Debates

THE THEORY OF CULTURAL RACISM

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i. Theory and Practice

Very few academics these days consider themselves to be racists, and calling someone a racist is deeply offensive. Yet racism in the universities is just as pervasive, just as dangerous, as it was a generation ago. Nowadays we seem to have a lot of racism but very few racists. How do you explain this paradox?

The place to begin is to notice the essential difference between racist theory and racist practice. Racism most fundamentally is practice: the practice of discrimination, at all levels, from personal abuse to colonial oppression. Racism is a form of practice which has been tremendously important in European society for several hundred years, important in the sense that it is an essential part of the way the European capitalist system maintains itself.

Racist practice, like all practice, is cognized, rationalized, justified, by a theory, a belief-system about the nature of reality and the behavior which is appropriate to this cognized reality. (The word “theory” is better in this context than the word “ideology,” because we are talking about a system of empirical beliefs, not about the cultural bindings of belief.) But theory and practice do not have a one-to-one relationship. One form of practice can be underlain by various different theories. Since racism-as-practice, that is, discrimination, is an essential part of the system, we should not be surprised to discover that it has been supported by a historical sequence of different theories, each consistent with the intellectual environment of a given era. Nor should we be surprised to find that the sequent theories are so different from one another that the racist theory of one epoch is in part a refutation of the racist theory of the preceding epoch.

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Putting the matter in a somewhat over-simplified form, the dominant racist theory of the early nineteenth century was a biblical argument, grounded in religion; the dominant racist theory of the period from about 1850 to 1950 was a biological argument, grounded in natural science; the racist theory of today is mainly a historical argument, grounded in the idea of culture history or simply culture. Today's racism is cultural racism.

I will try to show, in this paper, what cultural racism is all about and how and why it has largely supplanted biological racism (at least among academics). To start things off, I'll explain the paradox that, today, in universities, we have racism but few racists.

Generally, when we call a person a racist in the academic world of today we are accusing this person of believing in the hereditary, biological superiority of people of one so-called race over people of another so-called race, with the implication that discrimination is justified, explained, rationalized, by the underlying biological theory. But hardly anybody believes in this theory anymore. Most academics believe that the typical members of what used to be called inferior races have a capacity equal to that of other so-called races, but they have not been able to realize this capacity. They have not learned the things one needs to know to be treated as an equal. They have not learned how to think rationally, as mental adults. They have not learned how to behave in appropriate ways, as social adults. The problem is culture, not biology. And, naturally, the inequality will disappear in the course of time. But in the meantime, discrimination is perfectly justified. Of course it is not called "discrimination" in this newer theory. It is a matter of treating each person in a way that is appropriate to his or her abilities.

The people of one race – pardon me: one ethnic group – demonstrate greater abilities than those of other ethnic groups, abilities in IQ, ACT, and SAT test-taking, in “need achievement motivation,” in avoidance of criminality, and so on. Given that they have these higher realized abilities, they should be given greater rewards. They should be admitted to college, be granted Ph.D.s and tenure, and the rest. And so racist practice persists under the guidance of a theory which actually denies the relevance of race. The differences between humans which justify discriminatory treatment are differences in acquired characteristics: in culture.

Another way of putting this is to say that cultural racism substitutes the cultural category “European” for the racial category “white.” We no longer have a superior race; we have, instead, a superior culture. It is “European culture,” or “Western culture,” “the West” (see Amin 1989). What counts is culture, not color.
ii. Religious Racism

The notion of European cultural superiority is not a new one. Early in the 19th century, Europeans considered themselves to be superior because they were Christians and a Christian god must naturally favor His own followers, particularly those who worship Him according to the proper sacrament. He will take care of such matters as hereditary abilities, thus making it easier for His followers to thrive, multiply, progress, conquer the world. He will even make certain that the physical environment in which Christians live is more favorable than the environment surrounding heathens: hence Europe's climate is neither too hot nor too cold, not "torrid" nor "frigid" but nicely "temperate." In a word: it was believed that the people of Europe, traditional Christendom, possess cultural superiority, biological superiority, even environmental superiority, but all of this flows from a supernatural cause. This was the theory which, in the period up to roughly the middle of the 19th century, underlay most racist practice.

