

Racisms

an introduction

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Second Edition



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The Idea of 'Race' and the Practice of Racisms

In this chapter we will

- Examine the history of 'race' as an idea
- Understand how 'race' has been theorised in the social sciences
- Look at definitions of racism and
- Arrive at our own definition, to be used for the remainder of this book

What is race? The striking element of all scholarly attempts to understand what 'race' is seems to be the impossibility of providing a definition. We think we know, obviously, who is in what 'race', even though we may try very consciously not to attach any further importance to it as an identity when we deal with other people. Clearly, dividing up people into 'races' is an act of categorisation. Yet when we look more closely at the kinds of assumptions this form of categorisation is based on, they do not hold water. We think 'race' is about physical appearance and has been a characteristic of humanity for centuries. But how many 'races' are there and what are they called? If you watch American crime shows, you may think 'Caucasian', 'African American' and 'Hispanic' are the main ones. Yet there are a number of problems with this understanding. First, these labels are all relatively new. 'Caucasian' was not used before the 1940s; 'African American' has only come into use since the 1990s; and 'Hispanic' has only been used since the 1970 Census. Second? Sorry my US readers, but the world really is bigger than the USA. What separates people's understandings of who is who in one place, at one time, is not necessarily the same logic that applies elsewhere at other times. Third, and we will come back to this many times, pursuing the idea that the world can be divided into 'races' requires a special suspension of logic.

What are the physical attributes we are really talking about in the discussion of ‘race’? Skin colour, hair type and colour, eye colour, shape of eyes, shape of nose. Are there any more? Yet let’s think for a moment about all the ways in which two human bodies could differ from one another. If you had to make a list of such elements, that list would be very long. Once you have proportions of limbs to body, shape of head, distance between eyes and muscle definition, I am sure you could come up with 20 before you have even started to struggle. That’s just the external (phenotypical) differences. If we then start to think about genetic differences, the scale of the sleight of hand involved in dividing the world up into ‘races’ on the premise of biology becomes apparent. In Box 1.1, we can see some information derived from contemporary science about the various ways in which human bodies could be grouped together and it is counter-intuitive for people whose culture encourages the normalisation of ‘race’.

Box 1.1 Race and Genes

While each human being has around 25,000–30,000 genes, the largest difference between two individuals seems to be in the region of 1 per cent. Although the biological basis of ‘race’ suggests distinct groups of people with more shared genetic heritage than genetic discrepancy, research into genetic differences shows that this is a false claim. The science does not stand up. Indeed, often there are geographical, social and medical reasons for the relatively small differences in genetic structure between people.

Example 1 – *Sickle cell anaemia*: often seen as a disease for which people of African origin exclusively are at high risk. The cluster of genes that means a person is likely to develop this form of anaemia is concentrated among groups of people whose ancestors came from sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and India. Thus, it is not solely a ‘black people’s’ disease but rather closely linked to malaria; hence the geographical concentration of the pathology. Malaria exacerbates the illness, and so where malaria is not present, the rate of sickle cell sufferers drops. African Americans’ rate is below that of West Africa, and falling as malaria has been eradicated in the USA.

Example 2 – *IQ testing*: the controversy about psychometric testing for Intelligence Quotient is ongoing. Introduced in the early twentieth century in the USA, its objective was to screen for intelligence among recruits for the armed forces. It was then used as a screening test for immigrants. The claims of those who advocate such tests are that different ethnic and racial groups score at different rates – even when environmental factors are taken into consideration. Those who disagree argue that there are a host of social class and culture-related issues around what is counted as intelligence and what is actually measured in these types of test. People can score at higher rates with training in the types of question asked, and in the case of immigrants, after longer exposure to the culture of the country in which the test is administered (Duster, 2003, 2006; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Fraser, 1995).

Ultimately, the judgement of science on 'race' as a way of definitively organising the human population into discrete groups, according to genetic make-up, is unequivocal:

Modern genetics does in fact show that there are no separate groups within humanity (although there are noticeable differences among the peoples of the world) ... Individuals – not nations and races – are the main repository of human variation for functional genes. A race, as defined by skin colour, is no more a biological entity than is a nation, whose identity depends only on a brief shared history. (Jones, 1994: 246)

This is not to say that people do not share characteristics such as complexion, hair type, eye colour, etc., but instead it should draw our attention to the relatively tiny proportion of physical features that we use as criteria for our understanding of 'race': skin colour, hair type, eye colour, shape of mouth, shape of eyes, etc. Why, out of all the biological differences there *could* be between two people, do we only focus on half a dozen at most? Moreover, biological genetic similarity within a supposed racial group, and its distinction from another, represent only half the story: 'race' has always been about linking culture and behaviour to physical appearance. How we think about 'race' is to assume, for example, that Person X is part of group A, therefore she behaves in a certain way. There is more in this book about how the links were originally made, and on the idea of culture later, but here, we just need to underline the fact that the idea of 'race' is not merely about bodies looking similar to or different from one another, but about the ideological labour we invest into collectively interpreting those similarities and differences.

So, if we accept that there are many physical differences possible, yet when we think about 'race', there are only a few features that we are interested in, the problem for us becomes, 'why is this the case?' Moreover, the terms we use, like 'white', 'black', 'yellow', 'red', etc. are not even descriptions of what they claim to describe. Nobody living is actually white. Nobody is really 'black' in the sense of the ink on this page, although there are some people with very dark complexions indeed. Certainly, nobody's skin is yellow or red – unless they are sunburnt or suffering from particular diseases. So the conclusion must be that such terms have social meanings but not biological ones.

The same could be said for the idea of 'race'. Our social worlds are full of ways to distinguish between one group and another in a specific context, and 'race' is one form of categorisation. The interpretations of physical differences that we make in our societies are determined not by the indisputable fact of racial difference, but by the social imperatives that enable us to do so. In other words, the social world provides us with tools specific to both our culture and our period of history, which we then use to read 'race' from the bodies of human beings. We are bombarded with ways of admitting that 'race' is a *natural* part of our social world, one of the legitimate ways in which we try to make sense of difference. 'We hold these truths', it appears, 'to be self-evident': all people are created racial.

