FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

EDITORS

JONATHAN JANSEN

& CYRILL WALTERS

06

Difficult Knowledge

The state of the discussion around ‘race’ in the social sciences

Crain Soudien

Introduction

Some ideas die hard. They refuse to go away, even when the evidence that they are false is put in front of us. In the European Middle Ages, it was believed that the sun revolved around the earth. People who suggested otherwise were put to death. In contemporary times, we have the idea of “race”. When we are told that it is a lie, many amongst us, perhaps most of us around the world, respond with almost instinctive incomprehension and, what’s more, often exasperation. “What? Get real, man!”, we exclaim. There is some justification for this response. It is about the real experience of racism. It is alive and material in many people’s lives. If this is case, goes the logic, how can “race” then not be real?

In this contribution, I will briefly review the state of the discussion around “race”. The immediate context for the review is, of course, the Sport Science article,¹ since retracted by the journal *Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition*, on age- and education-related effects on the cognitive functioning of what the authors called ‘coloured’ women. The journal retracted the article, because it contained assertions about ‘coloured’ women that were not supported by the data presented in the article. The approach I take here focuses on the state of the broader discussion about race, as it is playing itself out in the social sciences and humanities community. Important about the social science discussion for scholars in a number of fields and disciplines, including the field of cognition addressed by Nieuwoudt and her colleagues, is,

I suggest, its focus on what social scientists call “the politics of knowledge”. All forms of knowledge are constructed on complex foundations of power. This is not an angle or a line of sight which enjoys much interest in many non-social science fields and disciplines. That Nieuwoudt and her colleagues have had to come to learn this in the way they have is unfortunate. “Race” as a field of knowing is particularly political.

In setting up the discussion in the social science community, it is necessary to contextualise the discursive climate, or the politics – not just people’s modes of reasoning but the *ways* in which they talk, argue and reason – that surrounds the question of “race”. This bears directly, of course, on the way in which Nieuwoudt and her colleagues approached their task. “Race” presents itself, we must acknowledge, as a difficult subject for many of us, including those of us who are in the academy. We are all at once awkward and diffident or else strident, confident and assertive, or all of those together simultaneously, when we are asked to talk about it. We raise our voices. We lose our ability to speak. We rise in anger. We cower in fear. It is difficult for many reasons. Some of these are theoretical and conceptual and are about what ‘race’ means, what it stands for and the uses to which it is put. Others are about what it means experientially in our lives. Central in this is the difficulty of drawing out for ourselves a meaning that we can hold together, both for what can be described as the theory of it and its practice – the knowledge we have of it and the practice to which we put our knowledge. In this process of holding together the theory and the practice, and this is at the core of the argument I am making, is the conflation of the term “race” with the real experience of racism. This conflation produces both academic and practical challenges – how one thinks and how one lives. It is the latter which is largely, although not entirely, the focus of this chapter. It looks at how the discussion is being approached in the social science community, and especially how the community is dealing with the awkwardness of the “truth” of “race” versus its “reality”. In this discussion, I juxtapose *social constructionism* with what I refer to here as *racial realism*. While social constructionism, as I will show, is the preferred theoretical approach of the social sciences, there continue to circulate around social constructionism concerns about its practicality – its ability to facilitate the development of social practices able to respond to and manage “race” and its complexities. Those concerns are captured in racial realism.

The social construction explanation

Towards understanding social construction, it is important to remind ourselves about the “common sense” of “race”. That common sense – the “truth” for most us – lies in the idea that “race” is a “natural” thing. It is in our bodies.² Its “natural” reality is evident in our skin colour, hair texture, the shape of our noses, and our physiognomic features. It is what we can see, the “obvious” reality. Upon this is constructed, and then

elaborated and extended into behaviour, beliefs about capability and predisposition – white people having superior reasoning faculties, black people having superior physical abilities, etc. – and worse, moral capacity, being unequally distributed amongst different ‘races’. Cruel whites. Savage blacks. Cheating Indians. And, in the South African context, drunken coloureds.

