

# SELECTED WRITINGS ON RACE AND DIFFERENCE

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## Teaching Race

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What I broadly want to do is to address four sets of problems. First of all, I want to identify what seem to be some of the difficulties with teaching about race and then I want to say something about the economic, political and ideological aspects of race. These remarks are not directly addressed to the kinds of specific curriculum interests that might arise in schools or indeed the kinds of questions that might be posed in examinations—but instead I have tried to organise them to address the issues with which one needs to engage when teaching in this area.

I.

First of all, there are pedagogical difficulties which are especially important because it is an area about which people feel very strongly indeed. One of the strategies which some teachers adopt is to try to sidestep the explosive nature of the subject itself and walk around it, to catch it unawares (except that it usually catches you unawares rather than the other way round). It is not possible to do very much with the area at a steadily high classroom temperature but several points are important. You have to recognise the

strong emotional ideological commitments people have to positions about race—this isn't an area where people simply think they know things but it is very strongly charged emotionally and this fact has to be recognised and be brought out. Whatever your own commitments and feelings are about the area (and all of us have feelings about it) they have to be made clear in the way in which we handle the topic and the kinds of things we say about it. It's not a topic where an academic or intellectual neutrality is of much value. Nevertheless, I do think you have to create an atmosphere which allows people to say unpopular things. I don't think it is at all valuable to have an atmosphere in the classroom which is so clearly, unmistakably antiracist that the natural and "commonsense" racism which is part of the ideological air that we all breathe is not allowed to come out and express itself. What I am talking about here are the problems of handling the timebomb and doing so adequately so that it connects with our students' experience. That experience has to surface in the classroom even if it is pretty horrendous to hear—better to hear it than not to hear it, because what you don't hear you don't engage with, and this is after all part of the very material about which we are teaching. We are not talking here about an abstract topic with which we are entertaining ourselves or over which we are stretching our minds. We are talking about very real concrete social, political and economic issues which touch the students' lives, which they experience. So we have to consider the problem of how to create an atmosphere in which those questions can be openly and honestly discussed—one in which your own position can emerge without people feeling over-weighted by its authority (although that authority is always exerted whether you are at the front or back of the class).

Now to move on more substantively to the empirical, conceptual and theoretical problems which are involved when teaching in this area. Because the subject is so exceedingly complex it is very difficult to teach about it clearly. One of the curious paradoxes about the area is that people know very simply what they feel and where they stand but when it comes to explaining the phenomena—i.e., relations between different ethnic groups, racist practices, racist beliefs, racial prejudice, however you want to put it—it becomes a great deal more complex because it requires putting together explanations from different areas of knowledge. All the attempts at a simple explanation must fail. There are two obvious examples; one is to argue that racism has to do with race which actually is not quite as obvious as it sounds. Here the statement is taken in its own right in an attempt to explain social phenomena in this area of concern by applying single-mindedly the categorical criteria of relations

between races, but it does not provide an adequate explanation. The other, which is a mirror reflection of it, is to say that the whole question of race is an epiphenomenon of more classical traditional kinds of structures and practices, especially economic and class ones, and that one can on the whole dissolve questions of race by looking at them in terms of economic relations and social and economic structures, etc., of a more familiar kind. This will take you some of the way, but it certainly won't take you all the way. It does involve a greater theoretical argument (which I won't engage in here) but I certainly don't think that in a general theoretical sense racism is attributable in a simple way to capitalism, although it would be impossible to study racism in isolation from the economic and social structures in which it functions and operates.