Indeed, 'race' has never been the object of consensus because of this slippery relationship to the facts. Throughout this book, we will examine geographical and historical contexts in which the interpretations afforded to 'race' differ. Michael Omi's conclusion is valid not just for the USA:

... the meaning of race in the United States has been and probably always will be fluid and subject to multiple determinations. Race cannot be seen simply as an objective fact, nor treated as an independent variable. (Omi, 2001: 244)

Paul Silverstein's anthropological perspective is that 'race' is a 'cultural category of difference that is contextually constructed as essential and natural – as residing within the very body of the individual' (Silverstein, 2005: 364). So, making sense of such clues, which we are primed to do in our cultures, is labelled a 'social construction' in the social sciences. Sociologists have long argued that 'race' is a social construction, but that the meanings attributed to it have concrete impacts on social relations. Although there might be strategic reasons why 'race' could be retained, as a basis for solidarity (Gilroy, 1987), I am convinced that as far as academic practice goes, Stephen Small's rationale (1994: 30) is the correct one. Contrary to the focus on 'race relations', he maintains, which first 'assumes that "races" exist and then seeks to understand relations between them', racialisation directs our attention to 'how groups not previously defined as "races" have come to be defined in this way and assesses the various factors involved in such processes'. These processes result in 'race' becoming a salient factor in the way social resources are allocated and how groups are represented, that is, *racialised*. The concept of 'racialisation' will be introduced and exemplified in detail throughout the next chapter.

Different Places, Different 'Races'?

As we said, these readings differ from one place to another and at different moments in time. Let's take an example of a person whom we shall hypothetically move from place to place. Using the racial terminology available to us in our understanding of the world seen through the lens of 'race', her mother is white and her father is black (UK), or Caucasian and African American (USA). This makes her either African American or bi-racial (USA) or black or 'mixed race' (UK). If we take this fictitious person with light brown skin to Brazil, there are at least four ways to categorise her racially: *parda*, *preta*, *morena* and *negra*. Each of these has different connotations, and the degree to which one is not white often affects your life chances in terms of education, employment, etc. Returning to the Caribbean via Latin America, she would pass through a set of cultures where the gradations between black, white and native American origins have an elaborate terminology: there would certainly be a term to describe her, possibly *mulatta* or *morena*, for example, and when she gets to somewhere like Jamaica, she might be referred to as 'red' or 'yellow'.

If we take her back to South Africa between 1948 and 1994, when the system called Apartheid was in place, she would have been 'Coloured'. This meant you

were restricted to living in particular areas, barred from others, and this, in turn, meant restricted access to education, employment and other resources, in a context where the entire population was identified by 'race' and governed on that basis.

In such systems of attributing social value, therefore, everyone has a set of physical attributes that can get you categorised. However, in this form of categorisation, the outcomes are unequal. If you look like this person in the USA, South Africa, or Brazil, particular openings are closed off to you. Yet should she stay in a country where the vast majority of people are black, let's say Nigeria, her identity is much more likely to relate to religion, region of origin, language, professional status, etc. Lastly, if we took her back to 1930s Germany, she would have been a candidate for the forced sterilisation programme. After the First World War, the Rhineland (the industrial region bordering France) was occupied by American and French African troops, several of whom had children with German women. From 1937 onwards, as part of the 'racial hygiene' programme led by Dr Eugen Fischer, these 400 children were sterilised in order that they did not contaminate the Aryan gene pool. In each of those settings, the social and political distinctions between people have their own histories; the words used to describe groups of people based on culture and physical appearance have different meanings, and refer the individuals concerned to different positions of relative power in their society. 'Race' is therefore not a universal concept, but a particular and contingent one.

There are some significant elements to note from this small set of examples:

- 'Race' in biological terms (of simply what people look like) matters a lot. For example, it bears importantly on the way resources are made more or less accessible.
- It is not individuals alone, but also important institutions like the State, which have input in determining the meaning of 'race'.
- Different social systems and their cultures attach different types of meaning to physical appearance.
- It is not simply a case of some people being denied access to goods and resources, but of the corresponding easier access for others. Racism, as we shall define it below, is a social relationship. This means that there is always an imbalance of power, expressed through access to resources.

If racism's departure point is the idea of 'race', our first exploration must be into that term and its development. Once this is clear we can move on to the second aim of the chapter, to provide a working definition of 'racism'.

Some Key Moments in the Development of the Idea of 'Race'

The purpose of this section is to establish that the three foundational aspects of racism outlined above change over time, and from place to place. The meanings attached to 'race' and the practices it endorses are also specific to different

eras and contexts. This is an important stage in the argument, because when we come to discuss configurations of racism post the Second World War, the idea that it consists of physical-based representations can be countered, and the debate moved forward. In later chapters, we shall go into some of these topics in much more detail. The three moments selected here are: the sixteenth century, the Enlightenment and classification, and racial science.

Although there were of course empires before the European expansion into the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australasia, the phase of empire that began in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century is the key one for students of 'race'. Spanish and Portuguese involvement in establishing colonies, the slave trade and the subsequent struggle for advantage that dragged in all the European powers had immense historical consequences. In the realm of racism, this was the period which witnessed the encounter between European and native that was to frame the colonial epoch. Such an encounter was frequently violent. The Europeans held technological and military advantage, as well as pre-existing ideas about classifying groups of people by virtue of criteria such as religiosity, property ownership, communal property, government, nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, farming techniques, etc. What can be observed over the four centuries of European expansion is the construction of a set of ideas about the native/indigenous people that placed them in a position of moral and cultural inferiority. This position was either borne out by, or led to (depending on how you interpreted such events), the corresponding political, economic and military inferiority institutionalised under the various forms of colonial rule.

