

ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES

Race Critical Public Scholarship

Edited by
Karim Murji and Gargi Bhattacharyya



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Women social justice scholars: risks and rewards of committing to anti-racism

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clsuk.permissions@cengage.com

Notes on Contributors

Gargi Bhattacharyya is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of East London, UK.

Philomena Essed is Professor of Critical Race, Gender and Leadership Studies, Antioch University, USA.

Max Farrar is a Sociologist and Emeritus Professor for Community Engagement at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK.

Eric Fassin is Professor of Political Science at l'Université Paris 8, Saint-Denis, France, and Lecturer at the EHESS in Paris, France.

Steve Garner is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, UK.

Michael Keith is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oxford, UK.

Karim Murji is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, UK.

Carlos Sandoval-García is Professor in the School of Media Studies and the Institute for Social Research, both at the University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica.

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Introduction: race critical public scholarship

Gargi Bhattacharyya and Karim Murji

Abstract

In a climate marked by expanding scholarship in ethnic and racial studies alongside sweeping changes in universities and the conditions of academic work, we seek to explore the nature of and challenges for critically engaged research, teaching and scholarship on race and racism. In particular, we look at the connection between academic scholarship and political engagement and activity that we are calling race critical public scholarship. We situate the discussion within various recent debates about universities and ‘publics’, and the public orientation and reach of academic work. We set out three frames for these issues: the impact of social movements in establishing race and racism as legitimate topics of academic investigation and setting the agenda for race research; the differing role of academics as public intellectuals and scholar-activists in addressing and engaging with publics and race issues; and the scope and limits of public sociology in addressing the responsibilities and institutionalized power of the academy. We argue that each of these frames offers a partial insight, but that further work is needed based on cases and examples that explore the facility for and challenges of undertaking race critical scholarship.

Introduction

This special issue considers the relationship between academic labour and critical or engaged scholarship in a climate marked by sweeping changes in universities and new challenges for the social sciences and humanities. In doing so, it returns to some well-known themes and debates about the connection of academic scholarship to political engagement and activity, and in particular to the relationship between

race, politics and anti-racism. We situate this discussion in the context of the flurry of recent debates about public scholarship, scholar-activism and the responsibility and character of the university.¹ The pieces collected here span a range of institutional and geographical locations, yet all posit the academy as an intensely embodied and located place for research, teaching and scholarship on ethnic and racial studies. All imagine the responsibilities of scholarship to be both political and educational; they all describe learning and politics that occur both within and beyond the university. In this introduction we outline our view of the influences that shape public scholarship in our field, with a view to understanding the impact of continuing racism within and beyond the academy and the challenges of a widespread crisis in higher education for engaged scholarship of all kinds.

The expanding field of ethnic and racial studies in the contracting world of higher education

The scope and variety of scholarship concerned either wholly or in part with racism and ethnic and racial studies has expanded hugely in recent decades. The numbers of books, articles, journals and events are all evidence of that. At the same time, the boundaries of what comes under ethnic and racial studies have also spread considerably, such that any attempt to capture the field, or even to speak of a field, is problematic. These developments underscore the intensification of global racial inequalities and the widening fields of racialized thinking and action (Bhattacharyya, Gabriel and Small 2001; Murji and Solomos 2005; Back and Solomos 2009). Yet, alongside that expansion, we have also witnessed considerable changes in the intellectual climate and contexts in which many of the readers of this journal work. Universities have been scrutinized, reorganized, and globalized in ways that mark considerable shifts in the nature, context and scope of academic scholarship (Bailey and Freedman 2011). These two trends present a confusing picture about the contexts of academic work and the professional responsibilities of academics. While there are many and complex themes that underlie these trends, they form the broad context in which we seek to ask questions about the purposes of research, scholarship and knowledge production. What outcome or impact does academic labour have? Who does it reach or who is it intended to reach? What are the challenges of addressing intensely political questions about race and racism in and beyond the academy for contemporary scholars? These kinds of questions are not new of course, but the current conjuncture raises them as a particular challenge for the academy.² There is a seeming and sharp disconnection in ethnic and racial studies between highly engaged ‘activist’ scholarship and highly abstract theorizing about ethnic and racial

formations. As Caroline Knowles (2010, p. 27; see also Hale 2008) observes:

Race is over theorised and disconnected from social and political engagement. Elaborating difference provides complexity and depth, but it is over focused on identities and lacks political engagement. Yet, race politics is urgently needed... There is growing unease in academics at the disconnection between theoretical debate and political struggles addressing racism.