Now if you take those two examples on the basis of their double-negatives, you begin to see that to try to explain phenomena in this area, one has to look at the relations or articulations between two things which appear in our world closely linked (and are linked in important ways) but are not dissolvable one into the other. Whichever way round you try to do it—to dissolve class relations into race relations or vice-versa—there are so many things you still can't explain. We are concerned here with handling quite complex social phenomena which are produced by different sets of determinations and which, though linked, have different and in some ways distinct histories. It is, though, not always possible to separate or isolate out ethnic relations from the other social relations and the social structures in which you find them. I am very much opposed to constituting this as a kind of specialist area of social science—the “race relations” problem as it were. This is by definition a phenomenon which one only begins to understand when one sees it in terms of the different institutions, processes and practices of whole societies in their full complexity in which race becomes a pertinent aspect of the social structure, the way in which its relations work and the way in which the social relations in institutions are linked and connected with one another. These relations will always exist differently in different social formations.

I suppose the first point that I'm making is that there is something really intrinsically difficult and complicated about the area. The questions of explanation are ones which we all hope will inform our ability to transform racist societies and racist situations—whether you are handling them at a simple or sophisticated level. We have a kind of wager or bet that if we understand things better we might be able to unlock or shift them. One does have to recognise the complexity of the analytic and explanatory problems we have in dealing with these phenomena, while at the same time trying to

use them to connect back to questions of politics and practice. It is not possible in the end to deal with this issue in a wholly analytic way—that is to say, in a way which does not raise the questions of changing the existing structures that we are examining.

I might have implied a moment ago that it doesn't matter how you set up the teaching situation, whether in terms of racism or ethnic relations or racial prejudice or discriminatory attitudes and actions or whatever. I do however think it matters crucially. There is a kind of liberal common-sense way of approaching the topic which fastens on to questions of discriminatory attitudes between people from different ethnic populations, prejudicial actions, beliefs and opinions, etc. One tendency in teaching is to take these immediate surface manifestations of the problem at face value and to look at how these prejudices arise through a kind of attitudinal or social psychological explanation of what the phenomenon is. There is a second strategy which says that all of that is just the surface and we should rather go to the structures which generate particular kinds of relations, which generate particular kinds of racial structures, etc., and on the whole I tend to go for the second of these alternatives.

We have to uncover for ourselves in our own understanding, as well as for the students we are teaching, the often deep structural factors which have a tendency to persistently not only generate racial practices and structures, but reproduce them through time, which account for their extraordinarily immovable character. One of the things I want to come back to when I talk about racism and ideology is the deeply based way in which racism in a particular society manifests itself and its deeply resistant character to attempts of amelioration, good feeling, gentle reform and so on. For that reason I turn to the structural questions, although it would be a mistake not to bring whatever explanations you are dealing with back to what I just a moment ago called the surface phenomena. One has after all to explain what students will be most sensitive to, i.e., the interplay of feelings between the groups which are structured around the awareness of racial difference. No matter how deep you go into structural factors, you need to show that they do generate particular interactions between groups of people, but you have to be able to show that you can get a deeper understanding of those surface relations.

Teaching strategies which engage people's most obvious, uncomplicated, unreflexive apprehension of the problem are important, but if having engaged them at that level you try to change attitudes and prejudices by putting good attitudes and good prejudices against them, what you get is a kind of "ding-dong" of: "Well you believe that and I believe this, you see it that

way and I see it this way,” and it becomes extremely difficult to move on in any sort of productive way. Social science is about deconstructing the obvious, it is about showing people that the things they immediately feel to be “just like that” aren’t quite “just like that.” The really crucial question is how do you begin to make that move away from the level of prejudice and belief? One needs to undermine the obvious. One has to show that these are social and historical processes and that they are not written in the stars, they are not handed down. They are deep conditions which are not going to change if we start tinkering around with them. We must not give our students that kind of illusion. We can however begin the process of questioning what the structures are and how they work.

II.