The Sixteenth Century

References to 'race' prior to the eighteenth century were much more ambiguous than we might expect. Before there were 'black' and 'white' people, there were 'Christians' and 'Heathens'. In Christian symbolism, 'white' had positive connotations (purity), while 'black' had the opposite, hence the type of negative meanings attached to the term black. The evidence suggests that ideas about explaining difference frequently focused on religion, climate and labour status, without giving the concept of 'race' the detailed content that it was to receive later.

How is this to be reconciled with the fact that the European colonial enterprises (including the conquest of Ireland) and the Atlantic slave trade had been under way for centuries before the Enlightenment? Surely ideas about superiority and inferiority revolved around physical as well as religious difference? Physical difference was explained largely with reference to religion. This can be seen as a long-term process at its clearest in the 'sons of Ham' argument put forward by the Christian churches to justify the enslavement of Africans. The argument ran that the punishment given by God to Canaan (the son of Ham) in the Book of Genesis (9:18–27) involved servitude and blackness (to denote inferiority already present in the nature of servitude).

The frame of reference for educated Europeans until the Enlightenment was one in which:

- The dominant idea about origins was that everyone was descended from Adam and Eve (*monogenesis*), and signs on the body were read as judgements of God.
- The idea of separate origins (*polygenesis*) was a minority one among biblical scholars, and responded to the obvious physical diversity of the human race.

However, nowhere in Genesis does it say that all Ham's descendants were to be dark-complexioned, nor that the form of their servitude would resemble in any way the bondage of the Israelites in the Old Testament. In fact, the punishment was restricted to Canaan. The idea of the sons of Ham was added to the very broad lines in scripture in a manoeuvre by clerical scholars over centuries. For our purposes, we should note also that ideas about the inequality of classes and genders were also given justification by particular interpretations of the Bible (as well as the holy books of other religions). The logic ran: Africans could be enslaved in large numbers, therefore their slavery was natural and permitted by God. This is because they were the 'sons of Ham', designated by God to be servants.

Moreover, the military and technological power of the European states was underwritten by the unchallenged assertion that the rest of the world's land and peoples were available to be exploited. In the 1493 Treaty of Tordesillas, the Pope divided the 'New World' into two areas: one for Spain to control, the other for Portugal.

However, the most pressing problem facing sixteenth-century colonists in the Spanish New World, for example, was the requirement of workers in the labour-intensive enterprise of extracting primary materials such as gold, diamonds and silver. The debate between Spanish intellectuals Las Casas and Sepulveda over the fate of Amerindians, held in Valladolid in 1550, encapsulated early humanist thought and imperial imperatives. If Amerindians in the New World had 'redeemable' souls, they could not be used as slave labour; if they hadn't, then their labour could be passed off as penance for sinful paganism. Little of this discourse focused on what Amerindians looked like, and until the end of the sixteenth century, when Amerindian resistance had been quelled, there was certainly no consensus that their cultures were universally less developed than Europe's. Even when there was, there existed no consensus that any such developmental lag was due to an innate incapacity to become civilised. Indeed, the model of civilising by example was still a defensible (although minority) position in North America and Ireland during the British colonisations of those places into the seventeenth century.

The Enlightenment and Classification

Over the decades now referred to as ‘the Enlightenment’ (c.1720–1820), a diffuse pattern of ideas expressed in relation to a number of disciplines including biology, philosophy, history, economics and political science were transformed into a coherent body of thought on humankind’s place in the world, containing an elaborate typology of human beings. The Enlightenment thinkers were engaged in a wide-ranging project of categorisation. Man’s place in creation was the object of study, and to this end, a series of classificatory tasks were carried out, and inventories of living things (including peoples) were constructed. The Swedish biologist Linnaeus, for example, wrote an epic work, *Systems of Nature* (1735, in Eze, 1997: 10), in which the physical aspects of this project appear clearly (see also Chapter 5):

Man, the last and best of created works, formed after the image of his Maker ... is, by his wisdom alone, able to form just conclusions from such things as present themselves to his senses, which can only consist of bodies merely natural. Hence, the first step of wisdom is to know these bodies.

In constructing the ‘great chain of being’, the fulcrum of Enlightenment reasoning was Linnaeus’s ‘bodies merely natural’: that is, a set of common-sense physical markers that expressed difference.

Indeed, a causal link was made by writers such as Hume, the Comte de Buffon and Hegel, between climate, ‘phenotype’ (that is, physical appearance), intellectual ability and capacity for civilisation. In this view of the world, civilisation in its highest forms emanated from the version of human beings dwelling in the temperate zones of Europe and America: they were pale in complexion as a result, and as contemporary history showed, were capable of mastering both nature and other species of man through the use of technology. The differences between the categories of human being were explicable in terms of appearance and culture: they were two sides of the same phenomenon. Physical appearance became a marker of cultural development, not just in the present, but also an indicator of the parameters of advancement (Eze, 1997).

There is a case that the ‘Atlantic Protestant’ Enlightenment was more conservative than its continental counterparts. There was less polygenist argument and it was certainly less critical of the Church than the French Enlightenment, which took place against the backdrop of the pre-revolutionary period.

However, ideas about racial difference, culture and climate gained legitimacy and became part of elite ideology in the Atlantic world in the context of the commodification of human beings in the Atlantic slave trade. The conclusions arrived at by many of the Western world’s most notable minds acted to justify slavery after the event. Within the Enlightenment was also an attempt to place secular rationalism above religion as the dominant

explanatory model for social phenomena. It did indeed achieve predominance, and the classifications proposed were honed in the industrial and scientific nineteenth century.

Box 1.2 Essentialism

A key relationship to be borne in mind is the one between the social and the natural worlds. When nature is employed to account for behaviour, the idea that this behaviour is unchanging, and therefore unchangeable, accompanies it. Identities are, in this perspective, constructed around an essence which cannot change.

