

Race

LEWIS R. GORDON

This entry focuses on race as discourse and its relation to culture, which, too, is discourse driven. This is not to say that race is discourse and culture is the same but instead that, as meaningful realities, they are governed by generative rules that, in turn, are also conditioned by similar sets of rules. The concepts are, in other words, *relational*, and as such, their definition often points beyond them to additional relationships.

For race, we begin with the term. The word “race” has its origins in the Middle Ages in Andalucía, Moorish-controlled Iberia, in the word *raza*. The word referred to breeds of dogs, horses; Jews, and Moors. This arrangement of things brings together zoological terms and religious cultural ones in a way that asserts a schema beneath the normatively Christian, which alerts us to its theological origins, and, with the zoological and anthropological elements, its claims to a form of theological naturalism. The term, although referring both to animals and human beings—and, in some instances, even to botanical life—eventually became primarily a term used for human designations, especially as discriminatory practices and hierarchies were conjoined to the concept to collapse into *racism*. Reflected here is the connection between race, language, and culture. As Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban reflects:

If race is about phenotype, and language is about speech and communication, and culture is about common heritage and shared identity through distinct customs, dress, food, and more, why are these three so often confused? The answer may be that each is a convenient referent for “others” different from “ourselves” (whoever “we” may be) . . . (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006, p. 15)

This is not to say that human differentiation emerged in the Middle Ages. There is ample evidence in literature and artifacts from antiquity in which communities of people attempted to determine their location through difference. In most, differentia took the form of gods or deities above, animals below, and their group (designating what we would call “man” or the “human being”) in the middle. Since the middle was self-referentially specific, other groups of people were often determined in relation either more toward animals or toward gods. There were, however, instances in which other human beings were placed in the same location of the group producing the documents, with differences marked not as hierarchies but horizontally situated. In both cases, whether in relation to gods and beasts, to both and other human beings, the human being, or what we understand as designating what we call human beings, has always been relational. That the human being is a relationship with other beings has not, however, often matched the metaphysics of the societies in which this often mythic understanding takes place.

In the modern world, mythic knowledge was secularized as scientific inquiry. The search for what is inside nature (and by extension inside human beings), that made things work, led to the emergence of modern natural science and an effort to construct the same for the study of the human beings. Race, then, became a mark of human difference as science also became a search for explanations of how the variety of human beings came to be. This concern led to the development of what could be called “raciology,” where race became part of the repertoire of disciplinary and mundane discursive practices in the modern world and its own object of theoretical study. There was, in other words, race and the

The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics, Edited by Carol A. Chapelle.

© 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Published 2013 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0992

metatheory (theory about the theory or discourse) of race. For the former, race was part of everyday life, and competent speakers of a variety of European languages understood it, without much reflection.

Oddly enough, the *practices* of race did not necessarily depend upon competent use of the word “race” (and its correlates in the European languages) because of the global political and economic realignment of world relations premised upon racial hierarchy, where European nations representing whiteness eventually regarded themselves as the natural master over the browner and darker ones they eventually conquered and colonized. The many clerics, soldiers, sailors, and prisoners involved in this process hardly worked with clear notions of the rationalizations behind the human differences they encountered. For some, physical difference at times entailed normative difference. Thus, racist consequences were at times present without the explanation of race explicitly stated. This afforded a form of presence of race and racism as ever-present—what sociologists, drawing upon the thought of Durkheim, refer to as originating from seemingly “nowhere” (see Daynes & Lee, 2008).

The metatheoretical work on race involves examining the discourse by which race is studied. The philosopher, jurist, and anthropologist Anténor Firmin offered a critique of this form in Paris in 1885 in his response to the racist anthropology of Arthur de Gobineau. In the USA, this critique was also developed, in response to the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, by W. E. B. Du Bois, who noticed not only that the study of race produces “problem” populations, but also that the very question of human sciences suffered from the problem of studying changing subjects as fixed and stable ones. Yet Du Bois also subscribed to the “message” model of race, where each group was presumed to offer through their unique social expression, through culture, a gift to humankind.