Having said that, let me say a bit more about economic and industrial factors. Here again I issue a kind of warning or qualification. There is a tendency in this area either to think that the structural economic features explain pretty much all that one needs to know. Or, on the other hand, that to deal with the structural economic features is to collapse into a kind of economic account of a phenomenon which is more complex than that. I don’t think that any structural or generative account of racism could afford to leave out the crucial determinations which emerge from the economic relations of a society like this one. Although it is not a sufficient explanation of the phenomena, it will take us a good deal further than antieconomic or antireductionist sociologists would like to think. This is one area where the economic dimensions do explain a good deal, particularly if you think of the kinds of questions which systematically appear on examination papers—questions about the tendency of racial groups to cluster or concentrate, whether it is in the occupational or industrial sectors, or in terms of class structures more generally, or in terms of housing, or of differential relations in education, etc. There is a long history to the British situation which happened overseas, but what you are trying to explain is the identifiable growth, at a certain stage in the postwar period, of the black commonwealth migrant workforce. One can of course find black enclave populations in Britain centuries before that, but what we are trying to explain from the early fifties onwards is a qualitatively new phenomenon. It undoubtedly had a very close relationship to the kind of labour demands of British industry at that particular period. It would be impossible to try to explain the full factors—those which opened

the doors for working people from the Asian subcontinents, the Caribbean and parts of Africa—without looking at the particular labour needs of British industry at that stage. Only if you go back to the debates about whether in fact the black overseas population should be recruited in that way—there was an interesting debate which was kept under wraps for a long time before the decision was taken to encourage black migration on any substantial scale—will you see that paramount in people’s minds at that time was a relative shortage of labour. This provides a starting point not only to explain the internal movements in terms of the economic—the need for certain kinds of surplus labour. This will explain the particular clustering of the black working population in specific areas. It enables one to look at the way recruitment into particular industries, particular occupations and at particular occupational levels clearly have a very strong economic substratum to them.

The real question is how much you are going to try and explain that way. You can attempt to match up in a very fine-tuned way either the rise in indigenous racism or the shifts in particular legislative policies with particular economic movements. For instance, what are the correlations between economic movements and, say, the introduction of the very early race legislation? How much was it due to the fact that at that stage already the demand for that kind of labour was beginning to tail off in the British economy? How much did it have to do with the fact that already the first wave of black migration, certainly from the Caribbean, was beginning to tail off before those economic dips became manifest? How much does it have to do with the fact that, already from the late fifties, certainly from fifty-seven and fifty-eight onwards, there was beginning to be an explicit political and social problem around race which must have had its bearing on both the decision to legislate in the area, the making of it into a manifest political topic about which politicians were going to conduct a debate on how to legislate their policies, etc., this obviously affecting the way in which those issues would be debated in the society as a whole?

I am not convinced that the question of economic determination can provide either adequate explanations or the sort of fine-tuned intermesh that I was talking about a minute ago. If, for instance, you try to explain the movements of black populations and their settlement and position in the British social structure by kinds of functional explanation, it won’t do. If you constitute the devilish collective mind of capital—if only you could tell me where the committee meets sometime, if you could just imagine it meeting occasionally and saying, as it were, “What do we need next, chaps,

and where do we need them from?”—your understanding will not progress. If you look at what is happening in detail you will see that the relationships between functional and dysfunctional features, that is to say the contradictions which are sometimes built into what is happening economically and what is being legislated and discussed politically, are too divergent to constitute anything like a neat functional fit. The important questions are concerned with the ways in which one begins to conceptualise the relationship between surplus populations of this kind and the dynamic movements of the economy. The questions of surplus populations and the notions of the surplus labour force or reserve labour force are both generative and productive ideas, which move the relationship between the patterning of race and the dynamic of the economy into a somewhat deeper and more adequate theoretical or explanatory level. The moment you do that you are beginning to shift away from any sort of explanation which would identify race exclusively as the element which you have to consider. At that point you do, for matters of teaching strategy as well as for reasons of explanation, have to identify other surplus or reserve populations including the native unemployed and women and the Irish, all three of whom in British history constituted and played something of the same functional role in relation to the expelling needs and the sucking-in needs of different developments within capitalist industry. Nothing in this area is assisted by identifying the racial question, either negatively or positively, as in some way abstractable from the other dynamic and historical processes of the society.