This is a particular source of tension: social science is about mapping and studying change and continuity, while discriminatory bodies of ideas are about fixing identity in time, and arguing that there is an essence that does not change. Some of the arguments against women receiving the franchise in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, stated that they were naturally too emotional and irrational to be entrusted with the serious business of voting. This illustrates how unchanging and unchangeable 'essences' are advanced as part and parcel of collective identities. We refer to this kind of argument as '*essentialist*', and the practice of arguing in this way as '*essentialism*'. However, some argue that essentialism serves a purpose for the oppressed, of aligning them against a common enemy and promoting solidarity. Post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak (Adamson, 1986) famously talked of deploying '*strategic essentialism*' as a tool for liberation. Yet it is seen as having limited use. In his seminal paper '*New Ethnicities*', Stuart Hall (1988) argued that essentialist constructions of blackness, and by extension other racialised identities, were ultimately deleterious for anti-racist struggles.

Racial Science in the Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth-century scientists built on the groundwork laid by the Enlightenment thinkers. Science began to eclipse religion as the legitimate authority for explaining phenomena in both the natural and social worlds. As the century progressed, the ideas that had been put forward linking appearance, climate and culture became the assumptions upon which new work was carried out, rather than themselves being the subject of scholarly debate. By mid-century, the idea that the causal link existed and explained behaviour was no longer debatable; it was instead the starting point for further debates about politics and inequality. If people's abilities were genetically determined and unequal, what was the point of trying to overcome these inequalities? They were natural, normal and must be the basis for the social world (see Box 1.3).

Box 1.3 Racialised Natural Sciences

Phrenology: the study of the structure of the skull (bumps and indentations) to determine a person's character and mental capacity. Promulgated by Franz-Joseph Gall (1758–1828), it correctly suggests that different parts of the brain are responsible for different mental functions. However, phrenology is based on the idea that these can be identified from the external surface, and people's behaviour thus predicted.

Craniology: the measurement of cranial features in order to classify people according to race, criminal temperament, intelligence, etc. The underlying assumption of craniology is that skull size and shape determine brain size, which determines such things as intelligence and the capacity for moral behaviour.

Anthropometry: the study of human body measurement for use in anthropological classification and comparison. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropometry was a pseudo-science used mainly to classify potential criminals by facial characteristics. For example, Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo Delinquente* (1876) claimed that murderers have prominent jaws, and pickpockets have long hands and scanty beards. From its earliest uses in identifying criminal types, anthropometry was later used specifically to research physical differences between the races (see Chapter 5).

Moreover, nineteenth-century science and pseudo-science further developed the central thesis of the Enlightenment, namely that the body is the key to culture. Sciences that flowered in the nineteenth century, such as craniology, phrenology and later anthropometry, involved the measurement of various body parts and the construction of classificatory typologies from these findings. The new 'social' sciences such as sociology, ethnology and anthropology which emerged in the second half of the century were equally influenced by the obsession with physical appearance and the meanings attributed to them by their colleagues in the physical sciences, within the contexts of colonial expansion and plantation slavery.

The texts produced by these natural science disciplines demonstrate that the notion of dispassionate and disinterested scientific endeavour held no sway over those interested in 'race': the logic underlying experiments is erroneous and the interpretations of data are so weighed down under the assumption of explicit existing hierarchies based on racial difference that the findings are not compelling. American craniologist Samuel Morton (1839), for example, filled the skulls of various 'racial' types with lead pellets to measure their capacity. He emerged with a league table showing that English skulls had the largest capacity, followed by Native Americans, and then Black Americans. His inference was that the English mind was larger, more powerful and superior.

Moreover, in addition to the inability of scientists to agree upon how many 'races' there actually were, and where the dividing lines between them lay (see Box 1.4), the cross-fertilisation of ideas and conclusions meant that the enterprise of racialising the population was carried out on the basis of a relatively small, scarcely challenged and scientifically dubious corpus. Yet the ideas contained in this corpus were referred to by contemporary scientists on both sides of the Atlantic, to the point where, by the middle of the nineteenth century, according to American historian Reginald Horsman, 'the inherent inequality of races was simply accepted as a scientific fact in America' (1981: 135). This is a crucial point: where the existence of unequal races passes from the area of discussion, to the area of accepted facts upon which further discussion is premised. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls the latter *doxa*. Once an idea has become *doxa*, it is all the more difficult to challenge.

It was in mid-century that the crude racial hierarchies became more nuanced. Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850) and de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55) detailed the divisions within the 'white race', dividing it into categories including Aryan, Slavic and Celtic, for example. Although de Gobineau's appraisal of the various groups was not wholly negative, the elaborate nature of his treatise made it a work of reference for 'Social Darwinists' later in the century and eugenicists in the next. Indeed, he prefigured the latter group's phobia about mixing. All great civilisations, he argued, were maintained by pure 'races', and when these mixed with 'degenerate races', the result was inevitable decline and fall.

Box 1.4 How Many 'Races' Are There?

Even among those people engaged in the process of producing knowledge about 'races' through the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, there is no consensus about where to place the lines dividing one 'race' from another, where to place the lines dividing the sub-races within each group, how many there are, and, indeed, what they are called. Nicholas Wade (2014) argues that modern science says there are five: Asians, Caucasians, sub-Saharan Africans, Native Americans and the original inhabitants of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Yet DeSalle and Tattersall's (2014) forensic critique of the science underpinning *A Troublesome Inheritance* ends with the statement: 'The central tendencies may be there, but the boundaries aren't. Which means that "race" is a totally inadequate way of characterizing, or even of helping us to understand, the glorious variety that is humankind' (DeSalle and Tattersall, 2014: 9).

For Linnaeus (1707–78) and Samuel Morton (1799–1851), there are four races: European, Asian, American, African.

For Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), there are five races: 'Caucasian' or 'white race'; the 'Mongolian' or 'yellow race'; the 'Malayan' or 'brown race'; the 'Negro', 'Ethiopian' or 'black race'; and the 'American' or 'red race'.

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(Continued)

For Charles Pickering (1805–78) in *The Races of Men* (1854), there are 11 races: two white, three brown, four blackish-brown and two black.

For Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (1816–82), there are three races: white, yellow and black.

Just for comparison, the US Census 2000 and 2010 have provided the opportunity for the US population to self-identify as members of at least 15 ‘races’: white, black, American Indian, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander or ‘some Other race’.

Like most official attempts to capture people’s racial and/or ethnic identity, this schema is open to criticisms about consistency, among others. But one thing is clear. There is no consensus about how many ‘races’ there are, and never has been. This should not surprise us. ‘Race’ is a property of the social world and not of the natural world.

In other sections of this book we will examine some of the key racial ideas and practices in circulation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (eugenics in Chapter 7), as well as having a special focus on the ‘new’ racisms (Chapter 9) of the post oil-crisis West.

After the Second World War, most social scientists responded by making an official declaration via the United Nations (1950) according to which ‘race’ had no biological validity. Although the ‘social’ nature of ‘race’ rather than its biological substance has been emphasised in the decades since then, popular understandings, and it must be said, some strains of thought within the natural sciences, still identify bodies with racial messages (see Chapter 7). This is the context in which the production and reception of this text take place. I encourage the reader to not close off the world of academia or research from the rest of society and imagine that different rules apply to it. The struggle to establish dominant meanings and representations in the social world includes all the academic production of work based on the idea that ‘race’ is social, and all the work based on the idea that it is more than social. Claims that scientists and politicians are courageously telling it like it really is (Murray, 2014) instead of being held back by liberal intelligentsia and political elites are part of this ongoing struggle about the meaning of ‘race’ and its consequences for the societies in which we live.

My conclusion is that ‘race’ is social but has real impacts on the material world. Moreover, according to the historical record, ‘race’ has referred not to bodies or culture alone but – this is the key thing to take forward – to the process of linking them irrevocably to each other in the context of categorisation and hierarchical classification; as part of the expansion of European empires.

None of this is to say that racialisation is an exclusively European colonial technology, but that its grammar and vocabulary are developed to their most definitive – and globalised – form in the European and North American colonial settings. There might be a longstanding bestowal of privilege on lighter skin and

the bloodlines that go with it in both Indian and Chinese cultures for example, but their versions of hierarchy were not exported and imposed on other areas of the world as a project aimed at establishing and maintaining control. The story of 'race' does not unfurl in a vacuum; power relations make it happen. This is evident in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideologies referred to above, with European intellectuals explaining the classification and categorisation of the human race. Moreover, in all the sources identified here, 'race' is constructed as a *collective hierarchy*, rather than individual phenomenon.

Box 1.5 Who's Who? The Rachel Dolezal Case

It has been stressed so far that for mainstream social science, if not in popular discourse, 'race' is a social not a biological reality. But surely we know who belongs to which racialised group when we see them? In June 2015, a controversy erupted around Rachel Dolezal, a local organiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Spokane, Washington State, when it was revealed that she was not actually African American, as she had claimed to be for the previous decade, but white, with European American forebears as far as could be traced. Dolezal used foundation and skilled hairstyling to produce a 'look' that succeeded in maintaining the pretence that she was – at least in part – African American.

This act of 'passing' is a puzzling one. The NAACP has always had a mixed membership, so there was no need to be black to participate in its activities. The revelation of Dolezal's whiteness led to her being fired from her temporary teaching position at a local university, her resignation from the NAACP, and also split observers. Some of her former colleagues supported her, saying what she had accomplished was more important than who she was, while others criticised her for 'performing blackness', or doing 'blackface' (Box 11.3): a derogatory and mocking white performance of blackness that originated in the nineteenth century. Does Dolezal embody an extreme form of white guilt, acting black through over-identification? On one level, her story is commonplace: people have 'passed' as members of other racialised groups for centuries. Yet the objective of passing – as white – was to access resources from which people would otherwise have been excluded. Passing as a racialised minority, with no resource benefits, is not an equivalent practice, any more than tanning is the equivalent of skin lightening (see Chapter 7).

'Passing', in terms of 'race', gender and class, can be transgressive. A major criticism of Dolezal's behaviour is that instead of challenging white privilege, by declaring herself white but acting against the benefits accruing from that position, she opted to pretend to be black, which in no way challenged such a hierarchy.

Dolezal's case, like all passing, demonstrates the social and cultural aspects of 'race', and the impossibility of drawing hard and fast lines around physical appearance and using them to define 'race'. It also makes us think about what is at stake in a racialised identity: What does it authorise and prevent? What assumptions do other people make when you present yourself in a particular identity? What are the questions of power underpinning the relationship between the various identities?

Defining Racism

What *Isn't* Racism?

The systems of Nazi Germany, South Africa under Apartheid (1948–94), and the segregated Southern states of the USA ('Jim Crow') placed racial discrimination very obviously at the heart of the way that government and everyday life were carried out. We will return to these historical examples throughout this book, but it is important also to recognise that they are not paradigms (examples that serve as models) but rather extreme points on a continuum. A common misperception of racism is that it is only the severe examples that constitute the whole, in other words only violence, verbal abuse and deliberate segregation are actually racist; nothing else counts.