Note that the religious theory of racism was an empirical argument. The cause was supernatural, but the effects were straightforward facts. God had created white people, in a region which Europeans considered to be their own cultural hearth: the "Bible Lands." The Garden of Eden was thought by many scholars to have been located somewhere around the headwaters of the Tigris river, in the healthful, temperate, mountains of Armenia, not far from Mt. Ararat, where Noah landed, not far from the Caucasus Mountains which were known to be the home of the Caucasian race, and (as was often pointed out) in the same temperate latitude as Greece and Rome (see, e.g., Lord 1869). There was no such thing as early cultural evolution, since Man was given agriculture, cities, and civilization in the days of Genesis. All of pre-Christian history took place among white people in a small piece of the earth's surface, roughly between Rome and Mesopotamia. The rest of the world was at first uninhabited. People migrated from this hearth to, and so populated, Asia and Africa. During the course of this exodus they became non-white, and they degenerated (Bowler 1989), and lost the arts of civilization (although Asians retained some of these arts).\(^1\) All of this was considered to be historical fact. It followed, then, that the white race has always been superior and still remains superior, and for very evident reasons. In short: an empirical theory, giving scientific justification for racist practice.
iii. Biological Racism

Toward the end of the 19th century, naturalistic arguments had displaced biblical and theological arguments in most scholarly discourse. But it should not be thought that religious racism (as theory) had entirely disappeared. In many contexts thereafter, this theory was (and still is) used to justify racist practice in which people of one religion oppress people of another on grounds of this, or some very similar, theory. An obvious contemporary example is Israeli expansionism. God gave all of Palestine (and more) to the Jews long ago, so the Jews have overriding rights to all of the God-given land, and can expel anyone else from that land on the basis of this absolute principle. It is quibbling to object that this is not racism because Jews are not a race. It is religious racism.

The secularization of thought after about 1850 made it necessary to rest racist practice in a new and different theory. Religious racism had already established the causality by which God gives better heredity to Christians, and this argument could now be adapted to assert the genetic superiority of the so-called white race, grounding this argument now in the immensely influential biological theories of the period, notably Darwinism and (later) Mendelianism. The genetic superiority of the so-called white race was now believed in axiomatically by nearly all social theorists. The cultural superiority of Europeans (a category vaguely identified with the white race) was also believed in, also axiomatically. Cultural superiority was mainly, though not entirely, considered to be an effect of racial superiority. (I say not entirely because various other sorts of naturalistic causality were also invoked: Europe's environment is superior. Or Europe's cultural priority originated in the mysterious and impenetrable mists of prehistory. Or no causation was postulated because none was thought to be needed. For some thinkers, among them Max Weber, all of these arguments were heaped together in a melange of race, culture, and geography.) But it is fair to say that the hereditary superiority of the white race was considered to be the single most important explanation for the white man's obvious superiority in culture. This was the era of classical or biological racism.

After the First World War, the theory of white biological superiority began to lose force in the scholarly communities of most (not all) European countries. This reflected several causes. Some were internal to intellectual progress, in, for instance, culture theory (e.g., Boas, Radin), psychological theory (e.g., Lewin), philosophies grounded in experience rather than the Cartesian-Kantian a priori (e.g., Dewey, Whitehead, Mead). One external cause was the rise of egalitarian values, notably socialism, which militated against theories of innate superiority and
inferiority. A second external cause, a very powerful one, was opposition to Nazism, which almost necessarily meant opposition to doctrines of biological superiority and inferiority.

iv. Cultural Racism

All of this notwithstanding, biological racism remained somewhat respectable until the 1950s and 1960s, the classical era of national liberation and civil rights struggles. Racist practice now needed a new theory. At this time, mainstream scholarship was being assigned—quite literally: with funds and jobs provided—the task of formulating a theoretical structure which would rationalize continued dominance of communities of color in the Third World and at home. Such a theory would have to accept two propositions opposed to biological racism, propositions which were axiomatic in non-European communities: that Europeans are not innately superior, and that economic development can bring non-Europeans to the same level as Europeans. The problem was to show that non-Europeans, though equal to Europeans in innate capacity, cannot develop economically to the European level unless these societies voluntarily accept the continued domination by European countries and corporations, that is, neocolonialism.

