



Ethnicity, Race and Nation

Regarding race, cultural studies has tended to explore:

- ▶ the shifting character of cultural understandings of race and ethnicity in terms of representation
- ▶ the cultural politics of race as a 'politics of representation'
- ▶ the changing forms of cultural identity associated with ethnicity
- ▶ the intersections between class, race and gender
- ▶ the cultural legacy to colonialism

The concept of race bears the traces of its origins in the biological discourses of social Darwinism that stress 'lines of descent' and 'types of people'. Here the concept of race refers to alleged biological and physical characteristics, the most obvious of which is skin pigmentation. These attributes, frequently linked to 'intelligence' and 'capabilities', are used to rank 'racialized' groups in a hierarchy of social and material superiority and subordination. These racial classifications, constituted by and constitutive of power, are at the root of racism. – Barker, p. 247

Racialization

The idea of 'racialization' or 'race formation' is founded on the argument that race is a social construction and not a universal or essential category of biology.

Races, it is argued (Hall, 1990, 1996d, 1997c), do not exist outside of representation. Rather, they are formed in and by symbolization in a process of social and political power struggle. Thus, observable characteristics are transformed into signifiers of race. This includes spurious appeal to essential biological and cultural difference. – Barker, p. 247

In Britain, America and Australia the historical formation of 'race' is one of power and subordination. That is, people of color have occupied structurally subordinate positions in relation to every dimension of 'life-chances'. British Afro-Caribbeans, African-Americans and Australian Aboriginal peoples have been disadvantaged in:

- ▶ the labor market
- ▶ the housing market
- ▶ the education system
- ▶ the media and other forms of cultural representation

In this context, race formation (or racialization) has been inherently racist for it involves forms of social, economic and political subordination that are lived through the categories and discourses of race. The concept of racialization refers to 'those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities' (Miles, 1989: 75) – Barker, p. 248

Different Racisms

As a discursive construct, the meanings of 'race' change and are struggled over. Thus, different groups are differentially racialized and subject to different forms of racism. As Goldberg argues, 'the presumption of a single monolithic racism is being displaced by a mapping of multifarious historical formulations of racisms' (Goldberg in *Black Solomos*, 2000: 20). – Barker, p. 248

The meanings of race differ over time and across space. For example, it has been argued (Barker, 1982) that the 'new racism' in Britain relies not on biological discourses of superiority, as in South African apartheid, but on cultural differences that exclude black people from being fully a part of the nation. In addition, the meanings of race differ between, say, America and Britain. In Britain, the relatively homogenous white character of the in situ population was disturbed in the 1950s by the arrival of migrants from the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent. This made questions of national identity a crucial category through which racialization operated. However, West (1992) has argued that the history of the modern United States begins with the dispossession and genocide of native American peoples and continues through the long history of slavery. Thus, questions of race are posed at the very inception of the US in ways that are more longstanding, but less concerned with nationality, than in Britain. – Barker, p. 248

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a cultural concept centered on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. The formation of 'ethnic groups' relies on shared cultural signifiers that have developed under specific historical, social and political contexts. They encourage a sense of belonging based, at least in part, on a common mythological ancestry. However, anti-essentialism arguments suggest that ethnic groups are not based on primordial ties or universal cultural characteristics possessed by a specific group. Rather, they are formed through discursive practices. – Barker, p. 249

Ethnicity is a relational concept that is concerned with categories of self-identification and social ascription. Thus, what we think of as our identity is dependent on what we think we are not. Serbians are not Croatians, Bosnians or Albanians. Consequently, ethnicity is best understood as a process of boundary formation that has been constructed and maintained under specific socio-historical conditions (Barth, 1969). To suggest that ethnicity is not about pre-given cultural difference does not mean that such distinctiveness cannot be socially constructed around signifiers that do connote universality, territory and purity. Thus, metaphors of blood, kinship and homeland are frequently implicated in the formation and maintenance of ethnic boundaries. – Barker, p. 249

Whiteness & Ethnicity

However, the concept of ethnicity does have some problems of usage and it remains a contested term. For instance, white Anglo-Saxons frequently use the concept of ethnicity to refer to other people, usually with different skin pigmentation. Consequently, Asians, Africans, Hispanics and African-Americans are held to be ethnic groups but the English or white Anglo-Saxon Americans and Australians are not. Here whiteness is seen as a taken-for-granted universal. By contrast, everyone else is understood to have been constituted by their ethnicity. However, it is important to maintain that white English, American or Australian people do constitute ethnic groups. As Dyer (1997) has argued, studying whiteness 'is about making whiteness strange rather than treating it as a taken for granted touchstone of human ordinariness'. Commonly, whiteness is equated with normality and thus becomes invisible so that we do not think it requires attention. Nevertheless, as Dyer notes, the recognition that whiteness is a historical invention does not mean that it can simply be wished away. – Barker, p. 250