This explanation arose out of the turn towards positivism that took hold in the scientific world around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Positivism is a scientific method used in the natural sciences, and adopted by the social sciences, that is based on the principle of the existence of objective facts, facts that can be scientifically verified. Up until the 1960s, the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology – three of the main social science disciplines responsible for understanding human beings and their behaviour – carried the heavy imprint of positivism. The world’s peoples were divided into racial categories, the world’s three great population subgroups – caucasoids, negroids and mongoloids – or white, black and yellow. Their abilities, their temperaments and behaviour, and critically their achievements – the level of “civilisation” to which they had come – were attributable to their racial classifications. This classification was taught as “objective fact”. It would not have been at all unusual for students reading these disciplines to be told about this great human “fact”.³

But what about the “privileged” people of the academy, especially the sociologists, the psychologists, the educationists, the anthropologists, the historians, the political scientists, the literary scholars, the legal experts and the economists? How do they approach the question of “race”? Significantly, amongst this community of researchers, there are very few around the world who now, in the twenty-first century, believe in the idea of “race” as a biological truth. Most now would agree with the broad scientific position that it cannot be empirically demonstrated and that it is a social construction.

Social constructionism as an approach to thinking about “race” has been long in the making. From the very inception of the formal discussion about human biology in the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a debate about the nature and character of human differences – about how to explain these. The discussion took a eugenics turn in the late nineteenth century, with the work of Francis Galton on the Herero, right here in southern Africa.⁴ Present in this turn, and driving it in some ways, was the spectral figure of South Africa and its “great men” of physical anthropology and palaeontology – Raymond Dart, Robert Broome and Philip Tobias. Their “great” scientific aim was to prove, through fields like craniology – the size of the human brain – that “black” brains were smaller than “white” brains.⁵ They failed. They could not find the definitive evidence they sought to show that

African people, the people they classified as Negroids, had smaller brains than European people (Caucasoids and now, extraordinarily, parlayed into the wonderfully symbolic word, without a hint of irony, “Caucasian”) and were, therefore, genetically inferior. They hung on to their beliefs, however, right into the 1970s. South Africa’s most eminent palaeontologist, Tobias,⁶ struggled right up until the end of his life to come to terms with the idea that “race” was not real.

There were scholars challenging this orthodoxy, beginning, already, in the late 1920s. One of them was a biologist who taught at the University of Cape Town, Lancelot Hogben.⁷ He contributed, interestingly, to the emergence of a strain of thinking against “race” which flowered in Cape Town in the work of intellectual-activists in the New Era Fellowship and the organisations that subsequently arose in its wake, such as the Non-European Unity Movement.⁸ Innovative and disruptive as this work was, it did not find traction in the broader social science community. It was the publication of a statement by UNESCO in 1950, essentially as a response to the racist horror of Nazism and its responsibility for the Holocaust, which inaugurated the global process of questioning the idea of “race”. The statement was and remains, in its many subsequent iterations after 1950, ambiguous in many respects. But, for the first time, the world’s major scientific authorities pronounced on the meaning of “race”. The fourteenth point in the statement read as follows: “The biological fact of race and the myth of ‘race’ should be distinguished. For all practical social purposes ‘race’ is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth... The biological differences between ethnic groups should be disregarded from the standpoint of social acceptance and social action.”⁹

The UNESCO statement stimulated the anti-positivist shift in fields like sociology and anthropology.¹⁰ Out of this shift emerged new approaches to science, such as deconstructionism and social constructionism. A social construction is an explanation of reality that has its basis in the understandings and behaviour of people and their behaviour in specific social settings. It found support from important natural scientists such as Richard Lewontin¹¹ and Stephen J. Gould.¹² They showed how insignificant “race” and its supposed markers were in explaining human variation. This work laid the foundation for the human genome project, which provided repeated confirmation that the levels of genetic variation within populations were much greater than they were between population groups.¹³ Genome mapping emphasised the hazards around the use of “race” as a concept. In 1997, the American Anthropological Association issued its *Statement on “Race”*.¹⁴ The statement asserted that:

With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century ... it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g. DNA)

indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies *within so-called racial groups* ... There is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them ... and because physical traits are inherited independently of one another, knowing the range of one trait does not predict the presence of others. For example, skin color varies largely from light in the temperate zones in the north to dark in the tropical areas in the south; its intensity is not related to nose shape or hair texture.¹⁵ [my own emphasis]

The anthropologists were followed ten years later by a group of Stanford scientists who published a letter in the journal *Genome Biology* on “the ethics of characterising difference: guiding principles on using racial categories in human genetics”.¹⁶ They put forward ten principles to guide the use of racial and ethnic labels when working with differences between putative groups. Of these, three are pertinent:

