
Racial theories

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Racial Theories presents a study of the main theories of race and ethnic relations, and traces the historical development of the concept of 'race'.

It begins with the eighteenth-century concept of race as lineage, and the nineteenth-century doctrines that have been called scientific racism. These doctrines, with their biological and theological foundations, were destroyed by the theory of natural selection; but the Darwinian revolution was complex; it took time before its lessons were learned and the foundations laid for a sociological approach to racial relations.

The book describes orthodox sociological theories in a chapter on race as status, and then looks at the major challenge to these theories. It maintains that these orthodox theories will not be superseded by attempts to interpret racial relations in terms of the relations between classes.

Anyone who wonders why racial theories were so widely accepted at the beginning of the present century has to understand their roots in nineteenth-century science. Anyone who wants to unravel the confusions of contemporary debate about racial conflict and racial harmony must follow the course of twentieth-century social science. *Racial Theories* tells them what they need to know.

Preface

A lot has been written about race and racial relations in the past one hundred and fifty years. To today's generation, much of it seems mistaken or pernicious, often because it is based upon tacit assumptions of a theoretical character. Consider the remarks of Gilbert Murray (1900: 156) the classical scholar, humanitarian and devoted supporter of the League of Nations:

There is in the world a hierarchy of races . . . those nations which eat more, claim more, and get higher wages, will direct and rule the others, and the lower work of the world will tend in the long-run to be done by the lower breeds of men. This much we of the ruling colour will no doubt accept as obvious.

In these remarks nations, as political units, are equated with races, as biological units. The position of white people at the top of the hierarchy is attributed to their racial character and the future division of labour throughout the world is represented as an expression of this hierarchy. So the statements reflect a theory that is simultaneously biological and sociological. The theory, which was very widely accepted among Europeans of all political persuasions in Gilbert Murray's generation, was first attacked for its claims about white superiority. Indeed, when one of the earliest critics, the Frenchman Jean Finot (1906), entitled his book *Le préjugé des races* he understood racial prejudice to be not a psychological disposition but a belief in racial superiority. The theory of white superiority was unquestionably both of political importance, and wrong. Whites were superior to blacks and yellows in political and economic power but their superiority was not an expression of the kind of hierarchy Gilbert Murray had in mind. He was in error, not just in his conception of hierarchy but even more seriously in his acceptance of a theory of classification which misrepresented the nature of the units.

Mistaken theories are scarcely unusual. In a hundred years time people

will marvel that the present generation could accept theories that have subsequently been exposed as inadequate or false. So in both the human and the natural sciences there is a central question: how does a research worker formulate better theories? In seeking an answer it is well to remember the testimony of Louis Pasteur, the discoverer of vaccines, who said that discoveries come only to the prepared mind. Those research workers who do not have a 'prepared mind' are likely to repeat old mistakes and to miss the significance of elements in their work that could point to new explanations. Research workers who know how previous discoveries have been made in their own field and have learned the lessons taught by past mistakes should be more imaginative and be more likely to make discoveries in their turn.

My own research has, I believe, been significantly assisted at several points by study of the philosophy of science and by its application to problems of intellectual history. In 1950, when I started research on black-white relations in England, the distinction between prejudice and discrimination was scarcely appreciated by anyone in Britain, even among academic social scientists (who, of course, were very few in number at that time). To get to the position where in *White and Coloured* (1959) I was able to write separate chapters on 'explaining prejudice' and 'explaining discrimination', and to analyze the relations between the two modes of explanation, required much hard intellectual work. Nothing helped me more than an acquaintance with the arguments then being advanced in favour of methodological individualism as opposed to methodological collectivism, and with the attempt to define an individualist method for sociology that avoided any tendency to reduce sociological problems to psychological ones. I argued for the view that the same event may pose different questions to the economist, the psychologist and the sociologist (though, of course, it may not be equally interesting to all three). All events can be looked at from many different angles, different aspects requiring different explanations. The sociologist might be interested in customary patterns of behaviour; these have a logic of their own quite apart from the expectations of individuals. Custom could have objective characteristics and the sociologist could build up a body of knowledge about it which was separate from the knowledge of psychologists.