Ethnicity and Power

Ethnicity is constituted through power relations between groups. It signals relations of marginality, of the center and the periphery. This occurs in the context of changing historical forms and circumstances. Here, the center and the margin are to be grasped through the politics of representation. As Brah argues: "It is necessary for it to become axiomatic that what is represented as the 'margin' is not marginal at all but is a constitutive effect of the representation itself. The 'center' is no more a center than is the 'margin' (Brah, 1990: 226). – Barker, pp, 250-251

National Identities

The Nation State

The modern nation state is a relatively recent invention. Indeed, most of the human species have never participated in any kind of state or identified with one. The nation state, nationalism and national identity are not 'naturally' occurring phenomena but contingent historical-cultural formations. In particular, they are socially and culturally constructed as collective forms of organization and identification. – Barker, p. 252

- ▶ The *nation-state* is a political concept that refers to an administrative apparatus deemed to have sovereignty over a specific space or territory within the nation-state system.
- ▶ *National identity* is a form of imaginative identification with the symbols and discourses of the nation-state.

Nations are not simply political formations but systems of cultural representation by which national identity is continually reproduced through discursive action. The nation-state as a political apparatus and a symbolic form also has a temporal dimension since political structures endure and change. The symbolic and discursive dimensions of national identity narrate and create the idea of origins, continuity and tradition. – Barker, p. 252

Narratives of Unity

Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as a discursive device which represents difference as unity or identity. They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified' only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power. (Hall, 1992b: 297) – Barker, p. 253

National unity is constructed through the narrative of the nation by which stories, images, symbols and rituals represent 'shared' meanings of nationhood (Bhabha, 1990)

National identity is a form of identification with representations of shared experiences and history. These are told through stories, literature, popular culture and the media. – Barker, p. 253

Imagined Community

National identities are intrinsically connected to, and constituted by, forms of communication. For Anderson (1983), the 'nation' is an 'imagined community' and national identity a construction assembled through symbols and rituals in relation to territorial and administrative categories. – Barker, p. 253

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each live the images of their communion...The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations...It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm...Finally, it is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson, 1983: 15-16) – Barker, pp. 253-254

According to Anderson, the mechanized production and commodification of books and newspapers, the rise of 'print capitalism', allowed vernacular languages to be standardized and disseminated. This provided the conditions for the creation of a nation consciousness. Thus, 'Print language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se' (ibid: 122). For the first time it was possible for the mass of people within a particular state to understand each other through a common print language. The processes of print capitalism thus 'fixed' a vernacular language as *the* 'national' language. In doing so a new imagined national community was made possible. – Barker, p. 254

Criticisms of Anderson

Anderson tends to overstate the unity of the nation and the strength of nationalist feeling. In doing so, he covers over differences of class, gender, ethnicity and so forth. Indeed, the proliferation and diversification of contexts and sites of interaction, constituted in and through discourse, prevent easy identification of particular subjects with a given fixed identity. Consequently, in the context of the accelerated globalization of late modernity, we have begun to talk about hybrid cultural identities rather than a homogenous national or ethnic cultural identity. Further, the instability of meaning in language, *différance*, leads us to think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than of fixed stable entities (Bhabha, 1994) – Barker, p. 254

Diaspora and Hybrid Identities

According to Pieterse (1995), it is necessary to differentiate between 'culture' as bounded, that is, tied to place and inward-looking, from 'culture' as an outward-looking, 'translocal learning process'. He argues that introverted cultures are receding into the background as diverse translocal cultures come to the fore. Bounded societies and states, though very much still with us, are cut across by the circulation of global cultural discourses. Thus, Clifford (1992), amongst others, has argued that culture and cultural identities can no longer be adequately understood in terms of place. Rather, they are better conceptualized in terms of travel. This includes:

- peoples and cultures that travel
- places/cultures as sites of criss-crossing travellers

-- Barker, p. 255

Diaspora

A diaspora can be understood as a dispersed network of ethnically and culturally related peoples.

This notion focuses our attention on travel, journeys, dispersion, homes and borders in the context of questions about who travels, 'where, when, how and under what circumstances' (Brah, 1996: 182). Thus, 'diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing "imagined" and "encountered" communities' (ibid: 196). Diaspora is a relational concept referring to 'configurations of power that differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another' (ibid: 183). – Barker, p. 255

The Black Atlantic

As an example of an enacted diaspora, Gilroy (1993) introduces the concept of the Black Atlantic. Black identities cannot be understood, he argues, in terms of being American or British or West Indian. Nor can they be grasped in terms of ethnic absolutism (that there is a global essential black identity); rather, they should be understood in terms of the black diaspora of the Atlantic. Here, cultural exchange within the black diaspora produces hybrid identities. This involves cultural forms of similarity and difference within and between the various locales of the diaspora. As Gilroy argues, black self-identities and cultural expressions utilize a plurality of histories. – Barker, p. 256



