

Ali Rattansi

RACISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Racism: A Very Short Introduction

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For Shobhna

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Introduction

‘An important subject about which clear thinking is generally avoided.’
(Ashley Montagu, *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 1954)

A reader expecting easy, cut and dried answers to the questions of what is racism, how it developed, and why it stubbornly continues to survive may be disappointed. But deservedly so. These are large, complex, and contentious issues. Racism is not easy to define, for reasons that will become clear. Short, tight definitions mislead, although in some contexts they are unavoidable. Even in a short book of this kind – perhaps especially in a book that might expect a wide readership – the question of racism requires relatively sophisticated treatment. Brevity and accessibility are not good enough excuses for oversimplification. Although racism is a multidimensional phenomenon, it has suffered from formulaic and clichéd thinking from all sides of the political spectrum. Professional social scientists and historians have been as liable to succumb to the seductions of oversimplification as political activists seeking to mobilize their various constituencies.

My research and writing in this area have been particularly concerned to move discussions of racism away from over-hasty definitions, lazy generalizations, and sloppy analysis. In particular, it is my view that public and academic debates should move away from simplistic attempts to divide racism from non-racism and racists from non-racists. At the risk of exaggeration, I would suggest that one of the main impediments to progress in understanding racism has been the willingness of all involved to propose short, supposedly water-tight definitions of racism and to identify quickly and with more or less complete certainty who is *really* racist and who is not.

Later in the book, I will discuss a number of definitions, including the disastrously confused and unworkable formula popular with many anti-racists: ‘Prejudice + Power = Racism’. I will also argue that the idea of institutional racism has outlived its usefulness.

This book, despite being only a very short introduction, is an attempt to present a more nuanced understanding. It also differs from most other introductions to the subject by

treating anti-Semitism and anti-Irish sentiments as important elements of any account of racism, and does not assume that racism is simply a property of white cultures and individuals. And it gives due recognition to the fact that racism has always been bound up with a myriad other divisions, especially those of class and gender.

Of course, I have not diluted the many brutal and painful realities that the subject forces us to confront. Millions have died as a result of explicitly racist acts. The injuries and injustices perpetrated in its name continue.

However, most people are nowadays liable to disavow racism. Indeed, the concept of race, as we shall see, has been subject to comprehensive critique within the biological sciences. In the wake of the defeat of Nazism, a great many nation-states have put in place legislative, political, and educative measures to combat racism. Some have introduced programmes such as ‘positive action’ and ‘affirmative action’ to undo the effects of past racial discrimination. In its turn, this has provoked a backlash, but which denies any racist intent. On the contrary, the affirmative and positive action programmes have themselves been accused of racism, albeit in reverse.

Confusion abounds. Many accused of racism respond with the argument that their actions and aspirations are to do with patriotism, or that their claims revolve around matters of *ethnic* or *national culture*, not race. To which others add the view that everyone is racist.

However, it is important to bear in mind a distinction between general ‘prejudice’ and racism properly so-called. That is, no one doubts that humans have always lived in groups and that these collectivities have had some sense of common belonging. The sense of belonging has usually been defined by language, territory, and other markers, which have been used to draw boundaries around the group. They have thus also served to define outsiders and strangers.

But contrary to the common-sense belief that the stranger or outsider inevitably provokes what the French philosopher Pierre-Andre Taguieff calls ‘heterophobia’, or negative evaluation of the different, the historical and anthropological evidence suggests that outsiders and strangers are not inevitably subjected to hostility. Empathy, curiosity, tolerance, dialogue, and co-operation are human traits that are as common as hostility and prejudice. Outsiders are not automatically feared or hated; they are as likely to be admired, found sexually attractive, to provoke ambivalence, or be envied (as we shall see). And nothing akin to the modern idea of race has been a human universal.

This subject is a minefield indeed. I hope that the reader will emerge a great deal

clearer about ways of moving beyond present confusions and unproductive polarizations of position around questions of race and racism.