Eight years later my book *Race Relations* was published. In it I surveyed the academic literature which was conventionally defined as constituting this field, classifying it in terms of what I called Six Orders of Race Relations. The publisher enquired whether I thought of up-dating the book after a while and preparing a second edition; I replied that I did not wish to do this because I was dissatisfied with the way in which I had

organized the material. It was too eclectic, different theoretical approaches being used for different regions. I wanted a single synoptic approach or theory that could be applied to all regions. But where was I to find one? After a while I concluded that in order to move forwards I must first step backwards and learn more about how it had come to be thought that there was a distinctive field of study identified by the name 'race relations'. The results of these enquiries were published in 1977 as a book entitled *The Idea of Race*. In writing it I learned a great deal that helped my search. As an undergraduate I had been taught that there was a body of doctrine in the nineteenth century called 'scientific racism'. Up to the end of the 1960s I had assumed that the central concept in this doctrine was that of race. Therefore, it came as a surprise to me when (helped by an essay of Ernest Mayr's) I discovered on rereading the principal authors that the central concept was not race but type. This enabled me to isolate the main features of the theory of racial typology and place it in its historical context. Racial typology was a better name for the body of doctrine than scientific racism; in turn this meant that I could dispense with using the word 'racism' and disentangle myself from the confusions that spread after the late 1960s when this word came to be used in diverse new ways.

A second discovery which may seem quite trivial but which started me on a new train of thought, concerned the use of the word 'assimilation'. I noticed that in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1901 the word was used in a wide sense, in line with that of some European writers who had been discussing social evolution. Any process by which peoples became more similar was designated assimilation. I realized that subsequently when commentators in the United States expressed anxiety that the new wave of immigrants were of poor racial stock and would not easily be assimilated, they were using the word in a more restricted sense in which it was being equated with Americanization. Something similar happened in Britain towards the end of the 1950s when assimilation came to be equated with Anglicization. The word was used to designate a process by which one collectivity (the majority society) was expected to absorb another (the immigrant minority) without itself undergoing any significant change. It identified one way in which people might become more similar and it was used in a manner which distracted attention from other modes of assimilation. Moreover, it was directed to change at the collective level and neglected the explanation of change at the individual level. For example, in many situations immigrant men learn the language of the receiving society more quickly than immigrant women. Language learning, which is one of the most fundamental features of assimilation, is a response to incentives. When people, men or women, want employment

and need linguistic competence for this purpose, they set about acquiring it even though at the same time they may be trying to preserve their traditional ideas about relations in the home between husbands and wives, parents and children. Processes of ethnic change have to be studied separately for different spheres of life, and the various different directions and speeds of change have to be separately accounted for. Appreciation of these quite elementary distinctions helped me understand how the study of assimilation had been distorted by unconscious pressures originating in the social and political environment. It led me to believe that some of the sociological problems could be resolved by a theory which saw individual behaviour as a response to incentives and related that behaviour to features of the social structure, particularly those which demarcated one group from another. So in 1976 I wrote down these arguments as a set of propositions which I called the Rational Choice Theory of Racial and Ethnic Relations.

My decision to step back in time and attempt a critical review of the intellectual tradition in which I stood had paid off. It had shown me lines of argument implicit at earlier periods which had never been followed up, and lessons that had not been learned. Having formulated a theory of my own, I wondered if I should revise my manuscript of *The Idea of Race* to show how it had helped me to my new position? I decided against this course, partly because that manuscript was already with a publisher, and partly because I thought I should first write out a full exposition of my theory and why I thought it should be preferred to the other theories then available. This task took me six further years and resulted in a book which some readers considered too long, though I am conscious of respects in which it still was not long enough to do justice to the argument.

