

Should race be used
as a form of identity?



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Identity is based on being the same as some people and different from others. The difference is usually equally weighted discuss with reference to the category of 'race'.

Identity is one of the most heavily debated factors of modern social life. This is represented in the corpus of sociological research, by the importance placed upon its influence in the different ways in which individuals and societies conceptualise themselves and others. Identity, first and foremost, is based upon the notion of being the same as some people (to identify with some people), and to be different from others. This can and often is interpreted as identity having both a positive and a negative aspect, positive in identifying with a social group, and negative in being different (or opposing) another. This may not necessarily be the case however. In this paper I will investigate the use of race as an identity, as this has traditionally presented us with both the positive and negative model of identity, and in more recent times, a more positive model in both identity and difference.

Identity, in its most basic sense, is formed from being 'other' than another particular person or group. This basic difference comes in many forms, from gender, to class, nationality, sexual orientation and race or ethnicity. Whilst these are the some of the more major identity groups, there are countless other ways in which people identify with each other, from a lifestyle guided by a certain musical taste to a radical political identification. Identity therefore remains a very important way in which people understand themselves and the world. Any one person will belong to a number of different identity groups however. A person might, for example, be a British national with an Asian ethnicity, and belong to a particular political group and economic class. Whether or not one particular facet of a person's

identity is more important than the others, is a matter that is fiercely debated.

For some theorists such as Miller (1997: 11), 'nations are ethical communities. They are contour lines in the ethical landscape. The duties we owe to our fellow-nationals are different from, and more extensive than, the duties we owe to human beings as such'. Miller and others argue that nationality is the most important way in which people identify themselves, and as such it renders their responsibilities to co-nationals much greater than to others. Whilst Perry (2001: 103-108) argues that gender is the most important identity group, and that feminism is in danger of being watered-down and destroyed by theories that place too much emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of an individual's identity. For, she argues (2001: 107), 'Women of all ethnicities, sexual preferences, and even classes, will be disadvantaged by proposed changes in welfare regulation, means-tested custody, and the rolling back of abortion rights and affirmative action guidelines'. Marxist theorists argue however that class is the most important factor in social identity, for the economic class you belong to will determine whether or not you have political control over you and your society's future. Hence Marx's (2001: 8) famous opening line to his *Communist Manifesto*, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'.

For the purposes of this paper however, I am going to focus on the influence that race plays in identity formation, and its relationship with the other facets of identity. Race has long been debated in sociological circles, but precisely what race is or even whether it exists to any significant level has been placed in doubt by a number of theorists. Todorov (1999: 64-70) argues

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that for a theory of races (or racialism) to exist, it needs to have five different presuppositions. Firstly the racialist must suppose that there are different races of people at all. Scientifically such a position is untenable, but, as Todorov argues, whether or not the man in the street thinks this way does not depend upon science. Secondly the racialist must suppose that people are not only racially separated by appearances, but that there are lines of division amongst cultures too, which are intimately linked with racial appearances. The third supposition is that the behaviour of an individual is profoundly affected by their race. Fourthly there is a hierarchy of values between differing races, and lastly that some political order should be in place to reflect all the previously mentioned factors. For Todorov racialist doctrine has not gone away but has merely changed its form, from discourses based on race to those of culturalism and nationalism.

For Todorov then there are many different presuppositions that have to be in place before race itself as a significant identity can be considered. But, as he himself notes, there is an ideological form of racialism which is pure and simply racist and does not rely upon theoretical grounding or offer any form of justification. This is racist behaviour and attitude is the most common one in society, and this behaviour can only create and galvanise race or ethnic identity. This can take occur in both a positive and negative fashion, in that one group might define itself in a positive nature when under pressure from another, or one group might violently negate another and try to eradicate it. In such circumstances, the significance that race or ethnicity plays in identity is accentuated and becomes more important than other factors. Indeed, according to Assad (1993), minorities in modern states are faced with two

stark choices; they can submit to complete assimilation or be despised as different. In such circumstances, the identity under threat comes to the fore of the life of the person in question. To submit to the majority is to lose your identity, but to keep it is to face hostility and conflict. Of course, the situation that Assad presents us with is somewhat extreme. But whereas in most circumstances the differences among people might be treated with equal weight, within the boundaries of a nation state trying to forge a unifying identity, racial and ethnic identity does become more important.