The outcome of this truly massive theory-building effort was the theory of “modernization.” This theory argued, in essence, that non-Europeans are not racially, but rather culturally backward in comparison to Europeans because of their history: their lesser cultural evolution. And it is for this reason that they are poor. So they must follow, under European guidance and “tutelage,” the path already trodden by Europeans as the only means of overcoming backwardness. Non-Europeans were thereby defined as inferior in attained level of achievement, not potential for achievement. This was the real essence of cultural racism.

One of the most interesting and important aspects of this theory-building campaign was the deification of Max Weber by various groups of social scientists, among them the Parsonian structural-functionalists (see Peet 1991) and “traditional mind” theorists like McClelland, most of whom were involved directly or indirectly in the modernization-theory construction project. Weber himself, a half-century before, had expressed the then-dominant European views concerning non-Europeans, with some small improvements. Weber’s argument, though partially grounded in biological racism (see, e.g., Weber 1958: 30, 1976: 387; 1981: 299, 379; 1951: 231-232), could easily be detached from that grounding because most of what he wrote about European superiority was axiomatic argumentation about the uniqueness of the European mind—its rationality, its spiritual capacity—and historical argumenta-
tion about the unique rise within Europe, and Europe alone, of institutions and structures which were the source of modernity. (See in particular Weber 1951; 1958; 1981.) Neither rationality nor structure was (in general) connected backward to race, as effect of a prime cause. Thus the Weberian argument could be, and was, detached from race and presented as a theory of modernization grounded in the uniqueness of European mentality and culture, permanent qualities which throughout history gave Europeans a continuously more rapid course toward modernity than non-Europeans. Those who think that Weber became popular in the 1950s and 1960s because of his well-known opposition to the Marxist theory of the rise of capitalism are missing the bigger picture. Weber, and Weberianism, became important at that time mainly because Weber provided contemporary social scientists with a theory of modernization, essentially an elegant and scholarly restatement of colonial-era ideas about the uniqueness of European rationality and the uniqueness of European culture history. Weber was to neocolonialism what Marx was to socialism. In a manner of speaking, Weber was the godfather of cultural racism.

Cultural racism, as a theory, needs to prove the superiority of Europeans, and needs to do so without recourse to the older arguments from religion and from biology. How does it do this? By recourse to history – by constructing a characteristic theory of cultural (and intellectual) history. The claim is simply made that nearly all of the important cultural innovations which historically generate cultural progress occurred first in Europe, then, later, diffused to the non-European peoples (Blaut 1992). Therefore, at each moment in history Europeans are more advanced than non-Europeans in overall cultural development (though not necessarily in each particular culture trait), and they are more progressive than non-Europeans. This is asserted as a great bundle of apparently empirical facts about invention and innovation, not only of material and technological traits but of political and social traits like the state, the market, the family. The tellers of this tale saturate history with European inventions, European progressiveness, European progress.

This massive bundle of purportedly empirical, factual statements was woven together by means of a modern form of the 19th-century theory of Eurocentric diffusionism (Blaut 1987a; 1987b). This theory evolved as a justification and rationalization for classical colonialism. It asserted, in essence, the following propositions about the world as a whole and throughout all of history.

(1) The world has a permanent center, or core, and a permanent periphery. The center is Greater Europe, that is, the continent of Europe plus, for ancient times, the Bible Lands and, for modern
times, the countries of European settlement overseas. The core sector, Greater Europe, is naturally inventive, innovative, progressive.

(2) The periphery, the non-European world, naturally remains traditional, culturally sluggish or stagnant.

(3) The basic reason why Europe is progressive, innovative, etc., is some quality of mind or spirit, some "rationality," peculiar to Europeans.