Instead of revising *The Idea of Race* I have written a new book with a much clearer structure than its predecessor; some of the earlier material has been used again but much that is in *The Idea of Race* is neither superseded nor replaced by this volume. The main task of this book, as of the earlier one, is to put forward an interpretation of the growth of knowledge about what people have called race or racial relations. (I prefer to write racial relations to make clear that the first word is an adjective and that the subject matter overlaps with ethnic relations, but 'race relations' has been the form more commonly used by other writers and so I employ it sometimes.) While I hope that the book will be of interest to some historians, it is written primarily for sociologists, seeking to persuade them of the relevance of intellectual history to theory-building in this field. This objective has been one of my criteria in deciding what to include and what could be omitted.

A particular difficulty in preparing such a study is that the word race has been used in so varied and imprecise a way that the modern reader is often left uncertain quite what earlier writers intended when they employed it. My claim is that many of the confusions about the growth of knowledge concerning racial relations can be reduced if this growth is seen as falling into three phases. This first is tied to the appearance of the word race in European languages from about the beginning of the sixteenth century. It deals with the increase in knowledge about the varied forms of life, the many proposals about how to classify and interpret that diversity, and the ways in which new knowledge fashioned the use of the word race. As the first phase is focused upon knowledge about race, so is the second upon knowledge about racial relations. It is the period in which relations between people who were not of the same race (or type) were thought to differ from relations between people who were of the same race. It was held that the difference was rooted in biological make-up, and that therefore inter-racial relations required different explanations from intra-racial relations, giving rise to the idea of racial relations as a special sphere of knowledge. This period started at the beginning of the nineteenth century and it took over a hundred years before the expression 'race relations' came into use. The third phase is one in which the errors of the second were identified, new explanations advanced, and attempts made to reformulate the field of study using sociological concepts in place of biological ones. Since this phase is still continuing and its outcome is uncertain, there must be dispute about the best name for it. The simplest solution is to see it as concerned with knowledge about ethnic relations, taking a lead from a book published in 1935 by Sir Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon which criticized mistaken racial doctrines and proposed the use of 'ethnic group' in place of 'race' when discussing the social aspect, because the adjective 'ethnic' more clearly indicated a concern with social differences. These three phases overlap. Mistakes made during the first two persist to the present day and increase the confusion of biological and social issues, but mistakes are almost certainly being made in the third phase too, and their character will become more evident in a future period.

The three-phase view of racial thought can be elaborated by separation of some of the different senses in which the word race has been used. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in English, the principal use was that of race as lineage, to refer to a group of persons, animals, or plants, connected by common descent or origin. In this phase the main dispute was whether all humans descended from Adam and Eve. The beginning of the second phase was signalled by the use of race in the sense of type, in which the word designated one of a limited number of permanent forms.

This perspective was destroyed by the discovery of the principles of natural selection which made possible an understanding of the evolutionary nature of species and subspecies. The second phase, therefore, contained a contest in which race as type was overcome by a Darwinian conception of race as subspecies, and then that conception was enriched by discoveries about the genetics of inheritance and the ways in which these were related to selective agencies in particular environments. The first sociological theory of racial relations was one which drew inspiration from ecological reasoning within biology. Physical features of the kind called racial were taken as indicators that the individuals in question were usefully assigned to particular populations distinguished by their gene frequencies. Both the biological and the sociological theory of the second period led to an understanding of human diversity which can be summarized in the notion of race as population. The third phase began with studies furnishing much better descriptions of black–white relations in the United States and which in their interpretations relied upon the idea of race as an indicator of minority status. Methods for analyzing race as status have been improved within the past twenty years by linkages between sociological and economic theory, but during the same period this approach has been forced on the defensive by challenges from writers elaborating the kinds of theory pioneered by Karl Marx. Their prescriptions can be designated, inadequately perhaps, by writing of race as class. So the third phase also contains a major contest; in this case I believe that the older theory will not be overcome, though it will surely be much improved by the criticisms to which it has been subjected.