In the course of this book, an argument will be presented that the phenomenon is far broader and more complex than such a view would suggest. Indeed, the term has been bandied around in so much public discourse, particularly since the 1960s, that it appears to have lost some of its explanatory power. It gets divorced from power relations, so that terms such as 'reverse racism' (Box 9.4) gain currency. Indeed, one of the noticeable elements of the landscape of contemporary racism is the increasingly frequent assertion that programmes ranging from affirmative action to multiculturalism in the public arena end up placing white people at a *systematic* disadvantage in the realms of education and employment especially. Moreover, using the 'colour-blind' frame that we will explore in Chapter 9, many argue that racism is caused by continually addressing 'race' per se; there is really not a problem until activists and academics make a fuss about it. One such definition is that of Mike Adams (a University of North Carolina–Wilmington criminologist, writing as a columnist):

Racism – is a pathological tendency to interject race into situations where it is not relevant, merely for personal gain. (Adams, 2006)

In case there is any confusion, this is categorically *not* the argument contained in this book! Indeed the whole project of writing it would be seen from Adams' perspective as an acting out of the 'pathological tendency'. That's a lot of wasted effort on my part, according to him. However, it is important to understand as a scholar of racism, that in many societies we are far from a consensus that racism even exists; and much further from agreeing that if it does, then it has longstanding, harmful effects. The core idea that I advance in this book – that racism is a set of social relationships rather than the outcomes of individual deviance and interpersonal interactions – is still a minority one. Indeed, popular understandings of racism can identify it as both 'natural' (people sticking together and preferring their own kind) and distributed equally through society, so that any member of a given group can be racist about a member of another group: what Miri Song (2014) has labelled a 'culture of racial equivalence' (Box 9.5).

However, through the interplay of claim and counter-claim about who is racist, the term comes to occupy a particular role. It is asked to serve as a normative description of something it is not – a level playing field (Doane, 2006). While it is perfectly possible that individuals have discriminatory opinions, the point of racism is that it constitutes much more than just personal opinions. What sociology has contributed to understandings of racism is that there are different levels of the phenomenon, some of which are to do with historical legacies and social formations that are not within an individual's capacity to alter. Like all forms of discrimination, racism is primarily an unequal *collective* power relationship.

In addition, there are the terms 'institutional racism', 'individual racism', 'cultural racism', 'indirect racism', and a host of other adjectives that qualify the noun. Faced with these competing understandings of racism, how can we take a step back and focus on the field as developed in the social sciences? Different expressions are used for phenomena, for groups and for outcomes in different periods. Indeed, terms like 'racialism' and 'race prejudice' were used in previous eras to describe more or less what the field of study is here.

We need a working definition to help us navigate this very broad terrain. My suggestion involves a two-part strategy. The first comprises looking at some existing definitions that undergraduates might find particularly helpful, and the second is an attempt to set out some criteria by which we can assess competing claims, and therefore, implicitly, develop our working definition.

Michael Banton (1997: 28) asks whether it 'is possible to discuss the sociology of race relations without using the term racism'. Banton advocates prudence in the use of the word 'racist'. It should be used carefully, he contends, and be attached to actions rather than to people, as labelling *actions* 'racist' leaves the possibility that *people* may be capable of non-racist or anti-racist behaviour as well. Whereas calling someone – rather than something that a person did – racist, can be a political tactic, which makes no attempt to illuminate the causes of racism. Moreover, according to George Frederickson (1988: 189), the popular idea that racism comprised a set of beliefs of biological superiority has gradually been replaced since the Second World War by 'patterns of action which serve to create or preserve unequal relationships between racial groups'. This new understanding of the term is concomitant with the development of a so-called 'new racism'. In a later chapter, we will explore this development, and argue that 'replace' might be the wrong word. However, putting the word 'racism' into the plural, to acknowledge the variety of forms it takes, might be worth considering.

The four definitions we shall use to begin the debate are the following.

I

[T]he attribution of social significance (meaning) to particular patterns of phenotypical and/or genetic difference which, along with the

characteristic of additional deterministic ascription or real or supposed other characteristics to a group constituted by descent, is the defining feature of racism. (Banton, 1996: 310)

1. If we are to get to grips with racism as a sociological phenomenon, we have to address its existence in the social rather than solely the biological sphere. Banton stresses the process of attribution of social meaning to the body.
2. Racism tries to explain the social world by reference to the natural world. Nature, as we know, is in permanent flux, yet in racist social narratives, bodies and cultures are fixed and unchanging; everyone with certain physical characteristics naturally has a tendency toward certain patterns of behaviour.
3. As a model of the natural world, 'race' functions as a set of transmitted genes; some for appearance and some for behaviour. The range of these is fixed. We can never break free of our genes, would run the argument, because we are programmed to behave in particular ways. Determinism is the name given to the expression of this causal relationship.

II

Racism is a belief system or doctrine which postulates a hierarchy among various human races or ethnic groups. It may be based on an assumption of inherent biological differences between different ethnic groups that purport to determine cultural or individual behaviour. Racism may be described as a strong form of ethnocentrism, including traits such as xenophobia (fear and hate of foreigners), views against interracial relationships (anti-miscegenation), ethnic nationalism, and ethnic stereotypes. (Wikipedia, until April 2007)

As every undergraduate knows, Wikipedia provides information, definitions and links to further resources. While I generally try to guide students away from using it uncritically, and especially cutting and pasting its contents into essays, or even as a source of definitions in sociology (there are plenty of better ones), the definition posted until April 2007 is useful for our purposes here, if not very comprehensive.

1. It is crucial to our sociological understanding of racism that we realise it involves the expression of a power relationship. In the social reality conjured by 'race', no two 'races' are ever on an equal footing. The history of the production of 'race' as a topic and the enactment of racism as a relationship perpetually throw up hierarchies. These alter from one period to another and from one historical context to another. There is never usually a consensus about the exact intermediate positionings, but it is hard to find one in which white is not placed higher than the other racialised identities.

2. Another merit of this definition is that it suggests practical examples. It opens us up to the possibility that racism is not uniform but might contain various strands of ideas. It is therefore to be understood as a complex of ideas rather than a single monolithic one. The collapsing of ethnicity into racism is also a useful exercise ... in what not to do! Don't confuse the two! (Fenton, 2007) (see Chapter 3).