(4) Progress occurs in the periphery as a result of the diffusion, the outward spread, of new and innovative traits from the core to the periphery. The diffusion process itself is natural. It consists of the spread of European ideas, European colonialism, European settlers, and European commodities.

Notice that the basic theory can be driven by religious, biological, or cultural motors. In the modern, post-1945 form of the theory, the motor was culture, or rather culture history. The theory itself was softened in some ways, for instance conceding that some progress takes place in non-Europe (in spite of cultural "blockages"), but the structure remained basically the same.

Modern diffusionism therefore depicts a world in which Europeans have always been the most progressive people, and non-Europeans are backward, and permanently the recipients of progressive ideas, things, and people from Europe. It follows that progress for the periphery, today as always in the past, must consist of the continued diffusion of European "rationality" and institutions, European culture and control. The periphery, today, includes the Third World, along with Third World minorities embedded in the European-dominated countries like the United States, in ghettos, reservations, prisons, migrant-labor camps.

The main proposition here is a kind of Eurocentric historical tunnel-vision which can be called "tunnel history." Historical causation occurs, basically, in Europe and its self-proclaimed culture hearth, the ancient Near East. (Examples: the origin of agriculture, cities, states, science, democracy, feudalism, private property, discovery, capitalism, industry . . .) Non-Europe participates in history mainly as recipient of diffusions from Europe. The most important part of tunnel history concerns the world before 1492. (And 1992 is a peculiarly appropriate year in which to point this out.) The essential argument is this: Europe was advancing more rapidly than the other civilizations of the world, and was more advanced than these other civilizations, at the very beginning of the modern era, prior to the rise of capitalism and modernization, and prior to the beginnings of colonialism. Therefore, the superiority of Europeans as individuals and of European culture has very, very old roots and, by inference, is natural and fundamental.

This proposition accomplishes everything that biological racism ac-
complished and more; indeed, there is a structural as well as functional parallelism between this doctrine and biological racism. It argues, in essence, that a cultural, not genetic, superiority appeared in the European cultural pool very long ago and, just like genetic superiority, it has led ever since to a greater rate of development for Europe and to a level of development which, at each moment in history, is higher than that of non-European cultures. Something occurred long ago in European culture which pushed it into rapid progress. This something then continued to operate to generate progress throughout all of later history. In effect: a cultural gene, or cultural mutation. But cultural racism claims that a vast number of these European cultural causes of progress, cultural mutations, occurred, throughout history, one after another, each adding further impetus to the progress of Europe, each pushing Europe farther ahead of all other civilizations.

v. A Few Examples

Before I give a few illustrative examples of modern cultural-racist theories, I have to offer two introductory comments to avoid misunderstanding - serious misunderstanding. First: Precisely for the reason that we have, these days, so much racism yet so few racists, cultural racism is not, in most cases, propagated by people whom we would want to label "racists." The doctrine is theory, not prejudice. Those scholars who advocate one or another form of it are people who believe that they are dealing with facts, and with the policy implications of these facts. Most of them reject prejudice and are not prejudiced. They simply believe that there are straightforward empirical reasons, grounded in cultural differences, which explain why some groups and individuals are backward.

Secondly, it is very important to distinguish between those statements which merely assert that some culture traits survive for long periods of time and those statements which assert that some ancient, or at any rate tenacious, culture traits explain the superiority of this culture and the inferiority of that one. Change is the normal condition in human cultures. If there is lack of change, it is either because the members of a culture do not want to discard some cherished traits or have no choice because of impinging circumstances. No human group is so stupid as to cherish misery, want, and death. Culture traits which generate or worsen such things are discarded, and quite deliberately so. (There are exceptions to this generalization, but they are very rare, though much publicized, particularly in freshman textbooks.) Cultural ecologists speak of a "culture core" consisting of those traits and institutions which lie close to the realm of human survival: matters of life and death (see
in particular Steward 1955). This part of culture is very plastic, very adaptive. People resist change in other parts of their culture (such as religion). But it is very questionable to infer that human groups will retain any traits if doing so is destructive to their livelihood and survival. Therefore, whenever you hear a statement like “this group is unprogressive because of its religious values,” or “that group is poor because its members are tradition-minded and opposed to innovation,” you should be on the lookout for cultural racism. It is one thing to respect culture, and to appreciate cultural differences, and quite another thing to rank human groups on cultural criteria, and to claim then that you have explained history.