One of the merits of presenting the history of racial thought in such a way is that it interprets this history as having a structure. Each of the various writers can be seen as having a place in this structure. Some of them are representative of a particular phase or viewpoint; others are transitional from one to the next; yet others are simply confused or are opportunists who put together incompatible elements to construct an unconvincing synthesis. Dividing up the subject and distinguishing different uses of the word race can also help the commentator avoid falling into the error of presentism. This is the tendency to interpret other historical periods in terms of the concepts, values, and understanding of the present time. Many writers about racial thought have failed to notice that when their predecessors wrote about groups distinguished in racial terms they did not see matters in the way that people would today. As a result, these earlier writings have not been located in their proper historical context. One reason why people have often fallen into this trap is that much of the debate has addressed the question ‘what is race?’ assuming that there

was something best identified by this particular name. The 'something' was the difference in skin colour, facial features and kind of hair that is best called phenotypical variation by anyone seeking a neutral scientifically defensible name which can be translated without difficulty into many other languages. 'Race' cannot be translated so easily because in English and some other tongues it is a folk concept, a word in popular use with a significance deriving from popular understanding and varying from one historical period to another.

Folk concepts change with the growth of knowledge. Thus people in twentieth-century Europe do not explain misfortune and mental illness in terms of the concepts of witchcraft and madness used by their ancestors. Folk concepts are also modified in line with popular experience: ideas about other peoples change in step with the frequency and character of the encounters from which that experience is derived. So in the course of time folk concepts acquire additional meanings which increase their serviceability in everyday communication while introducing ambiguities. By contrast, the building of scientific theories depends upon the reduction of ambiguities, so that the meaning of propositions becomes more certain. Theories are built with analytical concepts defined as precisely as possible in ways appropriate to the task in hand. Where folk concepts are ordinary language names of things, analytical concepts are terms necessary to explanations. In the social sciences the tendency has been to start from folk concepts and to elaborate definitions which will permit the same words to be used also as analytical concepts. For example, Augustin Thierry's study published in 1825, a *History of the Conquest of England by the Normans*, seems to have inspired others to try to transform the words race and class from folk into analytical concepts. W. F. Edwards, the founder of the *Société Ethnographique* in Paris, was stimulated to develop ideas about the significance of race in history by a reading of this book and some similar ones, while Karl Marx hailed Thierry as 'the father of the "class struggle" in French historical writing'.

There is today a folk concept of class used to identify what sociologists prefer to call differences of status. Many, but not all, sociologists would maintain that class can also be used as an analytical concept. The distinction between these two kinds of concept furnishes a perspective from which to study the career of the word race as a concept. In English it has been used as a folk concept for four centuries, changing as the kinds of contacts between English and non-English have changed. Its meaning has also diversified and shifted because, with the growth of knowledge, theorists believed it possible to use the word analytically to explain the common characteristics of individuals thought to constitute first a type, then a sub-

species, a population, a status category and finally a class category. What the theorists wrote has affected its use as a folk concept, so there has been a two-way traffic between the two spheres of discourse. In some other respects the folk-analytical distinction parallels that drawn between the world of appearances, and the world of determining relations in which the appearances are manufactured. There is often dispute about what are the determining relations, different theorists advancing contrasting views and advocating the use of different analytical concepts.

In what I have described as the second phase the word type was introduced as an analytical concept. The more systematic typological theorists, like Nott and Gliddon, recognized that the races of the contemporary world were historical creations assembling people of mixed origin. Yet appearances were deceptive. Men could migrate and mate with strange women but they could not overcome the anthropological laws of permanence of type, the infertility of hybrids and the restrictions upon acclimatization which determined the ultimate outcome. Others did not draw a clear distinction between race and type. For example, Robert Knox maintained that race was the key to the interpretation of history but his argument depended upon a definition of race that made it a synonym for type as used by Nott and Gliddon. This is the capital error and the central issue with which the history of racial thought must be concerned. It must explain how the error came about, why it has been so difficult to overcome, and why the elaboration of better explanations had to depend upon the establishment of new modes of analysis.