This picture and these questions form the background and the context in which this special issue was conceived. The eleven articles and an interview collected here explore the interconnections between academic labour and committed and engaged forms of social science praxis. They do so not to construct typologies or engage in speculative discussion about how we would like things to be. All of the authors strive to present a candid and reflexive account of the dilemmas and complexities of engaged research and scholarship. The articles do not permit any easy answers about knowledge work; they are not a collection of theories, or a manual, or a discussion of methods per se. They are about challenges and contradictions, rather than models and plans; they are about the benefits and achievements of engagement, rather than either an ivory tower or a detached view of the academy. The frame within which we want to locate this special issue shares an affinity with a number of strands and perspectives that we think *Ethnic and Racial Studies* readers will recognize. These include the critique of the academy from critical and systemic race theories (Essed and Goldberg 2002; Feagin and Elias 2013), the notions of public intellectual work (Ritzer 2006), activist and committed scholarship (Hale 2008; and on race, see St Louis 2002), and public sociology and social science (Burawoy 2005; Clawson et al. 2007). We say something about each of these, as well as some of their limitations, in the following sections.

Challenging the academy – from the margins to the centre?

A significant strand of thought in the area of race and ethnic studies has its roots not in the formal academy but in the social movements that emerged in opposition to colonialism and racism. In this there is a triple marginality. At one level, racism and the study of race is, broadly conceived, among the collection of intellectual endeavours that has emerged in civil society and then fought to enter the academy. At a second level, the study of race itself has sometimes been marginalized in the social sciences and humanities as an epiphenomenon to class, or subsumed under ethnicity, or collapsed within what, for some, are

wider projects such as cosmopolitanism or social justice and human rights. A third aspect is the struggle and degree of marginality of racial 'minority' scholars, who can experience the double burden of being seen as 'responsible for race matters' in a department or within universities and as troublemakers for raising issues about racism within the institutions in which they work (Ahmed 2012). At the same time, we should also recall that for all the apparent expansion of race scholarship, the study of race and racism has previously been marginalized in various social science disciplines, for the reasons suggested, and that the expansion of 'race studies' has also led to concerns about the fragmentation of the subject and what, if any, the core theories and concerns of the field are.³

While the imagined topic of race has animated various developments in the European academy, from biology to anthropology (Stocking 1982; Kuklick 1991; Barkan 1992; Gilroy 2000), the push to give voice to the lived experiences and troubled histories of race and to analyse the continuing social impact of the term in the light of these knowledges has been tied to a systematic critique of the exclusions and hierarchies of the traditional academy (Staples 1976; CCCS 1982; Young and Evans Braziel 2006; Stanfield 2011). This has entailed an insistent worlding of our conception of what can count as knowledge, both in the sense of uncovering the global connections and inequalities that constitute such seemingly neutral terms as progress and reason; and as an additional aspect of this process, re-inserting an awareness of the materiality that lurks beneath the abstractions of learning. The struggle that Upendra Baxi (2007, p. 100) describes and summarizes with a quotation from Kwame Nkrumah, to 'reclaim the psychology of people, erasing colonial mentality from it', is a battle about the boundaries of humanity and the rights of those deemed to be human beings. Perhaps now, as Baxi implies, our post-human condition demands something other than this struggle to assert a shared humanity and, through this, a shared entitlement to resources, rights and survival. However, to understand the influences that underlie much debate in the broad field of race and ethnic studies, this is the battle that must be acknowledged – the ongoing struggle to reveal the barbarism on which the cultures of colonial privilege rest and the impact of such violence on the psyches and the bodies of those deemed less than human.