KEY THINKER: Paul Gilroy

Born in London to Guyanese and English parents, Gilroy earned his Ph.D. at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies while studying under Stuart Hall. He is currently the Anthony Giddens Professor in Social Theory at the London School of Economics. Gilroy's theories of race, racism and culture were influential in shaping the cultural and political movement of black British people during the 1990s. He has enabled black British people to declare their commitment and belonging to the United Kingdom. His notion of the "black Atlantic" marks a transformative turning point in the study of diasporas. Gilroy makes the peoples who suffered from the Atlantic slave trade the emblem of his new concept of diasporic peoples. This new concept breaks with the traditional diasporic model based on the idea that diasporic people are separated by a communal source or origin, offering a second model that privileges hybridity. He argues that black self-identities and cultural expressions utilize a plurality of histories and that we should think of identities as being in motion rather than existing as absolutes of nature or culture.

Key Writings:

Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (1987)

The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993)

Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture (1993)

Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line (2000)

Types of Hybridity

- ▶ *Structural hybridization* refers to a variety of social and institutional sites of hybridity, for example border zones or cities like Miami or Singapore. It increases the range of organizational options open to people.
- ▶ *Cultural hybridization* distinguishes cultural responses, which range from assimilation, through forms of separation, to hybrids that destabilize and blur cultural boundaries. This involves the opening up of 'imagined communities'.

cultural code switching

the practice of selecting or altering linguistic and/or other cultural elements so as to contextualize talk and behavior in various interactions

Intersections and Boundary Crossings

According to Hall, the end of essentialism 'entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity' (Hall, 1996d: 444). We may consider this process in three fundamental ways:

1. the multiple identities of the postmodern subject, that is, the weaving of the patterns of identity from discourses of class, race, gender, etc.
2. the construction of one discourse in terms of metaphors drawn from another, that is , the construction of nation through gendered metaphors or of race in terms of class – for example, the idea of 'race' being connected to the idea of the ascent of 'Man'; further, ethnic groups may be derided as effeminate, nations be gendered as female, and absolute ethnic differences premised on the idea of blood lines and thus women's bodies
3. the capability of persons to move across discursive and spatial sites of activity which address them in different ways.

Weaving Patterns of Identity

We can thus conceive of persons as operating across and within multiple subject positions. Nevertheless, some critics have worried that the critique of essentialism robs us of the tools to combat racism. This is said to be so because the very category of race seems to disappear. However, to abandon an essentialist universal condition called 'race' does not mean that the social and historical construction of race, the racialization of specific groups of human beings, need also be lost. On the contrary, the critique of essentialist arguments exposes the radical contingency of identity categories. This helps to combat the reduction of people to race by encouraging us to see all people as multifaceted. – Barker, p. 263

Race, Ethnicity and Representation

Representations raises questions of inclusion and exclusion. As such, it is always implicated in questions of power. Nevertheless, Dyer (1977) points us to a useful distinction between types and stereotypes.

- ▶ *Types* act as general and necessary classifications of persons and roles according to local cultural categories
- ▶ *Stereotypes* can be understood as vivid but simple representations that reduce persons to a set of exaggerate, usually negative, characteristics

Stereotyping commonly involves the attribution of negative traits to persons who are different from us. This points to the operation of power in the process of stereotyping and to its role in the exclusion of others from the social, symbolic and moral order. Dyer suggests that 'types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes)' (Dyer, 1977: 29). Stereotypes concern those excluded from the 'normal' order of things and simultaneously establish who is 'us' and who is 'them'. Thus, 'stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes "difference"' (Hall, 1997c: 258) – Barker, p. 264

Racism is a matter not simply of individual psychology or pathology, but of patterns of cultural representation deeply ingrained within the practices, discourses and subjectivities of western societies. – Barker, p. 266

The Question of Positive Images

While positive images have much to commend them in terms of the development of self-esteem, the strategy is beset by problems, namely the following:

- ▶ It rests on an essentialist and homogenizing understanding of ethnic identity. As such, it obliterates differences of class, gender, sexuality, etc. This is, positive images of black people assume that all black people have essential qualities in common. They may not.
- ▶ It is impossible to know what an unambiguously positive image would consist of. We are unlikely ever to be able to agree on this. One person's commendable image is another person's stereotype.
- ▶ The strategy rests on an epistemology of realism by which it is through possible to bring representations of black people in line with 'real' black people. This is not viable, for the real is always already a representation. There is no access to 'real' black people.

Representation is constitutive of race as a form of cultural identity and not a mirror or a distortion of it. Consequently, no criteria can assess the accuracy of the representation of race. – Barker, p. 274

If you go to analyze racism today in its complex structures and dynamics, one question, one principle above all, emerges as a lesson for us. It is the fear – the terrifying, internal fear – of living with difference. This fear arises as the consequence of the fatal coupling of difference and power. And, in that sense, the work that cultural studies has to do is mobilize everything that it can in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihuman in their capacity to live with difference. (Hall, 1997d: 343) – Barker, p. 279