Now some examples.

1. Many historians, today as in the past, claim to find a uniqueness in the culture of very early Europe, something which they connect with the early Indo-Europeans or the ancient Germanic tribes or the Iron-Age peasants of Europe, and which they quite regularly attach to the ancient Greeks as contradistinct from their non-Indo-European neighbors (see the analysis of this matter in Bernal 1987). In Marx’s Germany, the conventional wisdom was that ancient Germans were uniquely freedom-loving, innovative, individualistic, aggressive, and rational; the modern form of the doctrine does not depart much from this formulation except as it admits Celts and Greeks to membership: no modern evidence adds support. Here, now, are some of the historical theories built upon the doctrine. (i) Ancient Europeans were uniquely inventive and technologically innovative, and thereafter remained so. (ii) Ancient Europeans acquired a unique love of freedom, which matured then into a democratic state. (iii) Ancient Europeans, because of or in close association with their individualism, adopted a unique family type which then acted to favor progressiveness, innovativeness, and, incipiently, capitalism.

2. Many theories begin Europe’s uniqueness with Roman times, or slightly earlier, often focusing on the Church, or the partly pre-Christian “Judeo-Christian tradition,” or the later Western Church. Different theories find different causes for the emergence of the new, and unique, and uniquely progressive culture. The effects also are manifold. For instance: some argue that the Judeo-Christian teleology explains Western technological inventiveness and innovativeness because it contains an inner faith in technological progress and the malleability of inert nature (see Blaut 1992): some scholars believe that Europeans became uniquely progressive because Christianity alone gave prominence to the individual.

3. A great many present-day historians believe that Europeans long ago acquired an ability to resist the Malthusian disasters which supposedly blocked development in every other culture, some of the ar-
arguments starting with the ancient Iron Age folk, some with an amalgam of Germanic and Christian elements, some with medieval Northwest-Europeans. This then becomes a general theory explaining what some call the "European miracle" (Jones 1981) by arguing that the (mythically unique) European family, nuclear, late-marrying, companionate, led to population control; led also to a capitalist mentality; even led unmarried European men to go forth and conquer the world because of their sexual frustration.

4. Paralleling all of these arguments is a set of arguments to the effect that non-Europeans, long ago, acquired cultural qualities which blocked development, or – this is perhaps the more common formulation – such qualities are "traditional," and therefore have always been present in non-European cultures. One historian at least thinks that Africans and African-Americans do not progress because the African family has always lacked the father-figure. Many others point either to specific old traits in specific cultures as causes of non-change, or else depict a worldwide zone of "traditional cultures" – including almost all non-European cultures – which "traditionally" lacked rationality, or achievement motivation, or sexual continence, or some other quality necessary to forward historical motion. It must be added that this argument is also used very routinely to explain the poverty of minority people in countries like the United States. When, for instance, lack of progress among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in this country is attributed to the "traditional culture," with its supposed "fatalistic attitudes," "docility," etc., etc., this is still cultural racism even though the source of the cultural argument is not ancient but rather a kind of undated "traditional society."

Cultural racism is rooted most fundamentally in historical mythology about the priority of Europe and thus the supposedly more mature, evolved, rational character of Europeans, today, at home and abroad. By way of closing this short paper I will simply note that, even if all of the roots are torn out, the vine will not wither: it will grow other roots, a new theory of racism, unless racism is attacked, not as theory but as practice.

Notes

1. A minority of scholars accepted the theory of polygenesis, according to which non-white people are not descendants of Adam and Eve, and did not migrate to Africa and Asia but were placed there by God along with the beasts. See Bowler (1989).

References