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RAKING THE FIELD OF THE DISCOURSE OF RACISM

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In order to disavow our social life of a set of social relations as destructive as racism, it is necessary to comprehend it in its full complexity. It is little wonder, then, that racism is yet so much a feature of contemporary social experience. The prevailing accounts of racism institutionalized by the mainstream academic perspectives have created an "object" corresponding only in part to the wide range of racism's manifestations in our daily experience.

Racism has been *defined* widely as an irrational group prejudice asserting superiority or inferiority of members of races on unwarranted groups of physical or mythical properties, such as skin color, blood, and so forth. Consider, however, the following spreading examples: Charles, a white Englishman, votes to end West Indian immigration because he finds his neighborhood transforming culturally from one of "privacy, chamber music and bacon 'n eggs" to that of "public steel drum music, Jamaican food and natty dreadlocks." Similarly, Friedrich, a white German, votes to end migrant labor because he watched his turf changing from one of "Wagner and schnitzel" to "belly dancing, shish kebab and Turkish delight." Both are clearly racist in their relevant beliefs and acts here. But no prejudgment need be made by them about some a priori group

nature, no appeal to skin color or blood, no claim to superiority. The basis for the discrimination is simply all that falls under the designation of "racial difference" (Barker, 1981: 16-22; Goldberg, 1985). Further, though each may be condemned as vicious, neither man in so thinking or acting need be irrational, for his beliefs are not necessarily contradictory nor is he inconsistent in the sense of undermining his purposes, frustrating his ends, or disadvantaging himself (Foot, 1978: 161 ff.).

Misconception at the level of definition exacerbates misconception at the level of explanation. Racism has been explained variously as a function of strictly biological or sociobiological mechanisms (Baker, 1974: 533-534; Van den Berghe, 1981: 28 ff.; Wilson, 1975: 562 ff.), of sexual desires and fears (Stember, 1976: 29-36, 49-54, 163-164), anger and frustration (Larsson, 1965), or as a product of our general psychological constitution (Kovel, 1970: 50 ff.; Pettigrew, 1965). Racism has been roundly criticized by Marxists, moreover, as the rationalizing of economic disparity and exploitation (Cox, 1948: 322-323; Gorz, 1970; Legassick and Wolpe, 1976: 87-107; Poulantzas, 1979: 255, 267). It is now widely conceded, however, that racism cannot be explained by reducing it to some putatively fundamental realm "logically" or "materially" prior to all others—be it biological, sociological, psychological, or economic.¹ Racism is a complex "social object" that calls for explanation as such without recourse to the oversimplifications of reductionism.

THE FIELD OF RACIST DISCOURSE

Now, to develop a theoretical framework sufficiently wide in scope to be capable of incorporating these disparate elements, racism is to be considered in general as a *field of discourse*, characterized by "unity in diversity." As a theoretical construct, the field of discourse of racism is sufficiently broad to include all the various entities constitutive of racism: Expressions,

where these are to be interpreted as covering not simply beliefs and verbal outbursts (e.g., epithets, slurs, and so on) but also their underlying conceptual structure, and more overtly, acts and their consequences, as well as institutions (or at least the principles on which they are based). "Field of discourse" can accommodate equally all those discussions of racism, the burgeoning body of texts that undertake to analyze and explain racism's occurrence and logic, its origins and history.

The view that racism exists in a field of discourse has been suggested explicitly by West (1982: 47-68) and a little less directly by Said's stimulating analysis of *Orientalism* (Said, 1978: 1-4). West's account simply summarizes briefly the bare threads of Foucault's original specification of the concept "discursive field" and applies it tendentiously to a limited "genealogy of racism" while suggesting how it might be incorporated into a more sophisticated Marxist historiography. Contrastingly, Said's more detailed investigation streamlines the concept's applicability to the specific confines of *Orientalism*, at once narrower and more institutionalized than the object of our concern here. We would do well therefore to consider afresh what this concept entails.

A well-defined field of discourse arises out of a "discursive formation" consisting in a totality of ordered relations and correlations: of subjects to each other and to objects; of economic production and reproduction, cultural symbolism and connotation; of laws and moral rules; of social, political, economic, and legal inclusion and exclusion. The sociodiscursive formation, in other words, consists of a large set of statements and expressions: "is's" and "oughts," "do's" and "don'ts"; "cans" and "cannots," "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." At a given historical conjuncture, the conditions of existence and coexistence, production and reproduction, preservation, transformation, and dissolution—all this promotes rules constitutive of a discursive field by defining an *object* that can be spoken of and the *mode* in terms of which it can be analyzed, its elements named and classified, its functions explained (Foucault, 1972: 38, 46, 179). This object, racism,

exists as the effect of that which is given rise to by established and determined relations between subjects and institutions, economic and social practices; by patterns and principles of conduct and ethics; by classificatory systems and technologies. Yet racism is not simply present in these relations, not reducible to them or to any one of their constitutive elements. This highlights the failure of any attempted explanation of racism solely in terms, for example, of economic determinism, sociological or biological reductionism.

Specifying both racism's "genealogy" and "ontology" in this way establishes concretely that the ethnocentrism of socio-epistemic conjunctures prior to the seventeenth century, though perhaps forerunners of racism, were not themselves forms of racism. Slavery or barbarianism are discursive objects differently constituted and structured—in short, spoken and spoken about—than racism. Most fundamentally, they make no appeal as such to any concept that has its place of origin in a particular scientific discourse in the way in which "race" does. There exists accordingly a radical schism between these earlier forms of subjection, exclusion and subjugation, on the one hand, and racism, on the other, a rupture reflected in the discourses defining these respective phenomena.

Within the structure and history of racism's own field of discourse there are breaks and fractures, as well as reformulations of the concepts composing the field in response to criticisms, corrections, discoveries, or new hypotheses. What imparts a semblance of coherence and stability to the object in spite of these alterations is not some abstract, ahistorical durability of racism itself. The discourse of racism precisely transforms—arises, alters, perhaps will virtually disintegrate—with these changes. Coherence and stability are a function rather of the cluster of concepts and principles that, at a higher level of generality, have been central to racism: differentiation and discrimination, classification and hierarchy, exclusion and domination, subjection and subjugation, violence and violation. Yet it must be emphasized at once that none of these concepts, taken independently, is unalterable (Foucault, 1972: 45-47).

A field of discourse is populated, in ascending degree of specificity, by texts, works, expressions, and statements. A work is a highly organized set of statements and expressions, occupying "book space," capable of physical transportation, parented and originally owned as property by its author. A text, by contrast, is not specific in the way in which a work is. As Barthes points out, it consists in a "methodological field" that facilitates the "activity of associations, contiguities and cross-references" (Barthes, 1979: 76). Texts offer the threads of the structure that enables the development and deployment of the concepts of the discursive field. At the risk of banalizing Barthes analysis, then, it can be said that works are instantiations of texts, and texts lay out the framework of the field of discourse. The interplay of concepts is to texts what expressions and statements are to works. By specifying and ordering in particular ways the expressions populating a sociodiscursive formation, texts define the rules and principles of the social institutions constituting that formation.

There are a number of elements specific to texts that form at the same time the methodological ground of discursive fields: sociohistoric conjuncture; formal or structural components and relations, including the concepts constitutive of the object under analysis; the subjective function instantiated as an expressive value, or less formally, how subjects internalize and interpellate discourses and act in terms of them. While each of these elements is crucial to a comprehension of the functions and mechanisms of the discursive object, I will concentrate analysis here only upon the first. Much attention has been paid to the sociohistoric soil in which racism has taken root. Yet some crucial features remain buried beneath the subsoil. Bringing these to light will furnish us, we hope, with a deeper understanding not only of the complexity of racism but more widely of our social world and its intellectual history.²

REREADING THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF RACISM

In general, the sociohistorical conjuncture of a discursive formation consists in the confluence of material and conceptual

conditions over a given period of time that facilitate the definition of the discursive object and the articulation of the field of discourse. Once the discursive field is established, variations and transformations in such conditions may stimulate discursive modification, development, even dissolution.

The sociohistorical grounds of racism have been scrutinized closely: The voyages of discovery from the sixteenth century on, reporting vast areas of "unconquered" land with inestimable mineral wealth and natural resources, yet peopled by "strange," often hostile beings;³ the nascent capitalism, fueled increasingly by an ever-expanding appetite for profit, and leading very quickly to demands for cheap labor and raw materials, race-bound slavery and the denuding of natural resources; the early nineteenth-century population increase in Europe leading to colonial spread;⁴ and the drive for market expansion stirred by the unquenchable desire for profit.⁵ The nineteenth-century "economic miracle" brought with it political solidification of the state, the forces of which were no longer directed just at the native barriers to colonial extension. They were employed quickly to promote internal division and exclusion, domination and violence. Thus the terror conducted against Jews in Spain or Russia, on one hand, was extended by the mid-twentieth century into a well-oiled machine of annihilation in Germany. And the exclusion of Jews from British citizenship until the latter part of the eighteenth century, and again in 1890, on the other hand, has developed into state-sanctioned techniques of racial exclusion not only of blacks and Asians in Britain and some of its former colonies, particularly South Africa, but ironically of Palestinians in Israel.

Though these "material" factors can be taken in a general fashion to have encouraged racist practices and articulations, racism—to repeat—is not reducible and hence not explainable purely in terms of them. In the process of defining the field of discourse, historical analysis must extend not simply to the surfaces of socioeconomic relations. They must uncover also those elements undergirding the discursive and material interrelations, namely, the system of values and appropriation. In the case of racism, what such an historical perspective reveals is the

remarkable confluence of the mode of economic and aesthetic valorization (the general criteria according to which things are imbued with value) and appropriate (how these objects are "made our own").

Mosse (1979: 10-11, 21-22) has pointed out insightfully that the rise of racist discourse rested upon the eighteenth-century resurrection of classical values of beauty.⁶ Mosse fails to notice the degree of similitude these values share with the criteria of value in the classical economic tradition. Thus equilibrium and utility have functions in classical economic theory analogous to proportion, symmetry, and refinement for classical aesthetics. Both sets of criteria determine an order of balance and harmony, established on the basis of the geometric model. Accordingly, beauty is for classical aesthetics a property, possession of which by subjects determines their ontological value, just as possession of economic goods creates the utility of classical economics. Further, possession of property is a sign of wealth, that which the agent is capable of appropriating in the face of competition (Locke, 1963: 327-344). To lack classical beauty is to be poor, which—as in *laissez-faire* economy theory—is considered the subject's own fault. Where beauty is interpreted in terms of racial properties—fair skin, straight hair, head shape, well-composed bodily proportions, and so on—to fail to possess them is regarded as a fault of inheritance, much as heirs are designated to maintain wealth within the confines of the familial "blood-line." So just as economic poverty (lack of property ownership and/or the means of production) led agents inevitably to work for pittance in factories and coal mines, "racial poverty" was seen to justify property in humans. Locke's "justifications" of property appropriation and ownership, on one hand, and human property in black slaves, on the other, provide perhaps the prototype of the confluence of values at work here (Locke, 1963: 325-327).⁷

Now this reveals a further historical dimension molding racist discourse. The criteria of value for classical aesthetics, as for classical economics, are thoroughly intellectualist. First,

“beauty” is considered to be a property present as an ideal essence to the intellect and is characterized thus by its clarity and knowability (Plato, 1972: 59b-65d, 1975: 210a-212a). Second, though “utility” in the classical economic tradition appears to be defined in terms of “satisfaction of desire,” the market mechanisms by virtue of which the classical model “tends to equilibrium” is equally intellectualist. This is a fact to which Smith’s “invisible hand of reason,” for example, bears witness.⁸ This intellectualism, however, is supported by a very strong naturalism. Objects are deemed beautiful in so far as they correspond to or mirror the order of things, just as they supposedly tend to their true or natural value (price) to the degree that they approach their natural equilibrium as demand and supply “mirror” each other (Hauser, 1951: 82; Marshall, 1890: 323-350).

This identical intellectualism and naturalism pervade the foundations of modern philosophical discourse. Both the rationalist and empiricist traditions rest ultimately upon common philosophical presumptions: truth as the correspondence of idea to reality, knowledge as mind mirroring nature (Rorty, 1980: 129-312; West, 1982: 53). Indeed, contrary to the beliefs of Chomsky and Bracken, this supports the conclusion that both rationalism and empiricism are equally prone to racist conjecture. Chomsky (1975: 132) and Bracken (1978: 244, 250) argue that while empiricism facilitates the expression of racism, rationalism furnishes a “modest conceptual barrier” to the formulation of racist principles. Rationalists, nevertheless, are bound to the view that mind mirrors nature. So, if the mind possesses a clear and distinct idea that one race is more intelligent or beautiful than another, it therefore must be true. In the case of empiricism, an unflawed perception of racial hierarchy or difference in nature will cause an idea of same to develop in the “mind’s eye.”

This pervasive intellectualism and naturalism led to the growth of the view that persons are to be considered beautiful on the basis of their “natural” qualities. These qualities are supposed to be established, in turn, on the a priori grounds of

racial membership. In this way, aesthetic value solidified into natural law, becoming for the eighteenth century as compelling for the laws of nature, economics, and morality precisely because they were all deemed to derive from the same basis. It is for this reason that many natural historians, biologists, and anthropologists at the time classified humankind not simply on grounds of strictly physical criteria, such as "measurement, climate, and environment," but according to the aesthetic values of "beauty or ugliness" (Mosse, 1979: 11).⁹ Thus the aesthetic values of bodily beauty referred to above were established as the mode of determining the individual's place in the racial (and therefore social) hierarchy. And perceived intellectual abilities (or a lack of) were considered to reveal inherent racial differences in mental capacity.

Most commentators have assumed that racists inevitably combine these two strains into a spurious causal principle. It is assumed, that is, that racial membership determines both one's degree of beauty and intellectual capacity such that where an observer has access to one the other may be deduced. The racist tradition in entirety unfortunately cannot be dismissed so hastily on grounds that racist discourse rests upon collapsing "aesthetic values" and "natural qualities." Based upon the inheritance of Cartesian dualism by the founding fathers of empiricism, some early racist thinkers had already begun to think of mind and nature as merely *correlated* in various ways. Witness Hume (1964: 250):

In Jamaica . . . they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis *likely* he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks few words plainly.

It is this looser notion of causality as correlation (Humean constant conjunction) that enabled the extension of each strain into separate genealogical lines of racist discourse: "Aesthetic racism" wedded, on one hand, to the physicality of bodily shape and color, quality of bodily accoutrements, such as hair, and so forth. For example, the depiction of the "Jewish nose"

from Carl Gustav Carus in nineteenth-century Germany, through Thomas Rawlandson (1921) to Nazi propaganda in the 1930s. Perhaps a less extreme, more sanitized version of this is Wilson's claim that bodily adornments, hairstyles, and so forth, like the more readily accepted racial characteristics, are gene-determined (Wilson, 1975: 22). On the other hand, "intellectual racism" expanded into the technology of brain capacity measurements and IQ testing. For example, the development in racist thinking from the likes of Gall and Spurzheim's phrenology, via Broca's brain capacity measurements, to the Eugenics movement, and culminating with the contemporary intelligence testing of Shuey, Jensen, and Herrnstein.

A move to merge these two trends was already made by Kant in his own racist thinking. After he had more or less abandoned strict Cartesian dualism, Kant could turn Hume's correlation between race and intelligence back into a strictly causal relation. This Kant did by moving at the same time from the notion of "beauty" as the basis of aesthetic classification to the concept of "sublimity" as perfection. In typical Kantian synthesis, racial sublimity incorporated aesthetic and intellectual qualities and yielded an hierarchical classification of races, with white Germans and Englishmen at the top, Chinese and black Negroes at the tail. This enables Kant to conclude logically that "the fellow was quite black from head to foot, *a clear proof* that what he said was stupid" (Kant, 1960: 113; emphasis added). Kant could consider himself to have derived thus a "Negro's stupidity" from his blackness.

TOWARD A PANORAMA OF THE FIELD OF RACIST DISCOURSE

What this analysis reveals, then, is a convergence of values, nonreducible and mutually determining, an interplay of factors—legal, political, economic, aesthetic, and philosophic—from the soil of which the field of racist discourse was able to

take roots and on the nutrients of which it has been able parasitically to thrive. So pervasive is this coherence of values that it can be nothing else than the fabric of rationality itself. The implication is clearcut. The modes of discourse in terms of which racism has been articulated are consistent with the modes of expression at the core of modernism. This is not to claim simply that modernist social and moral discourse makes possible racist discourse. A weak claim such as this is little more than platitudinous. Rather, I wish to stress that at given sociohistorical conjunctures, concepts, terms, and claims in scientific, legal, political, and moral discourse have fashioned ways of seeing, expressing, and acting that are distinctly racist. This accounts not only for the rise of racist discourse, it explains also the shifts internal to the racist field of discourse in relation to the alterations in these formative socioscientific discourses (as a function of criticism, political action, changed circumstances, and so on). Consider our introductory example of the shift from appeal to "inferiority" to appeal to "difference" in immigration or separate development policies (South Africa). Now, because of the great stress in the notion of "social discourse" laid here upon sociohistorical conjuncture, racist discourse cannot be considered to arise inevitably ("analytically"). Nevertheless, racism must be considered historically determined *in the sense* that, given these sociohistorical conditions and the representations of the enlightenment project, racism could not help but occur. In particular, deontology and utilitarianism—the ethics of duty and the ethics of utility, the two major interpretations of the moral values of modernism—have been shown to be the fertilizer of the field of racist discourse (Goldberg, 1984). Thus the values of a waning Christendom and an emerging capitalism fused with a new sense of turf ("Europe") (Hay, 1957: 56-57), a new technology for defining identity and otherness, for determining inclusion, and establishing entitlements (Goldberg, 1985).

It must be illustrated how the field of racist discourse assumes various hues, how it grows and develops, how its modes of expression and discrimination change with the intellectual seasons from the eighteenth century to the present.

To this end, the two remaining methodological components of discursive fields must be subjected similarly to analysis. First, the structural components of racist discourse, the conceptual grid, must be laid bare to reveal the principles of identification and difference, entitlement and disavowal, what racist differentiation, discrimination, and subjugation consist in, the various fashions in which violence and violation are manifested. At the same time, this conceptual structure must furnish the key to illustrating not only how the concepts are linked by a transformational schema from one to the other. A pattern of development must be furnished also that exemplifies the wider changes from one racist form to another: for example, from philosophical racism to scientific and economic, from economic to linguistic, literary and cultural, or between color racism and intellectual racism, and so on.

Finally, to show how agents have so readily “spoken” racist discourse, how the agent digs, sows, hoes, and reaps his or her field and then distributes its produce, the account must not limit itself in the end to the structural. It must be demonstrated how social agents *subject* themselves and are *subjected to* modes of expression, how the expressions become the agents’ own; whom they choose to direct them at and why; what they aim to gain from it, and so forth.

It is to these two weighty tasks—the structural and the subjective—that a thorough understanding of racism now beckons us.

NOTES

1. Gabriel and Ben-Tovim (1977) offer a critical survey of this trend among Marxists. Laclau (1977: 81 ff.) has noted a similar reductionism in the liberal analysis of fascism. Here, he clearly has the likes of Arendt (1973: 158-221) in mind.

2. For a detailed analysis of the formal structure of racist discourse and the subjective function, see Goldberg (1985).

3. Consider, for example, the debate in Spain (1550) between Las Casas, representative of the Church, and Sepulveda, spokesman for the imperial forces (Hanke, 1959: 28-73).

4. The best example is furnished by Hegel's (1952: 241-247) argument for colonialism as the only really viable response to overcrowding and poverty in European cities.

5. It has been argued recently that the metropolises, utilizing scientific and technological developments, have internalized the dynamics of colonialism to maintain clear class lines "at home." (Aronowitz, 1981: 89-100).

6. Mosse is followed by West (1982: 53-54, 58-59) on this point.

7. In a footnote to Locke (1963: 23, 325), editor Laslett quotes Leslie Stephen:

The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (Locke was secretary to the proprietors of Carolina) provide that every freeman "shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves." . . . The Instructions of Governor Nicholson of Virginia which Locke did so much to draft 1698 regard negro slaves as justifiably enslaved because they were captives taken in a just war who had forfeited their lives "by some Act that deserves Death" . . . Locke seems satisfied that the forays of the Royal Africa Company were just wars of this sort, and that the negroes captured had committed such acts.

See Bracken (1978: 253).

8. Smith (1978: 158), of course, does not employ the concept of "equilibrium"—a later invention—but rather that of "natural price."

9. Mosse and to a lesser extent others have documented in detail this tendency by early racist thinkers such as Buffon, Camper, and Lavater, and the influence upon their work of the art historian J. J. Winckelmann (Mosse, 1979: 1-29; West, 1982: 53-59; Gossett, 1965: 32-39, 69-72; Jordan, 1969: 3-95).

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