Chapter 1

Racism and racists: some conundrums

The term 'racism' was coined in the 1930s, primarily as a response to the Nazi project of making Germany *judenrein*, or 'clean of Jews'. The Nazis were in no doubt that Jews were a distinct race and posed a threat to the Aryan race to which authentic Germans supposedly belonged.

With hindsight, it is possible to see that many of the dilemmas that have accompanied the proliferation of the notion of racism were present from the beginning. The idea that Jews were a distinct race was given currency by Nazi racial science. But before that, there was little consensus that Jews were a distinct race. Does that make it inappropriate to describe the long-standing hostility to Jews in Christian Europe as racist? Or is it the case that racism has to be seen as a broader phenomenon that has long been part of human history? Indeed, that it is part of 'human nature', and does not necessarily require technical or scientifically sanctioned definitions of 'race' to be identified as racism?

After all, it can be argued that the Nazi project was only one stage in a very long history of anti-Semitism. And that anti-Semitism is one of the oldest racisms, indeed the 'longest hatred', as it has been called.

However, complications immediately arise. The term 'anti-Semitism' only came into being in the late 1870s, when the German Wilhelm Marr used it to characterize his anti-Jewish movement, the Anti-Semitic League, and he used it specifically to differentiate his project from earlier, more diffuse forms of Christian anti-Judaism, more popularly known as *Judenhass*, or 'Jew hatred'. His was a self-conscious racism that required that Jews be defined as a distinct race. And 'Anti-Semitism' had the advantage of sounding like a new, scientific concept separate from simple religious bigotry.

Thus, the key assertion of his little book was that Semitic racial (that is, biological) traits were systematically associated with Jewish character (their culture and behaviour). Jews, according to Marr, could not help but be materialistic and scheming, and these traits meant an inevitable clash with German racial culture, which could not

be anything but idealistic and generous. Marr entitled his pamphlet *The Victory of the Jews over the Germans*, because he thought that German racial characteristics meant that Germans would be unable to resist being completely overwhelmed by Jewish cunning. He blamed his own loss of a job on Jewish influence.

Was Marr justified in insisting on distinguishing his version of anti-Jewishness from other historical forms? Is racism properly so-called something totally distinct from the hostility that many would argue is a universal form of suspicion of all ‘strangers’ and those who have distinct cultural identities? It is after all not uncommon to hear the view that Jews have been particularly prone to victimization because of their own attempts to retain a distinct identity and their refusal to assimilate (one version of the so-called ‘Jewish problem’), a type of argument that is often used against other ethnic minorities in European nation-states.

The underlying logic of this sort of viewpoint is that racism is simply part of a continuum that includes, at one end, perfectly understandable and benign collective identifications that are essential for the survival of all cultural groups. At the other end, the Holocaust and other genocides are therefore to be regarded as unfortunate but inevitable episodes, varying in superficial ways but united by an essential similarity stemming from the very nature of humans as biological and cultural beings who live only in groups, are held together by common feelings of identity, and are thus impelled to maintain their collective identities.

Also, the idea of making the German nation *judenrein* seems close to the notion that has now come to be called ‘ethnic cleansing’. But is all ‘ethnic cleansing’ racist? Or is there something distinctive about racist acts of hatred, expulsion, and violence? In which case, how exactly are we to distinguish between hostility based on ethnicity and that based on race? What is the difference between an ethnic group and a race? To put it somewhat differently, but making the same point, should we distinguish between ethnocentrism and racism?

It is clear that even the briefest inquiry into the meaning of the term ‘racism’ throws up a number of perplexing questions and various cognate terms – ethnicity and ethnocentrism; nation, nationalism and xenophobia; hostility to ‘outsiders’ and ‘strangers’, or heterophobia; and so forth – which require clarification.

There is a further issue that derives from the example of Nazism with which I began. Who exactly is to count as Jewish against whom anti-Semitism could be officially sanctioned? Is there an unambiguous definition? Talmudic law and the immigration policies of the Israeli state accept only those who have Jewish mothers as authentic Jews. This is a strictly biological definition. In Nazi Germany, one had to have three Jewish grandparents to be classified unambiguously as a Jew. Those who were one-

fourth and sometimes even half-Jewish could be allowed to be considered to be German citizens provided they did not practise Judaism or marry Jews or other part-Jews. In the absence of clear *biological* evidence, a *cultural* practice, commitment to Judaism, functioned as a *racial* marker.