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that some of the most influential ideas in our area have arisen from outside the academy. The debate about black consciousness inspired by Steve Biko (1986) still floats in the background of analyses of attitudes to identity; Fanon's (1963) prodigious imagination shapes our approach to the psychic costs of inhumanity for all parties; post-colonial and black feminism continue the debates that began in the insistently non-institutional assertions of the Combahee River Collective in 1977

(CRC 1997) and the imaginings of visionary writers as diverse as Audre Lorde (1984), Toni Morrison, Nawal El-Sadaawi (1980) and Angela Davis (1974). We may have incorporated these ideas into the dullness of course outlines and assessment criteria but a lot of our material comes from somewhere else altogether. Such an eclectic heritage has its own mixed consequences, including an all-too-visible tension between the wish to consolidate the credibility of our work in the eyes of a wider professional audience (with this goal also understood as a political struggle for recognition) and a desire to continue and extend our traditions of contesting and re-imagining what can be considered as knowledge. As a result, work in the field spans a range of registers – from the highly professionalized discourses that echo more established disciplinary areas to the cut-and-mix styles that could be conversation or could be literature or could be popular culture. Alongside the stylistic diversity of our interventions, there is the recurring theme of challenging racist exclusion. Confronting the academy for its neglect of race as well as its impoverished understanding of racism is the source of one key term – institutional racism. This was first used by Kwame Ture (then known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton in their book *Black Power*, first published in the USA in 1967. The interpretation and utility of the term they coined has been debated in sociology and in public life for over four decades since then. Each contribution here struggles with the question of institutional accountability, including responsibility for the continuance of institutional racism and exclusion.

This context and these observations underlie Urry's (2000, p. 210) observation about the 'parasitic' relationship between the discipline of sociology, in this case, and social movements.

Most important developments in sociology have at least indirectly stemmed from social movements with "emancipatory interests" that have fuelled a new or reconfigured social analysis. Examples of such mobilised groupings have at different historical moments included the working class, farmers, the professions, urban protest movements, student's movement, women's movement, immigrant groups, environmental NGOs [non-governmental organizations], gay and lesbian movement, "disabled" groups and so on.

However, the ways in which such interests are taken up and developed in the social sciences and the academy are often indirect rather than direct. The important point, as Urry (2000, p. 210) further notes, is how 'the "cognitive practices" of such movements have helped to constitute "public spaces for thinking new thoughts, activating new actors, generating new ideas" within societies (Eyerman and Jamison

1991: 161).’ At its best, this is what we think the relationship between academic and extra-academic worlds can achieve: to widen the vision of what is possible and for drawing together diverse constituencies for emancipatory ends.

In this special issue we have brought various kinds of extra-academic influences and movements to bear on academic work. Max Farrar considers the ways in which sociology has tried – and failed – to take account of and provide an adequate framework for the social movements and issues that he himself has been involved in. Philomena Essed’s work on social justice scholars shows the extent to which their pedagogic practices have been shaped and influenced by their links to and rootedness in social movements outside and beyond the academy. Eric Fassin and Steve Garner debate the ways in which issues such as the headscarf affair have shaped scholarly debate about race, culture and difference in France. Gargi Bhattacharyya and Michael Keith write reflexively from within two distinct but overlapping traditions of social movements against racism: community organization and local government. Carlos Sandoval García discusses the challenges of collaborative work in a social movement. In each instance, contributors position the academic voice as that of a participant – not an all-knowing commentator or the theoretical leadership of the movement, but as the bearers of a particular kind of contribution.

Public intellectuals, scholar-activists and responsibility

Another notable strand in the relationship between academics and ‘publics’, broadly conceived, is the role of intellectuals in communicating ideas, framing problems and issues, bringing some analytical clarity, and, sometimes, advancing policy and other kinds of political solutions to some issues. The manner in which the figure of the public intellectual is conceived tends towards a privileging of the exceptional individual – the one/s who is/are able through talent, diligence and commitment to straddle different worlds. Readers of this journal can no doubt think of individuals whom they regard as exemplars of public intellectuals. There are many examples of this recurring theme in scholarship, two quick and differing examples are the intervention of Pierre Bourdieu against globalization (on Bourdieu and politics, see Swartz 2003), and the relationship between sociology and government through the ‘third way’ programme associated with Anthony Giddens. In the field of racial and ethnic studies, the involvements of Henry Louis Gates and Michael Dyson (2003) on misogyny and violence in rap music, or Angela Davis (2005) on the devastating impact of the prison-industrial complex provide examples of scholarly critique applied to public issues and concerns (see also St Louis 2002; Sudbury and Ozakawa-Rey 2009).

There are, however, problems with the conception of public intellectual work. One is that it is to a significant degree, an individualized and, arguably, masculinized conceptions of intellectual life, mirroring accounts of the 'great men' of history. In this view, interventions into the public realm are imagined as individual displays of courage, free from any context of collective endeavour. We find this unanchored and de-contextualized model of public intellectuals problematic and difficult to reconcile with the highly contested and often explicitly politicized practices of racial and ethnic studies. A linked point is that speaking is not the same as being heard. The extent to which such figures are speaking to 'publics' beyond particular constituencies and elites is a moot point. There is a further problem of self-presentation too, such as the way in which the status of public intellectual is claimed without much foundation. An anecdotal example of this was a speaker at a session on race at an American Sociological Association conference who announced that he had gone to the UN conference on racism in Durban in 2005 as an 'organic public intellectual'. This seemed to mean only that the speaker did not at the time have an academic post. We find problematic both the claims that being detached from the academy provides an 'organic' status, as well as the converse – that being in the academy is tantamount to being complicit in the reproduction of racial hierarchies. This is not to deny that there are some levels and forms of complicity in the academy. However, a second substantial problem is the conception of the public intellectual as a fearless speaker of truth, or in the words of the late Manning Marable (1998) as one who 'speaks truth to power'. If truth claims are questionable, the idea that being in the academy is not some kind of privileged position of power is just as much so.

These reservations about public intellectuals are of course not new. Part of our critique is based on Foucault's (1977) observations on the political function of intellectuals. Foucault pointed to the changed circumstances in which the idea of the 'universal' intellectual as the bearer of a universal 'consciousness/conscience of everyone' became impossible to maintain. Instead, he stressed a new mode of connection between theory and practice in specific sites where people are 'situated either by their professional conditions of work or their conditions of life (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, familial and sexual relations). Through this they have undoubtedly gained a much more concrete awareness of struggles' (Foucault 1977, p. 12). Although this idea of the 'specific intellectual' is not without its problems, we think it is preferable to a model of intellectual work as a distinct and specialized activity that brings knowledge and enlightenment to the masses or to the public.

The idea of specific intellectuals intersects or connects with an alternative perspective of linkages across academic and public

realms – engaged and activist scholarship. This blurs the distinctions between intellectual and political work, combining both and seeking to bring the movement to the classroom and the insights of the classroom to the movement. The project of the scholar-activist has been described as an attempt to dismantle ‘the “ivory tower” syndrome creating a false distinction between academia and wider society in terms of sites for social struggle and knowledge production’ (Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill 2010, p. 247; see also Isaacman 2003 on African studies; and the essays collected in Sudbury and Ozakawa-Rey 2009). This is both a familiar and an important call – the assumption that the academy holds a monopoly over the production of knowledge is regarded as a key barrier to achieving a more inclusive and democratized process of shared learning. Whether adopting the approach of public intellectual, engaged researcher or scholar-activist, the sense that the academy is also a site of contestation is central to attempts to rethink how, where and for whom knowledge is made. However, in their thoughtful account of the pitfalls of attempting to engage activist groups in research, Chatterton et al. (2010) suggest that the good intentions that motivate many scholars with activist inclinations can be derailed by the imbalance in access to resources and the distinct, if not always contradictory, priorities and motivations of researchers and activists. Importantly, they issue a warning about the potential dangers of professionalizing scholar-activism. Whereas the pressures on those working in the ‘neo-liberal university’ (Bailey and Freedman 2011) increasingly demand that all activity must be measurable and given value in the market, the move towards institutionalizing activist research in such settings threatens to reconstruct the elitist barriers to learning that scholar-activism has sought to dismantle. Chatterton et al. (2010, p. 266) express this concern: ‘We fear that without more critical reflectivity scholar activism may undermine its own intentions by creating a cadre of professionalised, institutionalised activists whose potential is incorporated into the neo-liberal university.’

The contributions to this volume navigate this danger in a range of ways. For some, involvement in social movements demands that they intervene in public debates, including, when valuable, in a manner that plays on the mythology of the professional and institutional(-ized) scholar; others choose to retreat from the constraints of the university and to search for other spaces of intellectual work. However, all contributors touch on the impact of institutional settings and the challenges and constraints that these bring. The often uncomfortable and still unresolved racist exclusions of the academy (despite the protestations of post-racial claims, see Wise 2010) shape politically engaged work in the cross-disciplinary areas of race and ethnic studies, giving a sense of urgency and political importance to ongoing debates

about what should be included in our conceptions of officially sanctioned knowledge. Inevitably, it also stages the academy itself as an interested and partial actor in a political arena that spans internal power struggles and a wider world (Back 2007; Ahmed 2012; Morton et al. 2012). While some discussion of the need to reclaim a public scholarship appears to imagine the academy as a neutral space, only recently corroded by the impure intrusion of the market, race and ethnic studies is formed, in part, through a battle about the nature of the university. The suggestion that we should *become* public – as if there were ever another place to be for any of us – sits awkwardly with this self-conception as an endeavour designed to disrupt the boundaries of the academy in the process of extending scholarly knowledge.