One should be attentive to the important ways in which one can speak of an Irish racism in Britain, and one should be attentive to the ways in which racism and sexism as ideologies are more comparable in some ways than either racism or sexism and class because there are ways in which both racism and sexism as ideologies depend on the processes of naturalisation and tend more easily than class relations in terms of their ideological syntax to refer themselves to what “mother nature” did. There is, of course, that tendency in class relations too, to think that they were really born that way, but a social structure is harder to find in the early books of the Bible than either of the other two—the other two are really right there from quite early on and can be ascribed to nature. It is part of that naturalisation that gives those two ideologies their deep-seated structuration, which makes them very hard to remove. “Use the evidence of your eyes, don’t you see they are different?” I am not attempting to privilege race and sex over class, I am trying to account for certain differences one can make in the functioning of different kinds



of ideology. One of the ways in which ideologies function is to naturalise themselves. They disguise the fact that they are historic and symbolic constructions by appearing to be part of what nature is. Some ideological formations find it easier to make that move of naturalisation giving them a long and deep persistence although that is not the only mechanism of ideology. There are other ideologies and other ideological forms which function in ways which give them a greater kind of efficacy. I am only comparing race and class ideologies in terms of their power to disappear behind nature and I am drawing the similarity between sex and race which is very often appealed to in terms of “You can see the difference” and if you looked at the syntax of class in that kind of obvious sense the cues and signs would be more complicated. They are not so immediately and manifestly obvious, although it is a very fine distinction as people do not use exactly natural and symbolic and material cues to try and place people and locate them socially.

It is not only correct to connect race with other dimensions in terms of what it can explain, but also in terms of the underlying politics of your teaching in this area, because, unless one can show those correspondences and differences and be sensitive to them, one can't deal with the question which a good student trained in your hands is going to ask you. “Yes, I now understand it, what do we do about it?”

III.

Now let me say something about the more political aspects. Having tried to take questions of economic structure and the relation of the needs of labour and types of labour force, you can see why it is that particular forms of migrant labour form a specially flexible reserve army especially in the early phases when that black labour force came more or less fully reproduced. It was ready for work, to put it crudely—whereas in the next generation, what is happening right now is that you have to reproduce them, I mean reproduce them socially. You have to born them, and then grow them, and teach them, and educate them, and train them, and discipline them before you get them in at all, and by then there are actually no jobs for them to go to. So then you have to look after them in unemployment, reproduce them through enforced leisure, and police them quite hard, and then, unfortunately like other people they faintly resemble, they are going to get old and go on living—they live quite a long time, West Indian women particularly are strong and long survivors. So the reproduction costs of this labour force look particularly attrac-

tive in 1951 and look particularly unattractive and expensive in 1971, when in any case you have less money in your pocket and fewer schools to reproduce them through and less plots in the cemeteries and so on—you are short of everything, as it were. The reproduction costs begin to turn back on you.

There is an argument that says that one of the ways to understand the legislative policies of race in Britain is that as the cost of reproducing the black part of the labour force has grown, as Britain had to take the fact seriously that they are here to stay and to settle throughout the full life cycle, so the legislation has tended to try to reconstitute that black population more as a really authentic migrant force, like Southern Italian labour whom you send back home for Christmas and deny the right to vote and so on. If you have tried to travel on the train from South to North Italy during the Swiss industrial holiday you will know what keeps those clocks going. They travel up and down. The reproduction costs are in Calabria, and they are in the North Coast of Africa, and they are in the interior of Turkey behind the NATO line. They have managed to maintain that system of backwards and forwards movement partly because of geographical factors but partly also by making it difficult to bring families and making it unattractive for them to stay. This backwards and forwards movement was quite common in a previous period of migration, i.e., that between the Caribbean and North America, until it was limited by legislation during the latter part of the war. In the early part of the 1950s, there was a constant movement of migrant labour moving backwards and forwards to the Southern states, and if they were able to stay for the whole part of a year, they took very substantial earnings to the family back home. Part of that argument says that what is happening here is a retrospective political enforcement of migrant status on a settled black population. This involves discouraging anybody else from coming and especially discouraging the formation of extended black families, curtailing the nonlabouring part of the population—the aged—and then encouraging repatriation—“After you’ve worked it out, shove off back where you came from!”—leaving the black population here not exactly like, but very much more like, a long-term “guest worker.” It is more sensitive not only to economic dimensions but also to the political climate in a period when there is not a shortage of labour, but a growing unemployment coupled with the economic problems of welfare, reproduction and social reproduction and so on, when far from the need for such a force there is the need to expand the areas for employment opportunities for the white population, tending to generate much higher levels of unemployment among blacks in general