1. We believe that there is no scientific basis for any claim that the pattern of human genetic variation supports hierarchically organized categories of race and ethnicity.¹⁷
2. We recognize that individuals of two different geographically defined human populations are more likely to differ at any given site in the genome than are two individuals of the same geographically defined population.¹⁸
3. We discourage the use of race as a proxy for biological similarity and support efforts to minimize the use of the categories of race in clinical medicine, maintaining focus on the individual rather than the group.¹⁹

Important social scientists who have addressed the question of “race” include Philomena Essed and David Goldberg,²⁰ Paul Gilroy,²¹ and Lewis Gordon.²² Brett St. Louis, who conducted an overview of the literature in 2002, summed up the agreement amongst these scholars as follows: “We have long been aware that ‘race’ has no sustainable biological foundation, and convinced of its socially constructed basis, we instead recognize the *racialization* of different groups that are culturally, socially and historically constituted.”²³ Zeus Leonardo, another scholar of “race”, pointed out that “it is clear therefore at least for much of the academy, that the inviolable sanctity of race is under fire, ... under erasure”.²⁴ Also surveying the literature, Moore, Pandian and Kosek argue that both “race” and nature are what they call historical artefacts, “assemblages of material, discourse, and practice irreducible to a universal essence ... Nature appears to precede history, even as it wipes away the historical traces of its own fashioning”.²⁵

Significant about what we have here are two developments: general agreement about the “made-up” nature of “race”, and a concern with understanding the ways in which the idea has historically entered and been sedimented in popular discourse.²⁶ Emerging from this concern is an awareness of what happens as popular discourses seek moral justification and so go in search of evidence. The results that flow from

this – conventional wisdoms, “truths”, beliefs – as can be seen around the world, are approaches to “race” that depend entirely on what is going on in a society at a particular time. “Race” emerges from this as a fluid, if not arbitrary, concept. So, as in South Africa during the twentieth century, particular groups of people are included in the category of “European” or “white”, as circumstances necessitate. Before 1945, there was ambiguity in South Africa about people thought to be “Jewish”. Geoffrey Cronjé, the little-known intellectual behind the architecture of apartheid, produced in 1945 a list of the racial groups in South Africa.²⁷ This list began with “Europeans” and explicitly listed “Die Jode”, Jewish people, as a separate “race”. People who came from Japan came to be classified as “honorary whites” in the 1970s, when South African and Japanese trade rapidly increased in volume and value. In Brazil, several categories of white and black were located on a colour spectrum. Howard Winant, one of the world’s most important sociologists of “race”, described Brazil as a “racial project”.²⁸ The meaning of “race” there was in “constant formation”.²⁹ The point is that, in the absence of objective criteria, societies took whatever was convenient and used it as it thought was appropriate to determine who fell inside and outside of whatever normative framework for classification of people was dominant. And so, it is important to emphasise, the idea of “race” is fluid and takes different expressions in different contexts.³⁰ This is what a social construction is. It means one thing in Brazil, another in the United States and yet another in South Africa. An individual could be seen, described and classified in very different ways in different social settings.

Some caveats

These same social constructionists who have given us the explanation of the social history behind the use of the term “race”, however, generally do not explain the durable, persistent and steadfast attachment to the idea that one sees in public discourse and official policy. They do not account for its deployment, almost universally, as a category of social analysis in academic writing. What one has instead, in academic engagements with it, is disavowal of the idea through the stratagem of something like “it is recognised that the use of these terms is unacceptable”. But then, without irony, the idea is not only rehabilitated but completely reified: “white people do x, y and z, and black people manifest the following”. Bonilla-Silva says of these people that “writers in this group then [after disavowal] proceed to discuss ‘racial’ differences in academic achievement, crime, and SAT scores as if they were truly racial”.³¹ The complexity of the manoeuvre, as a reflection of just where we are as individuals and groups in the present time and space, is, I want to argue, symptomatic of the precariousness of modernity and its identity compulsions.