III

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen and detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (*The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* [MacPherson Report], 1999: para. 6.34)

The MacPherson Report (1999) was an inquiry into the (London) Metropolitan Police's handling of the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's murder in South London in 1993. The whole of section 6 of the report is worth reading because it sets out a genealogy of the term 'institutional racism' as developed in the context of what is referred to as British 'race relations'. We shall see in Chapter 6 that this is not the only context in which the term can be understood, but it is nevertheless very significant, because the definition provided by Lord MacPherson formed the basis of a controversial shift in defining racist crime in the UK (especially England and Wales) in the early twenty-first century. It was also fundamental to an important amendment to the law in Britain on racial discrimination (through the 2002 Race Relations (Amendment) Act).

1. MacPherson identifies that racism is not purely about the psychological processes of individuals dealing with each other (as most early work in the field suggested), but can be located at a broader, collective level, that is, as outcomes of an organisation's activities, rather than of one agent's activities.
2. The distinction drawn between 'processes, attitudes, and behaviour' is also helpful. It separates what people think (attitudes), from what they actually do (behaviour), and explicitly asserts that discrimination can result from long-term patterns (processes). All of these aspects can be addressed by different anti-discriminatory measures.
3. The idea that discrimination can be unintended, or 'unwitting', in Lord Scarman's terms, has proven controversial. Lord Scarman chaired an inquiry on the riots that took place in South London in 1981 (Scarman, 1986). His report suggested that actions and processes can be racist in outcome even if they are not intended to be. Because institutional racism has been developed

into a legal concept which has to be proven beyond reasonable doubt in a court of law, it must also have a clear definition. Defining something by its outcome rather than by its intention, as Scarman did, and MacPherson does here, has enabled institutional racism to become a workable legal concept. The other aspect of intentionality returns us to the idea that discrimination can occur at a level beyond the individual, and as part of a set of procedures that are unfairly loaded against some groups, while favouring others. In this way, by following the set procedures of an organisation, an agent can be performing an act that has racist outcomes, even if that agent has no intention of doing so (see more on this topic in Chapter 6).

4. Racism is popularly imagined as something someone *does to* somebody else. However, in this definition, it is also a failure to do something positive, rather than exclusively constituting positive and detrimental acts. As a result of the police force not carrying out its functions fully and rigorously, Lawrence's family and friends were dealt with in discriminatory fashion. This type of reasoning will not be news to the many people who have waited in vain to be protected by police forces, but it is a welcome addition to the understanding of racism we are trying to explore here.
5. An overview of this definition also suggests that the phenomenon of racism is multifaceted and cumulative: a number of aspects are identified along with a timeline that extends into the past. In a nutshell, this is well worth remembering, as the rest of the book serves to underscore these dual characteristics.

IV

Racism takes two closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism ... When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of society. But when in that same city – Birmingham, Alabama – 500 black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, clothing, shelter and proper medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed or maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism. (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967: 6)

Carmichael and Hamilton's book emerged out of the struggles for civil rights in the 1960s. Their stance was more radical than that of the mainstream civil rights movement. Indeed, the National American Association of Colored People and the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (the principal

organising bodies of national civil rights campaigning) both condemned Carmichael's philosophy as 'black racism'. Indeed, he ended up as a leading Black Panther and changed his name to Kwame Turé. Academic Charles Hamilton was a radical political scientist who held a professorship at Columbia University from the 1970s until he retired in the late 1990s. Together, they produced a book establishing a manifesto of black solidarity at a crucial juncture in US history.

1. Their definition is compelling, detailed and empirical. It critically links economics and racism, or class and 'race', in a vision of mutually compounding, not exclusive, sources of discrimination. In it, we find the bones of what is later referred to as 'structural' or 'systemic' racism, later explored by academics (Massey and Denton, 1994; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006; Lipsitz, 1998; Feagin, 2006) (Chapter 6), involving society-level processes and contrasting them with what is popularly thought to exclusively comprise racism, that is, verbal abuse and violent attacks. It is a common discursive strategy in early twenty-first century Western societies to distance oneself from 'genuine' racism, as perpetrated by fringe extremist movements, and find ways of criticising the idea that anything other than this is really racism at all.
2. Carmichael and Hamilton conjure up a conception of unequal and antagonistic social relationships involving two communities, the black and the white. However, implicit in their development of this concept is the idea that poverty also plays a role. Poverty is disproportionately concentrated in the African American population, although the largest proportion of poor people in the USA is white. By linking 'race' and class, they imply that racism is inextricable from class – in that people have multiple identities and locations.

Being poor in the USA would certainly lead to some of the housing and health-related problems they identify being experienced, but being poor and black would make them much more likely.

After examining these four attempts to define racism, we are a lot closer to something substantial. The point is really to demonstrate the complexity of racism. It cannot easily be reduced to a formula of the type 'racism is ...'.

So far, we have the following elements of what racism is:

- Distinctions have been made between the individual and the institution as sources, and between practices, attitudes and processes.
- It is a phenomenon whose roots lie in the social meanings attributed to ostensible biological difference, and has an observable history.
- It is a set of ideas organised hierarchically, and at its most abstract level, an ongoing power relationship.

The relative weights of these components can be argued about. However, we are moving to the kind of conclusion that definitions of racism are broad-ranging and numerous. Just a brief survey has highlighted this.

In his critique of the concept of racism, Robert Miles (1987) suggests that racism is primarily an 'ideology', an assertion which he and Malcolm Brown embed in their revamped second edition of *Racism* (2003: 17). It is arguable whether their definition is indeed a definition per se, but more of a five-part approach to a subject:

1. Racism is an ideology.
2. 'Race' and 'racism' as everyday concepts can be critiqued using a social science analysis of racism.
3. Racism should be flexibly defined so as to note the shifting emphases in meanings attached to it, and the constant importance in the political economy of migration.
4. The interdependence of racism and nationalism through the development of the capitalist system should be foregrounded.
5. Political and moral aspects must also be acknowledged alongside social scientific ones.