Britain, for example, present us with a multicultural society that incorporates a whole range of people from different ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds. But this does not mean that racial discrimination and intimidation does not occur. As Solomos (2003) argues, the long history of racial discrimination in Britain has led to political activists in all the main political parties, whose aim and purpose is to fight for the rights of ethnic minorities. Such developments galvanise people around their ethnicity and form new identities with which people differentiate themselves against others. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1980s were interested in precisely this:

A major concern of the group was the need to analyse the complex processes by which race is constructed as a social and political relation. They emphasised that the concept of race is not simply confined to a process of regulation operated by the state but that the meaning of race as a social construction is contested and fought over. In this sense they viewed race as an open political construction where the meaning of terms such as black are struggled over. Collective identities spoken through race, community and

locality are, for all their spontaneity, powerful means to coordinate action and create solidarity (Solomos 2003: 28).

Race can therefore be theorised not as a natural category or regulation of the state, but as a political construction where identity can be formed in order to fight for social justice. This political use of race argues that racial divisions in society are a cause of major differences in quality of life, and therefore racial identity is of much more importance than other factors. Such division can however cause greater resentment amongst different social groups and put more emphasis on difference than on similarity. While positive discrimination by the dominant social group, in an attempt to redress the power balance between different segments of society, can often enflame racial tension. As Solomos (2003: 192) argues, anti-racists are often depicted as doing more harm to race relations than extreme rightwing fanatics. This is because they highlight racial differences and polarise people between different racial identities. It could be argued however that anti-racists do not create racial tension, but merely highlight tension that is already there. In any case, the importance that race plays in everyday social life is clearly evident. Anwar (1998: 99-100), for example, claims that racial discrimination against Asian people has been on the rise in recent years in Britain, and that in 1994 alone there were 170, 000 instances of racially motivated crimes and threats, whilst an estimated 74 people have been killed by racist attacks between 1970 and 1989. Racial identity can motivate people not only to dislike and slander each other, but even to reach the extremes of violence and murder. With this in mind race is quite obviously, although without any ultimate justification, the deciding factor in a person's

identity in many social situations, overriding other factors such as gender, political affiliations or, very often, religion.

Scott (2002) renders this assumption problematic however by researching the roots of racism from a Marxist perspective. Whilst race and racism clearly do have an important impact in social identity, this is for Scott a modern phenomenon with historically traceable roots. Scott argues that modern racism is intimately related with that of capitalism, and that whilst racism has always figured in societies in different forms, it is only with capitalism that it becomes a constant factor. Early slavery in the New World, for example, was largely made up from white slaves from England before the large influx from the West Indies and Africa. The English ruling classes had no qualms about exploiting the white working classes, but in the end the demand for labour at home rendered the practice of shipping white slaves over to the Americas as inefficient. Using Blackburn's analysis of racism and capitalism, Scott (2002: 167) argues that racism is linked to capitalist growth, national identity and the individualising of the populace.

Its development was associated with several of those processes which have been held to define modernity: the growth of instrumental rationality, the rise of national sentiment and the nation-state, racialized perceptions of identity, the spread of market relations and wage labor, the development of administrative bureaucracies and modern tax systems, the growing sophistication of commerce and communication, the birth of consumer societies, the publication of newspapers and the beginnings of press advertising, "action at a distance" and an individualist sensibility (Blackburn in Scott (2002: 167).

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A further Marxist analysis might consider the influence that alienated labour has on divisive notions of race (see Manson 2000: 20). For Marx, man becomes alienated from his labour in a capitalist society, because he no longer has any control over the products of his labour. He therefore becomes reduced to an atomistic cog in a productive machine, alienated from his work and society. Pseudo-identities can then be formed and people coerced into assuming them to fill in the lack of meaning left by his lack of control over his social production. Furthermore, the crux of Marxist theory rests upon the notion that the ' class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it'(Marx and Engels 1970: 64). This means that it is the ruling economic class, which are the people who control the means of production, that disseminate ideas and values throughout the rest of society. Notions of race are therefore inherently linked with the prevailing ideas of capitalist production and the values and ideas that this produces.

Whilst the Marxist analysis does not refute the existence of racism, nor can it deny its powerful and destructive effects, it does suggest that the existence of racial discourse is the product of an underlying one, that of the capitalist economy. Whether this is correct or not, it does at least render problematic the notion that race is a distinct and unique form of identity. This also calls into question whether or not race really is more important than other forms of identity, or whether its existence is part of an underlying form of identity production.