Imprecision in the nineteenth-century use of the word race was assisted by the upsurge in European nationalism and the readiness to see that sentiment as an expression of race, so that race was often equated with nation as well as type. After Darwin, races were seen by biologists as historical units that might sometime evolve into species. When genetics became established as a science, its practitioners could examine the underlying relations which determined the process of speciation. Instead of trying to identify a subspecies by drawing a line round a collection of individual specimens, geneticists selected a sample in order to study the frequency of particular genes within that population, and to examine the processes of change in gene frequencies. The theory of natural selection comprehended the determinants of biological patterns. Something additional was required to explain the social relations between people assigned to groups and categories on the basis of their physical characteristics. Ways had to be found of superseding the erroneous mid nineteenth-century explanations of the relation between race and social affairs. This search has provoked an animated controversy about the relative merits of status and class as

analytical concepts capable of explaining the patterns of behaviour which constitute racial relations.

Anyone who seeks to explain how it is that some contributions led to a growth of knowledge and helped to move racial thought on from one phase to another, must draw upon some philosophy of science. Up to the middle of the present century the dominant view was the inductivist one formulated by Francis Bacon. It represented research as a procedure whereby people collected specimens, classified and named them, and then noted the generalizations that emerged. According to Bacon, the chief obstacle to the growth of knowledge was excessive self-confidence among research workers unable to recognize how they were blinded by their prejudices and superstitions. To avoid error they should purge their minds of preconceptions. According to his successors, the scientific procedure was to express the generalizations as explanatory hypotheses and try to verify them. The challenge to this prescription came from Karl Popper, who maintained that the mind could not be purged of preconceptions. Hypotheses occur to investigators as, working within particular intellectual traditions, they attempt to account for new as well as old observations. Discoveries come from the refutation of conjectures. Mistakes are made continuously: the task is to learn from them. In the study of racial thought, the Baconian philosophy revealed itself in the representation of race as 'a modern superstition' and in the claim that doctrines of racial superiority expressed the racial prejudices of their authors. Those who followed Popper's view of the matter stressed the relative inability of scientific institutions in the nineteenth century to regulate claims to scientific authority, especially when the political climate in Europe and North America encouraged the growth and distribution of the doctrines.

Popper's interest was in the discoveries which ushered in major scientific advances, the revolutions which were featured in the title of Thomas S. Kuhn's 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Yet Kuhn's work attracted more attention for what it had to say about the paradigms, or patterns of 'normal science' in between the revolutionary upsets. It accompanied the revival of interest in the sociology of knowledge which encouraged historians to examine what Kuhn called the 'external social, economic and intellectual conditions' when analyzing changes in science. Kuhn wrote (1968, vol. 14: 76) of the 'internal approach' to the history of science as being concerned with the substance of science as knowledge. It concentrated upon the problems with which scientists grappled and their attempts to resolve them. He contrasted it with the 'external approach' which is concerned with the activity of scientists as a social group within the larger culture and looks at the ways in which their problem selection

and their search for explanations are influenced by the social and political conditions of their time. Both are legitimate ways of writing history. The tension between them is not in the answers they offer but in their choice of questions. This is most marked in the case of Marxists. Since they subscribe to a theory about the course of historical change they think they can, in general terms, predict the course of future events. They then maintain that scholars have a moral obligation to study the sorts of problems which will help politically progressive people to select the sort of strategy that will be to the advantage of the majority. Non-Marxists are more likely to say that the individual scholar should be free to study the kinds of problem he or she finds interesting, and that often intellectual advances have come from the study of unfashionable problems. There are links here with contrasting philosophies of society. Someone who believes that the material conditions are vital to the understanding of any society is likely to think it important to concentrate upon questions of external conditions in the history of science. Someone who considers that the ideas people hold decide the use they make of their material resources, is more likely to interest himself or herself in the sort of questions that characterize the internal approach to the history of science.