Other responses to social Darwinism included those of Franz Boas, who debunked primitivist appeals to some populations living in the present and others in the past. In all, the question of race was increasingly separated from being rooted in naturalistic accounts to more socially and eventually culturally driven ones. Among those were also developments from criticisms of science itself as an absolute basis of human understanding. The most influential thought from this end was the vitalism of Henri Bergson, which influenced developments in 20th-century ethnography and its correlative critical debates. The important distinction between animal life and human life, *zoë* and *bios* in Ancient Greek, raised questions of cultural life, and, as might be expected, race as expressions of such. The roots of cultural racism emerged here, where, it is believed, there are inferior cultures created, in turn, by inferior people. The circular logic here is straightforward: Inferior people create inferior culture, which is the mark of inferior people. Hidden in cultural racism, in other words, is the notion that some people *could not* create valuable culture, or, in some cases, culture at all. An additionally questionable consideration here is the notion of “good” and “bad” culture, since, in the end, the evaluation of each would be through criteria posed by the evaluator, whose culture is presumed “good,” or at least the standard of good.

The emergence of structural linguistics also affected the turn to the study of culture in important critical ways. Although the efforts by Ernst Cassirer are crucial here, the better known line followed from the impact of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s work and the eventual conjunction of his ideas with developments in Marxism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. The effect was most commonly known as structuralism, which placed a premium on *discourse*, especially language, in the study of race and culture, and poststructuralism, which focused on the anti-essentialist dimensions of structuralism. The opening observation about relationality came to the fore in structuralism and poststructuralism, much of which was explored in the terms of the former and anticipated in the case of the latter, in the thought of the Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon.

Fanon argued that race was neither phylogenetic (species determined) nor ontogenetic (a matter of individual bodies). It was *sociogenetic*, produced by a social world, the world of culture. He also argued that within that social world, there are normative expectations that make racism, as a function of that world, “normal.” The problem, then, became one of examining the extent to which, as Du Bois had argued, the social, and by extension culture, as a changing and dynamically producing series of relations, can be transformed. In effect, then, the Du Boisian understanding of race as a discourse embedded in that of the human sciences of the modern world is substantiated by much of the metatheoretical discourse on race, including those, ironically, whose aims were the circumvention of race. It became present *as something to be avoided*.

The metatheoretical discourse on race, then, faced several important critical considerations. The first, as Du Bois noticed, was the tendency to ignore the force of self-critique. When encountering populations that do not fit the theoretical models and methodologies at hand, the response was often to treat the populations as recalcitrant, as problems, instead of assessing the viability of the discipline and its methods. Fanon, too, noticed this phenomenon, and he described it as the self-devouring of methods in the study of racism and colonialism. A group of scholars in African Diasporic philosophy and what has become known as Decolonial Studies in Latin America (see Gordon, 2006, 2008) have interpreted this critique as the identification of disciplinary decadence and colonial discourse (in which there is also the colonization of method). They have argued that race, as a human manifestation, exceeds singular disciplinary models of controlled study. It thus requires *transdisciplinary* efforts with the understanding of their own limits.

The second metatheoretical consideration pertains to the metaphysics of race. Here, the thought of Ernst Cassirer is again instructive. He argued for a relational understanding of reality in which meaning emerges also as a transition from signification to symbolization, which he described as “symbolic forms.” Many theorists subsequently refer to the same as “structure.” In Cassirer’s thought, however, the world of culture, manifested by symbolic forms, is not only one of intersections and overlapping relations or structures but also of *different dimensions*—by which he meant the emergence of a peculiarly human world. This is significant for the understanding of race, since it suggests that race, as a symbolic, self-reflective activity of the human species, is about the production of meaning *onto* human bodies. Culture, in this sense, is thus more radical than the folkways, customs, and specific linguistic practices of different groups. It is also the more radical basis of their expression—namely, a human world as a world of symbolic disclosure.

The dimensional view of race brings to the fore the lived reality of race and racism. Race theorists, from Du Bois to Fanon to the present, have observed how people differentiated by race seem to live in different worlds even when in spatial proximity or under singular national boundaries. Called double consciousness, this phenomenon involves for the designated-inferior racial subject a construction of the self as seen by the designated-superior subjects. While the dominated racial subject is forced to think and speak through two worlds—theirs to each other and the dominant language—members of the dominant group live and speak as if their world were complete. Realization that the dominant world lacks an understanding of the schemas beneath it leads to the emergence of a second form of double consciousness—*potentiated double consciousness*. This form involves identifying the missing elements of the dominant structure, which, in effect, unveils its fundamental incompleteness.