It has come to light recently that men of partial Jewish descent, *Mischlinge* in Nazi terminology, were allowed with Hitler's explicit permission to serve in the German armed forces during the Second World War. Even more surprisingly, in the postwar period some of these *Mischlinge* went to Israel and served in the Israeli army.

To complicate matters even more, it is worth remembering that historically there has been an ambiguity surrounding Jewish 'whiteness' which still persists to some degree. As we will see, the 'whiteness' of Jews, especially in the USA, as of the Italians and the Irish too, has actually been gradually *achieved* in the 20th century as part of a *social and political process* of inclusion. As 'Semites', Jews were often regarded as not belonging to white races, while it was not uncommon in the 19th century for the English and Americans to regard the Irish as 'black', and for Italians to have an ambiguous status between white and black in the USA.

But who is to count as 'black'? The history of US debates and legislation reveals consistent difficulties in defining the black population. A famous 'one drop' rule was adopted in many Southern states, which implied that any black ancestry, however far back, consigned an individual to the wrong side of the white/black divide, determining (disadvantaging) where s/he could live, what kind of work was available, and whether marriage or even relationships could take place with a white partner. One drop of 'white blood', though, did not carry the same weight in defining racial status.

The idea of racism is obviously closely tied to the concept of race, but it should be clear by now that the more one delves into the history of both notions, the more puzzling they turn out to be.

Several important points emerge from considering the examples of Jews and the Irish, and some of the other groups that are discussed later. Firstly, the idea of 'race' contains both biological and cultural elements, for example skin colour, religion, and behaviour. Secondly, the biological and cultural appear to combine in variable proportions in any definition of a racial group, depending upon the group and the historical period in question. And racial status, as in the 'whitening' of Jews, Irish, and others, is subject to political negotiation and transformation.

Inevitably, therefore, the term 'racism' has also become subject to social forces and political conflict. The idea of race has been in retreat in the second half of the 20th

century in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazism and discoveries in the science of genetics. Nowadays, there is a tendency to regard inter-communal hostilities as stemming from issues of *cultural* rather than racial difference.

Many commentators argue that the justification of hostility and discrimination on grounds of culture rather than race is mostly a rhetorical ploy to get round the taboo around racism that has gradually been established in the Western liberal democracies. There is, they contend, a new 'cultural racism' that has increasingly supplanted an older biological racism. 'Islamophobia' has been identified as one of the most recent forms of this new racism. But can a combination of religious and other cultural antipathy be described as 'racist'? Is this not to rob the idea of racism of any analytical specificity and open the floodgates to a conceptual inflation that simply undermines the legitimacy of the idea? These issues are discussed later in the book.

Fewer and fewer people in Western societies will nowadays openly describe themselves as racist. Yet social scientists, politicians, journalists, and members of various communities are apt to claim that these societies are deeply racist. Government agencies continue to collect statistical and other evidence of racial discrimination and use a variety of laws and other instruments to attempt to enforce non-discriminatory codes of conduct.

In Britain, considerable controversy was ignited in 1999 when Lord Macpherson's inquiry into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence branded the London Metropolitan Police as *institutionally racist*, thus propelling yet another definition into the public domain (although one well known to social scientists and the subject of controversy in an earlier official report, from the Scarman Inquiry into disorders in the London borough of Brixton in 1981).

This has been only one in a whole series of other investigations that has documented systematic and long-standing discrimination against Britain's ethnic minorities in spheres such as housing, and private and public sector employment.

To take just one instance, the British Medical Association published evidence in 2004 that doctors of South Asian origin had been consistently passed over in terms of recruitment, training opportunities, merit awards, and promotion. One medical specialist of Indian origin was paid nearly £1 million in compensation in March 2004 by an industrial tribunal for racial discrimination by the National Health Service. Moreover, another official report in 2004 revealed that black and Asian British citizens do not experience equal treatment with whites as patients of the National Health Service.