To understand which questions scientists and scholars seek to answer, it is helpful to see each individual research worker as standing within an intellectual tradition. He (assuming it is a he) has received a training which has directed his attention to particular problems and to what is interesting about them. He has come to regard particular previous investigations as exemplars of the best way to conduct research and, on the other side, has come to believe that other procedures are unproductive and to be avoided or attacked. In this way research traditions are built up which incorporate ideas about good and bad practice. They are driven forward by internal controversy and new knowledge so that they change over time. They also vary from one country to another and sometimes from one university to another. Popper and Kuhn took their examples from physical science where the intellectual revolutions have been fairly clear cut and there is least opportunity for research in different countries to pursue idiosyncratic interpretations (the Lysenko affair in Soviet genetics is an illuminating example of these constraints). Biological science, so Ernst Mayr (1982: 36–45) argues, differs from physical science. General laws are less important and have to allow for exceptions that are not refutations. The study of evolution necessitates the use of concepts of a special kind. Social science differs even more, since the people who are being studied are constantly changing their behaviour in the light of what they have learned about the principles governing the operation of their societies. Social science tra-

ditions differ greatly from one country to another, partly for this reason, partly because of political constraints, and partly because the research workers concentrate upon what are perceived as the important problems of their own societies. The study of ethnicity and ethnic relations in the Soviet Union today is very different from that in the United States, while that in the United Kingdom has yet another character.

Most readers will not be interested in historical studies of racial thought for their own sake. They will want to know if such studies can throw light upon present-day problems of an intellectual or practical nature. I have tried to bear their concerns in mind by keeping to a minimum the descriptions of the work of particular authors (while providing references for those who wish to follow up such matters) and by concentrating instead upon the connecting tissue of enquiry which relates these authors to one another. I have neglected authors who in their time attracted much attention, like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, if they did not grapple with the intellectual problems. In any case, their arguments have been thoroughly examined in other works. Nor have I thought it feasible, in a work of this character, adequately to discuss the social and political background to all the various theories. That would be another and larger task. Underlying the selection of authors and topics for discussion in the period up to World War Two has been my assumption that no one can understand the debates about racial differences among humans who cannot relate them to the contemporary attempts to explain corresponding differences in the wider world of nature. The modern reader with the advantages of hindsight can see more clearly the shape of the problems with which these earlier writers contended. Too often he condemns his predecessors for being unable to see things that no one in an earlier generation could clearly perceive. Too often he explains the predecessors' mistakes as the outcome of moral deficiencies. No one knows how future generations will assess the moral deficiencies of our own time. Every commentator upon racial relations in the present judges them in the light of what he believes them to have been like in the past. Everyone who writes about present-day racial thought does likewise. If their beliefs about the past are wrong, their assessments of the present will be unreliable. Therefore they should check their assumptions. Historical studies can bring a measure of humility to the vigorous dialogue that is understandably characteristic of discussions about racial relations and racial equality.

For the period after World War Two, when the third phase was well established, the need to consider contemporary explanations of biological differences is less pressing. The volume of social science research started to

increase dramatically in the 1950s and this makes the task of selection more difficult. For this period I have allowed my views of the Marxist challenge, and of the most satisfactory response to that challenge, to determine the selection of arguments for discussion, though this obliges me to neglect work in sociology and in other subjects that other readers will consider equally or more important. I have also tried to present the material selected in ways that will persuade readers that historical studies can open perspectives that should stimulate the formulation of better theories.

Acknowledgements

One of the pleasures of writing a book about racial theories is that the subject matter invites an author to cross so many academic boundaries. One of the pleasures of working in a university is that an author has colleagues with so many kinds of specialist knowledge who can guide his studies. I have benefited from the guidance of colleagues in departments of accounting and animal husbandry at one end of the alphabet across to theology and zoology at the other. Seeking advice from specialists has its perils as well, for they often insist that to clarify a problem it is necessary to go into the kind of detail that will frighten off most non-specialist readers. So I have tried to keep these tendencies in check.

I wish to thank all those colleagues and students who, sometimes without knowing it, have advised me or helped me develop my arguments. I owe a particular debt to John Hurrell Crook, until recently Reader in Ethology in the University of Bristol, who over the years has tutored me on many questions of a biological character and who commented in detail on this book when it was in draft.

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