An 'ideology', in Miles' sense, is drawn from Marx, and can be understood as any discourse that distorts the truth about human beings and the social relationships between them. The search to avoid 'conceptual inflation' and 'conceptual deflation' that occupies two chapters in his book reminds us that too narrowly defining racism, or indeed overloading it so that *everything* is racism, leads to the rendering of the term as meaningless.

Miles' approach has been critiqued as lacking sophistication, being tied too closely to Marxism, and defining racism in too doctrinaire a fashion, as 'ideology'. These are arguments that he rebuts in the 2003 edition. For a student of the sociology of racism however, the work is of central importance as a critical contribution to the debate. There is rigorous attention to the specifics of the racial element that distinguishes racism from other ideologies (not necessarily a feature of much of the work in this field). Moreover, this approach is useful both in its insistence on a historical method, and in its emphasis on the intersections between bodies of ideas as being essential to understanding the way racism works *as an ideology*. Racism emerges in practice as inextricable from, but not reducible to, class relations, gender relations and nationalism. The focus is indeed on the material contexts in which racism is enacted, and less on the cultural expressions that racist ideas may take. The overlapping of -isms may be dizzying for those seeking conceptual clarity, but it rewards the reader interested in the dynamics of inequalities.

So if we want to use a definition, we should bear in mind the contributions above, and think, like Miles, of an approach that involves a minimal covering

of the bases, so that we require certain elements to be present, no matter what other ones are included. The International Council on Human Rights Protection, for example, uses this strategy in an information pamphlet:

Racism thus has three elements: (i) it is a vision of society that is composed of inherently different groups; (ii) it includes an explicit or implicit belief that these different groups are unequal by nature – often enough based on a Darwinian interpretation of history; and (iii) it shapes and manipulates these ideas into a programme of political action. Combined, these three components give racism its force. (International Council on Human Rights Protection, 2000: 4–5)

I think racism is a phenomenon manifesting itself in such a diverse spectrum of ways across time and place, that to properly anchor it theoretically, we need something of this type, which stresses foundations. Moreover, I would go as far as to recommend using the plural, racisms, to denote the variations on the main themes.¹ Indeed, my approach is akin to Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of 'family resemblance'. Elements are connected by overlapping features instead of one common feature, like the physical characteristics of the individuals comprising a family: no single characteristic is common to all members. Therefore in the case of racism(s), my suggestion is that whatever else your definition of racism includes, it must contain the following three elements:

1. **A historical power relationship** in which, over time, groups are *racialised* (that is, treated as if specific characteristics were natural and innate to each member of the group).
2. **A set of ideas (*ideology*)** in which the human race is divisible into distinct 'races', each with specific natural characteristics.
3. **Forms of discrimination** flowing from this (*practices*) ranging from denial of access to resources through to mass murder.

One element of racism is a set of ideas; the other is a set of practices, and we shall explore these in the following chapters. The gap between the social and the biological is to be emphasised. Racist ideas can be at least partly comprehended by returning to this basic adage: racism tries to explain differences in the *social* world by reference to *biological*, that is, *natural* distinctions (see Box 1.2).

Social scientists would argue that differences in the social world between groups are the result of historical, cultural and economic factors, that is, that the vast majority of the poor in any society are prevented collectively from advancing through the socio-economic hierarchy by factors largely outside the control of individuals. A racist argument would state that the poor are culturally inferior and genetically ill-equipped (through intelligence) for competition in the system we live in. Increasingly, as we will argue in later chapters, expressions of racialised

difference have used 'culture' rather than 'nature' as their main vector. In discussions of immigration and multiculturalism, for example, people's collective culture is perceived as determining their behaviour, thus rendering them compatible or incompatible with the culture of the majority.

Conclusions

- There has been no satisfactory definition of 'race' yet offered. This is because it is a social rather than natural phenomenon. However, even though it has no basis in biology, the division of the human race into 'races' has very serious and measurable impacts on people.
- Racism is a multifaceted social phenomenon, with different levels and overlapping forms. It involves attitudes, actions, processes and unequal power relations. It is based on the interpretations of the idea of 'race', hierarchical social relations and the forms of discrimination that flow from this.
- Racism is not confined to extreme cases, but is present in a whole continuum of social relations.
- Specific societies see and do 'race' differently, and are organised in different ways. Therefore, discussions of racism *in the abstract*, without referring to particular conditions in particular places at particular times, are quite limiting. In this book, we will use the term racisms to acknowledge this diversity.

Having established a working definition of racisms and that there can be no single definitive one for 'race', we shall now turn to the dominant concept for understanding how 'race' becomes salient in the contemporary sociology of racism: racialisation.

Points for Reflection

Is 'race' a useful sociological concept?

Is 'race' about 'bodies', 'culture' or both?

'Racism' or 'racisms'? Which is the more appropriate and why?

Can you think of any ways in which 'race' and racism have impacted on your life?

Further Reading

Goldberg, D.T. (2009) *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Comprehensive and international comparative work emphasising the different historical contexts and development of racialisation across the globe, and its relationship with neoliberal forms of governance in the contemporary period.

Smith, L.T. (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

An extended indigenous critique of what counts as knowledge and why in the Western academic tradition and makes power relations between coloniser and colonised very clear.

Essed, P. (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. London: Sage.

Interviews with women of colour in higher education in the USA and the Netherlands are examined through Essed's concept of 'everyday racism'; a framework that helps understand racism as a set of common and frequent experiences.

Note

1. This is not a new idea. The term 'racisms' appears in early work such as: Husbands (1987), Satzewitch (1987), Anthias (1990) and Appiah (1990).