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PAUL GILROY

Paul Gilroy has been a controversial force at the forefront of debates around race, nation and diaspora. Working across a broad range of disciplines, Gilroy has argued that racial identities are historically constructed, formed by colonization, slavery, nationalist philosophies and consumer capitalism.

Paul Williams introduces Gilroy's key themes and ideas, including:

- the essential concepts, including ethnic absolutism, civilizationism, postcolonial melancholia, iconization and the 'black Atlantic'
- analysis of Gilroy's broad-ranging cultural references, from Edmund Burke to hip-hop
- a comprehensive overview of Gilroy's influences and the academic debates his work has inspired.

Emphasizing the timeliness and global relevance of Gilroy's ideas, this guide will appeal to anyone approaching Gilroy's work for the first time or seeking to further their understanding of race and contemporary culture.

Paul Williams is Lecturer in Twentieth-Century Literature at the University of Exeter, UK.

ROUTLEDGE CRITICAL THINKERS

Routledge Critical Thinkers is a series of accessible introductions to key figures in contemporary critical thought.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach a key thinker's original texts by explaining their key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why this thinker is considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose a specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and the thinkers' original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what they wrote. In some cases, volumes consider small clusters of thinkers, working in the same area, developing similar ideas or influencing each other.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

> On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians.

> Under their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the
> gurus of the time … What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my
> lunchtime suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books
> offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'.
But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers
have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen, as new
research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have
spread through the arts and humanities. The study of literature is no
longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems,
novels and plays. It is also the study of ideas, issues and difficulties which
arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and
humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and
issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented
without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can
simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong
with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed,
some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However,
it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern
and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study
the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in
space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and
their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the
thinkers' own texts and ideas. Every interpretation of an idea, even
the most seemingly innocent one, offers you its own 'spin', implicitly
or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that
thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind.
Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is
not so much its style or the content as the feeling of not knowing
where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by
offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works
and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own
texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889–1951), these books are ladders, to be thrown away after you
have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to
approach new ideas, but also they empower you, by leading you back

to the theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, the education systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education systems of the 1960s is not suitable for the larger, wider, more diverse, high technology education systems of the twenty-first century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date introductions but new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of the featured thinkers and explain why they are important. The central section of each book discusses the thinkers' key ideas, their context, evolution and reception; with the books that deal with more than one thinker, they also explain and explore the influence of each on each. The volumes conclude with a survey of the impact of the thinker or thinkers, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the thinkers' key works, then, following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book, references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of a work cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way, the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned

assumptions. Second, they are critical because studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will make you critical. Third, these thinkers are critical because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

For ease of reference, the following abbreviations have been used for the major works written (or co-written) by Paul Gilroy. The Works Cited provided at the end of this book includes full bibliographic details for these texts.

AE	*After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004)
AR	*Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000)
BA	*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993)
BB	*Black Britain: A Photographic History* (2007)
DTB	*Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010)
ESB	*The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (1982) (Written by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies)
SA	*Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (1993)
TANB	*'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987)

CONTENTS

WHY GILROY?

'Race' [is not] an eternal cause of racism [but is] its complex, unstable product. I should probably emphasize at this point that neither race nor racism are the exclusive historical property of the minorities who are their primary victims.

(AE 16)

I find myself coming back, again and again, to this quotation from the black British critical theorist Paul Gilroy (1956–present). As a proposition, it could not be put more simply, but it runs counter to expected ways of thinking about racism, and the phrasing could easily be misinterpreted. What does Gilroy mean by it? He is countering the belief that racism is the obvious by-product of incompatible races rubbing against each other, something the African-American critic and novelist Toni Morrison (1931–present) describes as 'the popular and academic notion that racism is a "natural," if irritating, phenomenon' (1992: 7). Gilroy reverses the idea that racism is what happens when two or more races clash against each other, arguing instead that racial difference and racial identities are the *product* of racial oppression. There is nothing natural or 'already there' about racial identity; it gets produced as a result of historical circumstances that bring groups into conflict.

Don't you need two separate things to exist *before* they have a relationship to each other? Well, yes and no. Yes, the peoples and nations understood as belonging to specific races did exist before

racism. No, because while those groups existed as identifiable categories of people (e.g. as the Welsh or as Christians) they did not exist as *races* before the advent of racism, not as races in the sense of people bound together by a shared biological identity acquired from preceding generations. After the Renaissance it became politically useful to assert this idea of race and to claim that some races were more moral, intelligent and physically robust than others. It was much easier to conduct the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism if you believed that Europeans and their descendants were born superior to the people being enslaved or colonized. So Gilroy is not suggesting that racism is responsible for the idea of human difference. He is suggesting that the modern idea of race redrew and solidified the idea of separate human groups, which, if they had been categorized before, had been done along alternative lines of difference, such as religion or language.