and especially among black school-leavers. In this situation, you are politically making the black population into a more flexible and responsive labour force. This is the more sophisticated way of trying to extend what is basically an economic argument to account for political developments. One of the best statements of this argument, which is worth looking at, is Sivandan's short pamphlet *From Immigration Control to "Induced Repatriation"* published by the Institute of Race Relations (1978). I think however that, although it provides part of the explanation, it doesn't adequately deal with the dynamic political and ideological factors attached to questions of race and racism in Britain which have to be introduced into the explanations that you are dealing with.

I don't want to say a great deal, but I do want to say something, about the political level. I want to point, on the one hand, to the lurchy rise to visibility of the question of race as an indigenous theme of British political life and political relations. We have to examine how it happens, when it happens, in response to what factors and how it is brought about—and it cannot be exclusively explained in terms of the early clashes in North Kensington or Enoch Powell himself as an individual, etc. When attempting to explain the politics of race in Britain we do have to give some attention to the institutional basis in which that politics has developed. We have to look at those particular sections of political leadership which have chosen to make statements about race and which have made a deep political investment in the topic of race, which have, with Powellism as a phenomenon, actually used race to open up quite a wide range of political themes, some of which had very little to do with race at all. We have to look at the very real and growing importance of the media and especially of the press and above all the popular press in a quite specific campaigning role around issues of race, around very primitive appeals to the notions of a "British way of life," of "British and alien cultures," etc. This is a very complicated operation particularly in the functioning of the media, and I don't have time to go into that in detail, but I don't think we should talk as if the politics of race fell out of the sky. It does have its institutional implications.

#### IV.

Ideological questions are one of the ways in which we return to what we previously spoke of as attitudes, prejudices and beliefs. The difficulty with focussing on attitude and beliefs is that you eventually come back to a notion

that these are individual emanations of good and bad, that they are to do with the differential perceptions of other people. Before long you can fall into the position of “Well, don’t we all like to hang about among our own, and don’t we all make differences and jokes about people who are different from ourselves?” You begin to sketch out a world which ought to have eaten itself from end to end because of multiple racism, brown and black hair, green and pink eyes, etc.—any difference. One really has to stop that runaway rout into difference and ask why some of those differences have consistently become historically pertinent. It’s along *that* channel that populations divide, that societies structure themselves, that perceptions crystallise and that people bring out truncheons. We must beware of dissolving the question of race into an infinite scatter, an inventory of all the possible differences that people can make, and show that it has served a very powerful social and historical function in various societies at different stages in history.

As far as questions of race are concerned, what matters much more than the differences are the already available languages which surround us from birth in this society—powerfully charged, well-developed languages which have consistently tried to come to understand the historical relation between the people of this nation and other nations, this economy and other economies, in ways connected with race which made those relations work, made them pertinent and which have been in existence for a very long time. The way in which we begin to think racially and to perceive racially has a great deal to do with the languages of racism available in societies like ours. The elements of those languages can be used to put together ideological explanations of phenomena which are really quite different. It isn’t that anybody confuses in their head old-style imperialism with the indigenous racism of the ’70s and ’80s, but this language of racism has been used to explain the sorts of structural differences which were implied in plantation society; then the sorts of structural differences which were implied in the gap between a rapidly developing, primarily industrialising capitalist society and the rest of the globe; and then to explain a set of relations between a truly imperial power and its imperial relations. It’s a well-minted, well-developed language which is around and which people draw on in order to explain to themselves new situations.