The formal correlates of double consciousness and potentiated double consciousness, if placed in the framework of linguistics, would be the grammatical structure of false universality. In effect, the potentiated critique is that the avowed universal grammar is particular, and that the claimed particular location (as subaltern, dominated, inferior) was *more* universal, albeit also not *the* universal. Learning the languages by which these

distinctions are made manifest in effect opens up worlds and transforms worlds akin to critical discussions of intercultural communication. The crucial point here, however, is that, as exemplars of culture, they are in principle communicable across each human divide. Race, then, is always a communicative practice, as Fluehr-Lobban reminded us, but the difficulty posed by racism is that it involves the rejection of its own communicability.

A growing body of literature examines dissociative elements of racial discourses. In work influenced by existential phenomenology, this tendency is characterized as bad faith, and they often criticize race-blind models of human study as enabling racial dominance by groups who control the conditions of their self-representation. Among those also influenced by poststructuralism, this criticism usually identifies genealogies of power and how, in governing subordinated groups, dominant groups produce racialized subjects through distinguishing themselves as nonracialized subjects. In concrete form, in many conversations, writings, or readings where race is not identified, it presumably means that a member of the dominant group is the subject. To be raceless, then, simply means the power to racialize others. In countries where whites are the dominant group, “racelessness” becomes a coded term for “white.”

Moreover, the structuralist and poststructuralist accounts also examine the semiological features of race discourses, where certain relations hide other relations. Thus, what is hidden in whiteness is its relation, in a binary system, to the gradations on which it is dependent for its designation. To be white as the extent to which one is not something else raises the question of whether one is also not something else by which whiteness is governed—that is, others who are *whiter*. These shifts of location, many of which are affected by shifting dynamics of power in societal institutions, leads to precarious efforts to stabilize racial categories, mostly through denial of the continued changes of the signs and symbols by which they could be meaningful. In psychoanalysis, where an unconscious is an underlying factor, processes of dissociation and trauma lead to discussions of dynamics of shame by which historical and other contextual resources are pushed to the wayside in linguistic performances of a preferred national (presumed as dominant group) *image*. Both the existential phenomenological and psychoanalytical (both of whose forms are too varied for elaboration here) converge on an understanding of the evasive tendencies of race discourses. Race, from these points of view, is an effort to avoid the risk of human communication.

Finally, although not exhaustively, efforts to stabilize race discourses, to fix the language of race, often lead to reductionistic models akin to the forms of disciplinary decadence mentioned earlier. To make the discourse pure, neat, and rigorously absolute leads to difficulties in accounting for the fact of racial mixture. These mixtures find correlates, as well, in discussions of cultural mixtures and linguistic mixtures. As with the disciplinary decadence model, some responses offer notions of isomorphism between race, language, and culture, where the result is one set of “whole” realities encountering another set of holistically constituted realities. Critics of this model include those in Africana philosophy of culture, who argue for the permeability and communicability of human communities, and those in what could be called the creolization-from-the-Global South groups, who examine creolization as genuine forms of mixture versus the forms where different groups live alongside each other instead of sharing, as their lived reality, the coproduction of culture.

SEE ALSO: Critical Analysis of Political Discourse; Critical Applied Linguistics; Cultural Hybridity; Cultural Identity; Cultural Studies; Ethnicity; Linguistic Imperialism; Postcolonial Studies; Religion; Subjectivity

References

- Daynes, S., & Lee, O. (2008). *Desire for race*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Fluehr-Lobban, C. (2006). *Race and racism: An introduction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gordon, L. R. (2006). *Disciplinary decadence: Living thought in trying times*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Gordon, L. R. (2008). *An introduction to Africana philosophy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Suggested Readings

- Alcoff, L. M. (2006). *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bernasconi, R., & Lott, T. (Eds.). (2000). *The idea of race*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Gilroy, P. (2000). *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the colorline*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Goldberg, D. T. (1993). *Racist culture*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Jones, D. (2010). *The racial discourses of life philosophy: Négritude, vitalism and modernity*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Nirenberg, D. (2007). Race and the Middle Ages: The case of Spain and its Jews. In M. R. Greer, W. D. Mignolo, & M. Quilligan (Eds.), *Rereading the black legend: The discourses of religious and racial difference in the Renaissance empires* (pp. 71–87). Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, P. (2004). *Race: A philosophical introduction*. Cambridge, England: Polity.