This process of dividing human beings into groups was also a process of *ranking*: prestige, intelligence and morality were systematically ascribed to white-skinned people, usually denying those qualities to other groups according to the shade of their skin. These acts of racism needed racial categories to justify the supposed supremacy of white people, and so the idea of separate races with their own identities and attributes led to the modern idea of race as a concrete marker of difference. Where slavery and colonialism were concerned, the belief in racial difference was often accepted by the group doing the oppressing ('race' ostensibly explained their power) *and* by the group being oppressed. For racially oppressed groups, the idea of their racial inferiority became something to argue against – by offering a superior racial identity instead. Race makes the identities of oppressors and oppressed seem fixed and uniform, but because racial categories are actually produced by 'human interaction rather than natural differentiation' those categories are subject to change (Haney López 2000: 968–9); the meaning of race has not stopped evolving over time and Gilroy sets out to track down the different permutations it takes.

In the second sentence of the above quotation Gilroy challenges *everyone* to look at race, racism, and their poisonous effects on society, culture, language and literature. Racism has not affected every person equally but that doesn't mean only the 'primary victims' of racism can talk about and study racism. This is something we all have a stake in: it is not any group's private intellectual property.

On first reading this quotation runs counter to a common-sense understanding of race and racism. This is part of its interest for serious academic discussion. Gilroy's writing estranges the presumptions and habits that the English-speaking academy has developed to talk about race, including those habits of speech and thought advanced in the name of antiracism. Estrangement of this kind is characteristic of Gilroy's work. He invites readers to think about which terms are needed to discuss racism in a more politically astute and ethically sensitive manner than our present terminology allows. Gilroy's writing deserves – and rewards – careful attention and close reading. One can read his essays simply to enjoy the language he uses and the deliberateness with which he places words in a sentence. Throughout this book I will pause to consider Gilroy's language because understanding his choice of phrasing is a key to unlocking his ideas. This is the first answer to the question 'Why Gilroy?' If you are unclear where to start peeling off the layers of meaning in Gilroy's writing, this book will guide you through revealing passages and phrases.

Why else have I written a book introducing Gilroy's ideas? The most immediate answer is his contribution to academic fields in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Gilroy has had enormous influence across a wide spectrum of scholarly disciplines, most obviously in black studies, cultural studies, critical theory, sociology and literary studies. According to rankings conducted by the Institute for Scientific Information, Gilroy was the black scholar most cited by other academics in the field of humanities in 2002 and 2004 (Anon. 2005: 39). Having made such an impact on contemporary research, what are the theories that have made Gilroy so widely consulted by his peers? This book will summarize those ideas for the reader.

The quotation I began with implies a further answer to the question 'Why Gilroy?' Gilroy's work is engaged in a political project to end racism's influence on human life, so that in the future human identity is no longer seen to spring from pure and timeless racial identities. Gilroy sees racism corroding human relationships throughout modern history; at its most extreme, it made possible some of the greatest atrocities ever seen, namely slavery, colonialism and the Holocaust. Gilroy wants to understand how these events happened and to build a world where they can never happen again. In his writing, dealing with racism is never a matter of simply being more tolerant or less prejudiced. To use his own metaphor, racism is not a coat of paint that can be

chipped off so that society as we know it can proceed in its usual manner (*TANB* 11). All around the world structures of political and social life have been constructed under the influence of race-thinking, and doing something about this legacy involves critical reflection on the deep marks that racism has left behind. It will involve challenging many assumptions and allegiances that we do not yet realize have racial dimensions. More than anything else I hope this book will introduce new readers to the moral demands that Gilroy's work compels us to confront.

'RACE' AND RACE-THINKING

Gilroy spends a large amount of time writing about the complex history of race as a concept. He accompanies these discussions with the term 'race-thinking': the act of accepting and promoting the idea that human beings belong in separate racial groups.

In his first book, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987), Gilroy constantly places the word 'race' in scare quotes to indicate the falseness of the concept, denying that race really exists but conceding its ongoing presence in cultural and political debates. Since *There Ain't No Black* Gilroy's use of those scare quotes has been inconsistent: some of his later texts abandon them, but they return in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), where Gilroy uses them to signify the instability of the idea of race (*AR* 52).

Why refer to it at all if he thinks there is no such thing as race? Gilroy considers this in the introduction to his 1993 collection of essays *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. The reason why he keeps referring to race is that we live in a world where 'racisms continue to proliferate and flourish', and abandoning the 'critical category' of race 'would not do anything to undermine or interrupt these racisms, many of which can operate quite effectively without resort to it' (*SA* 14).

VERNACULAR CULTURE

An abiding subject of Gilroy's work is something he calls 'vernacular culture'. This refers to popular forms of collective cultural activities. It could mean: