

A Companion to Racial
and Ethnic Studies

Edited by

David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos

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Ethnicity and Race

Werner Sollors

Origins of "Race"

The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first English equivalent for Italian *razza*, Spanish and Castilian *raza*, and Portuguese *raça* in the sixteenth century. An example from 1570 reads: "Thus was the outward race & stocke of Abraham after flesh refused." This instance supports the theory that the obscure roots of "race" may lie in the word "generation," and "race" and "generation" remained synonyms for some time in such languages as English or French. Sir Thomas Browne wrote in 1646 that "complexion was first acquired, it is evidently maintained by generation," and Le Car made a similar argument in 1765 that even at the poles of the earth Moors "keep their black skins without any change from generation to generation" ("*de race en race*"). The development from "generation" to "race" slowly resolved the ambiguity in genealogies against family connectedness and in favor of human divisions. Verena Stolcke has stressed that the word "race" could mean "the succession of generations (*de raza en raza*) as well as all the members of a given generation"; that it often had a close connection with "quality" and "nobility of blood" (inserting an aristocratic dimension to its legacy); yet that it was also "confused in the middle of the fifteenth century with the old Castilian *raza* which meant a patch of threadbare or defective cloth, or, simply, defect, guilt," obtaining a meaning exactly opposite to "nobility," namely, "taint" and "contamination," which is why the word appeared in Castilian, with a negative meaning, in connection with the doctrine of purity of blood (*limpiezza de sangue*), "understood as the quality of having no admixture of the races of Moors, Jews, heretics, or penitenciadors (those condemned by the Inquisition)" (Stolcke, 1994:276-7). With its legacy from fifteenth-century Spain, "race" can thus evoke both the generational pride of a "nobility" and the "taint" of those descended from socially ostracized groups and their descendants.

Origins of "Ethnicity"

The word "ethnicity" is once recorded in 1772, in an instance listed as "obsolete and rare" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "From the curling spume of Egean waves fabulous

Examples and arguments presented here have been drawn from my introduction to *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (Sollors, 1997).

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ethnicity feigned Venus their idolatress conceived." The word was revived only during World War II, at a time when "race" had become compromised by its fascist abusers. W. Lloyd Warner reintroduced "ethnicity" as a social category, parallel to sex and age, by which human beings can be differentiated from each other. Like "race," which it set out to replace, "ethnicity" contains a doubleness. Derived from the Greek root *ethnikos*, the word refers both to people in general and to people who are different from the speakers, making "ethnic" applicable to self-description and to ascription.

Racism, and from Race to Ethnicity

"Racism" is a word that came into general usage only in the 1930s. It was at first a positive term launched by fascists to describe the importance they assigned to race, and then became the central term to express intellectual critiques of fascism. Magnus Hirschfeld's still remarkable antifascist book *Racism* (1938) marked the turning point, according to Robert Miles (1989:42). Race was affected by the vicinity to racism. In scholarly language, after World War II "race" slowly began to be displaced by "ethnicity" so that Irish-Americans, for example, did not remain a "race" but became an "ethnic group" (a term that enjoyed wider circulation than "ethnicity").

"Ethnicity" as Exclusive of "Race"

While the word "race" never completely disappeared from the field of ethnic studies, it became common practice to define "racial" as a part of "ethnic" phenomena. John Higharn's collection *Ethnic Leadership in America* (1978), for example, includes entries on Afro-Americans and Native Americans. A journal devoted to "American ethnic literature," *MELUS: The Journal for the Society of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, similarly offered (and still offers) criticism of literature from many ethnic groups, white and nonwhite; and many anthropologies of ethnic literature followed the pattern of interspersing writings by African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans with texts written by "white ethnics" (e.g., Blicksilver, 1978; Raderman and Bradshaw, 1975; Newman, 1975; Simon, 1972). In fact, the very term "white ethnic" implies that the word "ethnic" is still not, in common usage, considered to be limited to whites; and many "Ethnic Studies" programs in the United States are devoted to the study of "racial" minorities.

The view of the intimate interrelationship of race and ethnicity is not just a matter of common usage: it has been argued in scholarship. Milton M. Gordon (1988) argued that "the term 'ethnic group' is broad enough to include racial groups." The inclusive quality of the term "ethnic group" becomes apparent in usage, for "all races, whatever cautious and flexible term we shall give to the term, are ethnic groups. But all ethnic groups, as conventionally defined, are not races" (1988:119). Ironically, it is thus the more inclusive quality of "ethnicity" that separates it somewhat from "race." Gordon specifically states it: "The larger phenomenon, then, is not race but ethnicity which, as a sociological concept, includes race" (p. 131). Hence he speaks of "races and many other types of ethnic groups" (p. 130). Yet their difference should not be exaggerated, as it is "a matter of degree rather than of kind." Most importantly, scholars should not be led to believe

that conflicts based on "racial" difference are inevitably more serious than those based on "ethnic" distinctions.

[T]he most momentous and catastrophic forms of ethnic conflict in some cases rest on the perception of differences that are physical and externally visible, and in other cases on differences that are cultural and ideological, no matter how the latter differences are phrased by the participants or perpetrators. (Gordon, 1988:131)

For Gordon, both the "physical" differences (often associated with "race") and the "cultural" differences (of "ethnicity") rest not on objective criteria but on "percep-

Race Differentiated from Ethnicity

In *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) Michael Omi and Howard Winant take the view that the inclusive view of ethnicity tends to ignore different historical experiences, leading to the possibility of lending support to the strategy of "blaming the victim." A conceptual differentiation between race and ethnicity would, by contrast, help to explain why, because of race, group distinctiveness is not altered by long-standing adoption of majority norms and culture. Finally, the distinction would open up more scholarly interest in, for example, ethnicity among blacks (Omi and Winant, 1986:21ff.) This argument marks a particular counterpoint to Gordon's maxim that "all races are ethnic groups," which could be misunderstood as inviting a method of regarding all blacks as only one ethnic group, because they are also "race." Races may be, and often are, ethnically differentiated (African Americans and Jamaicans in the United States), just as ethnic groups may be racially differentiated (Hispanics - who "may be of any race," as census takers know). Omi and Winant's argument supports the need for a careful examination of the relationships of "visible" and "cultural" modes of group construction in specific cases, but not the assumption that there is an absolute dualism between "race" and "ethnicity," and a deep rift between them.

Benjamin B. King and Elinor R. Lawless (1989) make a stronger claim:

The they-ness imputed to racial minorities by the dominant American society has been qualitatively different from the they-ness imputed to white ethnic minorities... So imprinted has this differential treatment [of racial minorities in the United States] been onto the very foundations of the American society from the colonial period onward that we have construed a theory of duality to account for this differential treatment. (King and Lawless, 1989:27)

King and Lawless add a very important qualification: "Accordingly we shall keep the two terms separate, although on occasion when we shall be looking at matters common to both racial and ethnic groups we may for the sake of simplicity use the term 'ethnicity' only." The language rule they apply could have been written by Milton Gordon, as it effectively makes ethnicity the superordinate category.

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In other words, van den Berghe's demarcation between race and ethnicity may rest on what is really a blurry and dynamic line at best. It is a matter of a relationship and of a difference in degree, of "perception" more than of "objective" difference.

David Theo Goldberg (1993) extends these reflections and complicates them even more. He writes: "The influential distinction drawn by Pierre van den Berghe between as lighter than an equally dark poor Negro, as suggested by the Brazilian proverb: 'Money physically differences is affected by cultural perceptions of race (e.g. a rich Negro may be seen culturally changed (by scarification, surgery, and cosmetics); and the sensory perception of which is a function of diet, cosmetics, and other cultural items); physical appearance can be several facts. Cultural traits are often regarded as genetic and inherited (e.g., body odor, In practice, the distinction between a racial and an ethnic group is sometimes blurred by

(van den Berghe, 1967:10)

compelled to add a qualification to his distinction between "race" and "ethnicity": factors. In fact, van den Berghe acknowledges this problem to the extent that he feels boundaries) rests on culturally shaped sensory "perception," hence not on "objective" visible ones, and by the fact that the olfactory sense is also often invoked in setting up ethnic plmented by Hannah Arendt's point that there are "audible" ethnic groups as well as fixed, objectively measurable differences; the notion of "visibility" (which could be com- tension. The terms "physical," "phenotypal," "innate," and "immutable" suggest a "physical" distinctions depend on external or internal definitions - which sets up a are also a matter of "perception," an issue addressed by van den Berghe's point that This brings us back, however, to the point made by Gordon that "physical" distinctions city was broad enough to include cultural and physical - he says "phenotypal" - features) and "immutable" distinctions and "cultural" ones. (Schermerhorn's definition of ethn- Gordon also suggested between "visible," "physical" (for van den Berghe also "innate" "ethnicity," and the remaining instance of "race" defined on the ground of the distinction by This differentiation leaves two meanings of "race" to be discarded, one to be replaced by

immutable physical characteristics" (van den Berghe, 1967:9). and/or is defined by other groups as different from other groups by virtue of innate and should use; it refers, as defined by social scientists, to a "human group that defines itself human race." Only the fourth sense of "race" is the one van den Berghe proposes we Third, the polysemous word is also synonymous with "species" when one says, "the the terms "ethnicity" or "ethnic groups" as synonyms for only this meaning of "race." race" or the "Jewish race" - and in these cases, van den Berghe recommends the use of Second, the term has been and still is applied to numerous groups such as the "French customarily three to five races, that is evoked when scholars now speak of "race." longer tenable context of physical anthropology that once classified all human beings into principal connotations of "race" make it confusing. First, there is the dated and no work comparing the United States and South Africa. Van den Berghe argues that four city" may be the one advanced by Pierre L. van den Berghe in *Race and Racism* (1967), a

Race Unlike Ethnicity

an ethnic group as 'socially defined on the basis of cultural criteria' and a race as 'socially defined but on the basis of physical criteria' collapses in favor of the former. This is so, Goldberg says, because that assignment of significance to "physical" criteria is in itself the result of a "cultural" choice that has been made differently in different countries and times. Goldberg reminds us that he terms "ethnoraces" (echoing Gordon's "ethnic classes") may also be formed "by consent or domination by others." Goldberg concludes: "Ethnicity . . . tends to emphasize a rhetoric of cultural consent, whereas race tends to resort to rhetoric of descent" (Goldberg, 1993:75-6). Yet it is a matter of a "tendency," not of an absolute distinction.

Mixed-race in Relationship to Race and Ethnicity

One area in which one can see this tendential divergence in operation in the United States is in the different rules of self-definition for ethnically mixed and for racially mixed individuals that has been the subject of Mary Waters' (1990) fascinating research. She found that not all persons from dual backgrounds have the same options for identification:

Certain ancestries take precedence over others in the societal rules on descent and ancestry reckoning. If one believes one is part English and part German and identifies as German, one is not in danger of being accused of trying to "pass" as non-English and of being "redefined" English. . . . But if one were part African and part German, one's self-identification as German would be highly suspect and probably not accepted if one "looked" black according to the prevailing social norms. (Waters, 1990:18-19)

The Afrocentrist scholar Molefi Kete Asante took an example quite similar to the one Mary Waters analyzed in order to argue against a racially mixed identity in America: to claim, for example, a partly German heritage for black Americans, he writes, may be "a correct statement of biological history but is of no practical value in the American political and social context. There is neither a social definition within the American society for such a masquerade" (Asante, 1993:142). What Waters describes as a social norm, Asante tries to enforce by considering a person's real ancestry "of no practical value" for identification, and the claiming of a parent's ethnicity merely a "masquerade." Those types of ancestry that are colloquially associated in the United States with the term "race" rather than "ethnicity" may deny a descendant the legitimate possibility of identifying with certain other forms of his or her ancestry (even though "ancestry" may mean one parent, three grandparents, or an even higher proportion of ancestors further removed). The social phenomenon of "passing" also throws into question the notion that "race" rests on "physical" features or that such features are visible - since "passing" implies that people who "look white" may be considered to be "really" black (see Davis, 1991). From a stronger theoretical probing of the issue of "mixed race" the concept of "race" as a "physically based" ethnic distinction may be fundamentally questioned, as Naomi Zack (1993) demonstrates. Naomi Zack has subjected the dualistic racial axioms to logical scrutiny and delineated the following schema:

An individual, Jay, is black if Jay has one black forebear, any number of generations back. An individual, Kay, is white if Kay has no black forebears, any number of generations back.

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If the Spanish origin of the term is true, then the problem with "race" goes back to its beginnings. It was used to expel from Spain people "tainted" by Jewish and Moorish blood – hence "race" in the "physical" and "visible" sense, we might think. Yet the list of people to which the doctrine of purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) was applied went on and included descendants of heretics and of "penitencidos" (those condemned by the Inquisition)" (Stolcke, 1994:276-7). Thus at this terrible beginning, "race" was hardly based on the perception of phenotypal difference but on a religiously and politically, hence "culturally," defined distinction that was legislated to be hereditary, innate, and immutable. It was what we would now call an "ethnic" distinction, as defined by Nathan Glazer as well as by Pierre van den Berghe. Stuart Hall (1994) said memorably that race and ethnicity play hide-and-seek with each other. A categorical refusal to find any possible relationship between ethnicity and race – even if that relationship should turn out to make "race" an aspect of "ethnicity" – does not seem promising as a program of scholarship.

Some contemporary scholars would like to consider "race" a special "objective" category that cannot be meaningfully discussed as a part of "ethnicity."² Yet it seems that, upon closer scrutiny, the belief in a deep divide between race and ethnicity that justifies a dualistic procedure runs against the problem that the distinction between ethnicity and race is simply not a distinction between culture and nature. Few if any scholars manage to sustain a completely dualistic procedure, and even fewer advocate abstaining from any comparisons between "racial" and "ethnic" groups. What seems to be the case then is that in a society in which ethnic differentiation along racial lines has historical depth and is supported by governmental bureaucracies, certain ethnic conflicts will come to be understood as "racial."

Conclusion

In an unsystematic fashion, the U.S. Census adheres to the principal of dividing Americans into four categories that are identical with nineteenth-century "races" (Caucasians, Africans, Asians, and Indians and a fifth, Hispanics, who can be of any race). And while the Census has found a simple method of counting multiethnic citizens, the government bureaucracy finds it difficult to acknowledge the existence of biracial citizens and, as Joel Perlmann (1997) has stressed, is unable to consider the possibility, in its statistical forecasts, that children may in fact be born from the unions of members of different races. In short, the U.S. Census predicts population growth only within (and not crossing) the five categories that David Hollinger (1995) polemically refers to as "the ethnoracial pentagon."

There is no other condition for racial blackness that applies to every black individual, there is no other condition for racial whiteness that applies to every white individual. This schema is asymmetrical as to black and white inheritance. It logically precludes the possibility of mixed race because cases of mixed race, in which individuals have both black and white forebears, are automatically designated as cases of black race. (Zack, 1993:5)

Notes

- 1 Other contenders are "ratio," "natio," and "radix" to Spanish and Castilian *raza*, Italian *razza*, and Old French *haraz*.
- 2 See, for example, Smith (1982). Ronald Takaki (1993:10) argued more subtly that race "has been a social construction that has historically set apart racial minorities from European immigrant groups. Contrary to the notions of scholars like Nathan Glazer and Thomas Sowell, race in America has not been the same as ethnicity." Yet he does not draw the conclusion from this assessment that "race" and "ethnicity" should not be compared. Most page references to what is indexed as "ethnicity" in Takaki's book actually refer to discussions of Jewish immigration.

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