I suggest that what is in play in this simultaneous avowal and disavowal of race is the difficulty of the cognitive management of, on the one hand, affect – our complex desires and repulsions forged in the heat of all that a master concept like “race” stands for³² – and reason, that which we consciously come to learn is “better knowledge”, as in the social constructedness of “race”. What the complexity of this cognitive moment requires, for us to understand ourselves better, is dedicated study. This is what cognitive sociology is now trying to do.³³ It involves getting on top of the complex processes of boundary construction between people – those processes in and through which they come to see and make sense of difference. Human beings account for and explain themselves as individuals and members of groups in relation to everything around themselves – the physical world, the organic world and the spiritual world. How they do that explaining and accounting in relation to other human beings is of particular consequence to us here, because they are accounting and explaining themselves as being attached – either naturally or socially – to some human beings, or not. Some people are like them, others not.

A handful of scholars, whom I here call “racial realists”, attempt to take us out of the conundrum of the simultaneous existence and non-existence of race. Prominent amongst them in the South African context are Xolela Mangcu³⁴ and Mabogo More,³⁵ and in the United States, the cultural theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, author of *Seeing Through Race*.³⁶ I will concentrate on the work of Mitchell, as he develops the most thorough argument, ultimately drawing on the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan for the necessity of “race” as a framework for social analysis. Mitchell holds on to the idea of “race”, even as he acknowledges its socially constructed nature. His version of “racial realism” takes the position that the social constructionist position is naïve and fails to understand the materiality of “race”. Here, I will work with the insights and challenges that racial realism brings to what is now the conventional wisdom around “race”. The insights are about the persistence of whiteness and the emergence of phenomena like as colour-blindness and colourism. The challenges, I seek to show, are about how “race” works as a discourse, and the many difficulties that arise within its politics.

Racial realism

Mitchell begins his argument with the question, as do, implicitly, Mangcu and More, about what is achieved by the social constructionist consensus around “race” and he refers, skeptically, to the “release” that social constructionists claim to derive from the position they take: “Who exactly is freed by the post-racial discourse and the abandonment of race as a concept?”³⁷

Towards demonstrating social constructionism's naïvety, Mitchell says that we need to understand "race" as a medium that

requires careful description and analysis ... One might find a way to complete Du Bois's incomplete argument by understanding that it was always driven by a desire to affirm race while negating and opposing racism, a desire that could only be articulated as an endless vacillation between the categories of science and the socio-historical, between nature and culture. Du Bois's whole intellectual career ... could then be seen as a heroic attempt to *mediate* these antinomies.³⁸
[Mitchell's emphasis]

In elucidating his position, Mitchell says, "We have to ask ourselves, as Cornel West and Ian Hacking do, why race still matters when it has repeatedly been exposed as a pseudoscientific illusion and an ideological mystification. The answer lies in the peculiar position of race in the unavoidable human practice of classifying and discriminating kinds of things."³⁹ It has the status, he argues, of a "conceptual icon, a potent, magical, talismanic word that can be uttered in the service of a diagnosis or as a symptom of racism; it can be used as an analytic device or a polemical, rhetorical weapon".⁴⁰

Critical about Mitchell's contribution is not so much a rehabilitation of the idea of "race" as a thing to be inhabited and lived, which is essentially what Mangcu and More seek, but its use as a *medium*, or, and this is my rendering of it, as a *method of interpretation*. It is "real", he explains, "not in the position of what Lacan called 'the Real', it is rather a matter of constructed, mediated, represented 'reality' – visible, audible, and legible".⁴¹ It is, he continues,

the unrepresentable gap ... that opens up when the medium is fractured, when the Symbolic and Imaginary tear apart, the site of affect and the effects of trauma. The Real, as you have probably surmised is the location not of race, but of *racism*. Racism is what hurts. It is the disease, possibly an autoimmune disorder and certainly an infectious malady. Race is the ambiguous medicine/poison, the *pharmakon*, for inflicting or alleviating the pain caused by racism. Race is the set of symptoms or signs – the diagnostic tool – that provides access to the disease known as racism.⁴² [Mitchell's emphases]

Mitchell draws on Sartre to explain that racism is a "nourished and nurtured passion" that evolves into a "conception of the world ... that may be expressed by statements of reasonable tenor ... which can involve even bodily modifications, ... involve ... the mind [in] ... deep-seated and complete [ways] ... as happens in hysteria".⁴³

Significant about this cognitive process, says Mitchell, is that "racism is the brute fact, the bodily reality and race is the derivative term, devised either as imaginary cause for the effects of racism or to provide a rational explanation, a realistic picture

and diagnosis of this mysterious syndrome known as racism”.⁴⁴ “Race”, he posits, is not the cause of racism, “but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation”.