This does not entail ‘reinventing the wheel’. There are people who, as far as we know, have never called themselves public intellectuals or scholar-activists, yet who have combined academic work with a range of civic engagement – and we have mentioned some names above. Indeed, such labels and categories are far less important than the issues and practices that they have involved themselves in. To provide just one example, Stuart Hall has for over four decades linked and crossed over between scholarly work and a wide variety of public engagements with the politics of race and racism. Some of these are widely known, such as his role as a prominent member of the Runnymede Trust-sponsored Commission of the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Parekh 2000) and his commentaries on the 1980s riots (Benyon and Solomos 1987). Others are less prominent and include Hall’s role as the chair of a local inquiry into policing in Hackney (ICI 1989), an area of north-east London marked by conflict between the police and black people; or his work on racial stereotyping for the legal team of Duwayne Brooks during the Macpherson (1999) inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. These examples, alongside his analyses of Thatcherism in the 1980s (Hall 1988) and of neoliberal politics generally, demonstrate impressive testimony of scholarly analysis of and engagement with critical conjunctures.

Public sociology and the corrosion of the university

Our third frame for this special issue builds on the discussion about ‘being public’ and speaking to ‘publics’ that has arisen previously. In particular, we take our cue from Burawoy’s (2005) famed call to public sociology. This was articulated within a context where the academy is under attack by the assorted forces of marketization, yet the impact of such pressures on the professional autonomy of scholars appears to have been a more muted aspect of this debate than the populist calls to connect with the public. There is much to commend in Burawoy’s vision of sociology – and, in this issue, we extend that to all disciplines

in the social sciences and humanities – that seeks to engage with, mobilize, activate or even ‘create’ public audiences for intellectual work. The appeal of this call is the stress on an ‘outward’-facing academy (although Burawoy’s schema acknowledges that there are other forms or types of sociology, which are equally valid) that asks itself for whom and to what end knowledge production is practised and intended. Burawoy’s manifesto for public sociology is made in response to what he describes as the ‘privatization (diminishing public funds), corporatization (the turn to private donors), and marketization (appealing to the most vulgar instincts to boost student admissions and justify escalating fees)’ (Burawoy 2005, p. 76) of universities. As these trends escalate, there is now a prominent Campaign for the Public University (<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>) and a growing and globalising Facebook group on public sociology, as well as other initiatives. While these developments have potentially far-reaching implications, in other respects Burawoy’s agenda is not far reaching enough. So his call is not for a critique of the institutions of higher education, or even of a significant reconsideration of what the university is. Instead, this is a public sociology that seeks to defend the university ‘against the encroachment of markets and states’ (Burawoy 2005, p. 76), as if universities exist without such institutional pressures and as an open space for democratic culture and not carriers of privilege.

Jayati Lal (2008) argues that the celebratory call to a public sociology initiated by Burawoy and others fails to acknowledge the history and institutional formation of US universities. Her argument could be applied to a range of locations where universities have been tied to the whims of the powerful and/or the injunctions of the state (and is there anywhere where academic life has been free of these two most intrusive of patrons?). Lal references some of the well-known critiques of US-based area studies, not least their service to US imperial projects. However, her position is not so much that this compromised parentage makes knowledge impossible, as it is a query about the impact of this provenance on the construction of publics. For Lal, academic institutions have operated as one link in a chain that constructs attitudes to knowledge and creates publics around particular interests, most often those able to garner resources and influence. Considered in this light, the marketization of the academy, although a matter of concern, is no more than a continuation of the long-running interference by external forces on practices of learning and, through this, on public understandings of what learning can entail.

The corporatization and marketization of American universities today continues this tradition of the academy in the service of state projects. Market needs, in harmony with state-led neoliberalism,