamic and wide-ranging; on the other hand, it also makes it one in which there are overlapping and contradictory understandings of what scholars mean when they discuss race and racism. Over the past decade or so, the shifting boundaries of race and ethnicity as categories of social analysis have become ever more evident. In particular, a plethora of studies have provided new perspectives on difference, identities, subjectivities and power relations. In this environment, ideas about race, racism and ethnicity have become the subject of sustained debate and controversy. The role of racial and ethnic categorisation in the construction of social and political identities has been highlighted in a number of recent conflicts in countries such as Rwanda and those of the former Yugoslav Republic. Yet it is paradoxically the case that there is still much confusion about what we mean by such notions, as evidenced by the range of terminological debates that have tended to dominate much discussion in recent years. A number of questions remain to be analysed: What factors explain the mobilising power of ideas about race and ethnicity in the contemporary environment? What countervalues and ideas can be developed to undermine the appeal of racist ideas and movements? Is it possible for communities which are socially defined by differences of race, ethnicity, religion or other signifiers to live together in societies which are able to ensure equality, justice and civilised tolerance? In turn, consideration of these questions has thrown up further questions about the persistence of race and racism and a diverse set of proposals and arguments about the best ways of addressing these issues.

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Part of the complexity of analysing the historical impact of racism is that it is often intertwined with other social phenomena and, indeed, can only be fully understood if we are able to see how it works in specific social settings. An interesting example of this process can be found in the ways in which modern racial and nationalist ideologies rely on a complex variety of images of race, sexuality and nationhood (Mosse 1995; Stoler 2002). Such themes and images often emphasise questions about identity, in relation to both majority and minority communities. Because race and ethnicity are, intrinsically, forms of collective social identity, the subject of identity has been at the heart of both historical and contemporary discussions about these issues. This has become an important theme in contemporary European discussions about migrant, Muslim and refugee communities and other groups that are seen as somehow not fully part of a 'European' identity or, more widely, as not conforming to 'Western' liberal values.

The preoccupation with identity can be taken as one outcome of concerns about where ethnic and racial minorities in societies such as our own actually belong and about their placement by racist ideologies outside the borders of 'the West'. At a basic level, after all, identity is about belonging, about what we have in common with some people and what differentiates us from others. Identity confers a sense of personal location and provides a stable core of one's individuality; but it is also about one's social relationships and complex involvement with others and, in the modern world, these have become even more complex and confusing. Each of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled. The list is potentially infinite and so, therefore, are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore and identify with depends on a host of factors, and feminist, intersectional and queer theorising has done much to engage with these issues (Collins 1990, 2006). At the centre, however, are the values which we share or wish to share with others.

So identity is not simply imposed. It is also chosen, and actively used, albeit within particular social contexts and constraints. Against dominant representations of others, there is resistance. Within structures of dominance, there is agency. Analysing resistance and agency repoliticises relations between collectivities and draws attention to the central constituting factor of power in social relations. But it is possible to overemphasise resistance, to endorse others through validating the lives of the colonised and the exploited. Valorising resistance may also have the unintended effect of belittling the enormous costs exacted in situations of unequal power, exclusion and discrimination. While political legitimacy, gaining access