The point of the questionable scientific value of the term “race” is not lost on Mitchell.⁴⁵ He hears the social scientists – scholars such as Appiah⁴⁶ and Gilroy⁴⁷ – who argue that “race is an illusion unworthy of our credence” and acknowledges that it is a “fetish concept ... invit[ing] compulsively repetitious confirmation in both positive and negative practices”.⁴⁸ In terms of this, he acknowledges, the idea reinforces a code of “collective solidarity, of brotherhood and sisterhood” and that this “threatens to become ‘grouphink’ under certain conditions or becomes ‘good to think’”.⁴⁹ It also, he says, finally, becomes a “god term” – “the alibi for murder, slavery and other forms of human sacrifice”.⁵⁰ But he insists that the critics miss the point about its link to the persistence of racism: “Even though Joshua Glasgow admits that ‘the concept of race seems irredeemably corrupted’, it remains [he says] curiously too valuable to do without.”⁵¹ He concedes that the endeavour he is opening up is a “precarious” one, but insists on its “necessity” as a “framework in which any kind of reality testing could take place”.⁵² There is no other idea in contemporary use which is able to go after the insistent creativity of racism. The postracial era, he argues, has unleashed “an epidemic of racialization, in which a variety of ethnicities and identities are mobilized to satisfy what looks like a structural need for an Other and an enemy”.⁵³ To the question, then, of whether the idea of “race” should be conserved, he replies, “My answer is: Yes, everything must be conserved. The whole unfolding of the conception of race as a scientific and political-cultural concept must be remembered and reframed, especially at a time of racialization run wild.”⁵⁴

Significant for racial realists is accepting “race” as a mediating concept for engaging with “the white things in the world”.⁵⁵ How it will do this, as Mitchell says, is to constantly “seek, test, and of course, ... reject new evidence”.⁵⁶ The approach is essentially a methodology. It carries within it the mechanism and procedure for both intuiting and detecting the conceits and strategies of racism. As racism evolves and takes new shapes, it provides the analytic tools to understand the discursive objects that are in creation.

Conclusion

It is important in working with racial realism to sift out and remain aware of the multiple moves that are in play in the argument that is being made. Two are significant. The first is the distinction it makes between “race” and racism. In Mitchell’s explanation, they are not the same thing. The second is being clear about the work that the concepts do and what purpose they serve.

With respect to the first, Mitchell works hard, not always successfully, I think, to prise apart “race” and racism. He does not succeed, I suggest, simply because of the complexity of the movement between the psychological and the social and the movement from “race” to racism.

So, what are we left with then? Racial realists such as Mitchell concede that “race” is a made-up idea: “[It is] a myth.”⁵⁷ “Race is built”, he says, “with the bodies of myths as well as myths about bodies, and it is constituted as a reality that cannot be erased by fiat.”⁵⁸ It is important to pause there. We have then, even amongst the racial realists, the confirmation of the falsehood of the idea of race. In accepting its falsehood, however, they remain supremely alert to its usefulness for the project of racism. It will play any role that is required. In that, it is utterly plastic. It will be used as it suits its users.

It is the racial realists’ second move that is crucial – that which calls our attention to racism. Demanded from us, they insist, is an explanation of how racism works. And here we are, I would like to suggest, in some difficulty. The explanatory schema of theorists such as Lacan are useful, but we need to see, as Hook, following Bhabha, asks of us, how the whole assemblage of forces operating in the experience of racism, how the material, as it is intersectionally brought together in the economic, the cultural and the social, is entangled and articulated with the psychological, to produce *real* effects.⁵⁹ The “real” of racism, it needs to be emphasised here, is not in “race”, it is in what racism gives rise to. Real advantage. Real disadvantage.

Endnotes

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- 17 Lee et al., "The Ethics of Characterizing Difference: Guiding Principles on Using Racial Categories in Human Genetics", para. 3.
- 18 Ibid., para. 5.
- 19 Lee et al., "The Ethics of Characterizing Difference: Guiding Principles on Using Racial Categories in Human Genetics", para. 16.
- 20 Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg, *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); David Theo Goldberg, ed., *The Racial State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
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- 40 Ibid., 39.
- 41 Ibid., 17.
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