There is no sense in which you could try to explain the distribution of racist ideologies in a simply class-structured way. There is no way in which relations between Britain, either as a slave-owning or as an imperial economic and political power, and the rest of the world could have been lived out over long periods of time, leaving one whole class sector of the population

saturated with those ideas and the rest of the population totally free of them. It's an inconceivable notion, not only in terms of how ideologies penetrate societies but also when you look at actual ideological and political practices. Racism in our society is in part sustained by the defensive institutions of the working class as much as the rampant and offensive institutions of the capitalist class. The fact that certain forms of working-class and trade-union racism differ in their extent, in their modality, in their grip on people's imaginations from other types—say, National Front racism—the fact that it is quite significantly different in its articulation, is not the same thing as saying that it would be possible to make a cut through the British population and come out with goodies on the one hand and baddies on the other. Those differences have to be confronted because, if you go back to the politics of race and to the resistance to racism, they have been one of the most pertinent factors which have consistently divided the working class politically within itself and throughout the whole of the period that I am talking about. It has prevented the emergence of anything that even remotely resembled a mass nonracial political organisation or struggle, whose principal kind of thrust was the internal unity of classes across the divide constituted by race. In fact, the history of the period is the history of the continued internal segmentation of the labouring force, and one of the principal ways in which that segmentation has expressed itself politically and ideologically is around questions of race. That has been one of its crucial political and ideological effects, and in an increasingly non-expanding economic and political climate, racism of a virulent kind has been able to provide a kind of adequate explanation, not so much for people at the top of the society but more for people at the bottom of the society, as to what it is they are experiencing and why it is that a kind of racist politics makes sense.

This is not safe but combustible material that you are dealing with, and if you try to stop the story about racial politics, racial divisions, racist ideologies short of confronting some of these difficult issues, if you present a kind of idealized picture which doesn't look at the way in which racism has combined with, for example, sexism working back within the black population itself, if you try to tell the story as if somewhere around the corner some whole constituted class is waiting for a green light to advance and displace the racist enemy and constitute a nonracist society, you will have done absolutely nothing whatsoever for the political understanding of your students. You can also tell the story I have just been trying to sketch out in a way which so undermines the possibility of building and developing social and

political movements around those issues, that it doesn't do them any good either. One has to walk a very fine line here, and not tell a story which is really nice for the fireside, makes you glow inside, which lines up the goodies and baddies, for that will not explain the real world which you and I live in, a world which is not unified around those ideological symbols in the way which we would like. We want to change or transform the world as it is so that it begins to approximate more to that, but that is something which has to be done: it isn't something which is written into the conditions which we inherit. If on the other hand you tell the story so that the students come out saying, "Well, everybody is racist, we all are and we have been from ever since, there is nothing you can do about it and it has disabled us, we have been able to develop politically around this, the forms of resistance which develop in the black community are containable, etc.," you are simply preventing the possibility of acting on the situation.

Somehow one has to steer that difficult line whilst not selling short the complexity of the issues with which you are dealing. Instead of thinking that the questions of race are some sort of moral duty, moral intellectual academic duty which white people with good feelings do for blacks, one has to remember that the issue of race provides one of the most important ways of understanding how this society actually works and how it has arrived where it is. It is one of the most important keys, not into the margins of the society, but right into its dynamic centre. It is a very good way of getting into the political and social issues of contemporary British society because it touches and connects with so many facets. That does make it a difficult problem to handle and to explain adequately, and one mustn't try to go for simple explanations, because one does want to create a dynamic which involves people in the problems of trying to build antiracist politics.

#### NOTE

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