

Race in the 19th and 20th centuries



**ASSIGN
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Essay Question:

Examine how ideas about race were elaborated in the second half of 19th century and the early 20th century.

Race is a historically and culturally specific notion, embedded in a constellation of economic, political, and cultural discourses and uniquely linked to specific relations of power and authority' (Hirschfield, 1998, p. 34).

It has been argued that race was an Enlightenment project that resulted from the desire to classify (Cohen, 1974, p. 207). Racial thinking certainly existed before this period, but the modern concept of race is a more recent one that has developed from the encounter of more Europeans with other peoples (MacDonald, 1973, p. 241). There is some disagreement as to when the construction of race took its current form. First, it has been suggested that the descriptions of race in ancient literature demonstrate that it originates in xenophobic beliefs (Hirschfield, 1998, p. 34). The system of natural classification that developed in the Eighteenth Century is also seen as an important contribution (Hannaford, 1996, p. 188). However, almost all studies agree that a distinctive development of racial thinking began to take place in the Nineteenth Century (Hirschfield, 1998, p. 35). The Nineteenth Century saw the search for the historical and biological origins of race (Hannaford, 1996, p. 235). It went beyond the simple classification of race and towards a more significant delineation of race into one that embodies characteristics, personalities and even mental abilities. Several key developments were relevant to this progression. These will be examined as follows: first the importance of the development of biological categories and

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the influence of power will be examined. Secondly, the development of scientific dialogue of Darwinism and Eugenics will be discussed. Thirdly, an examination will be made of the influence of nationalism and imperialism. Finally, the notion to which the discourse became self-serving will be considered in that as the connection between cultural features and racial stereotypes became ingrained, there was recourse to the scientific argument to justify the features of power.

The urge to divide the human race into broad categories similar to the animal kingdom seems to be a starting point for many of the theorists in the Nineteenth Century (James, 1981, p. 19). Kant's *On the Different Human Races* is characteristic of this view: he draws analogy to how the animal species are divided to demonstrate a division in the human race. 'A natural division is based upon identifying lines of descent that divide according to our reproductive relations' (Kant, 2000, p. 8). This description of racial characteristics holds a number of significant features of the developing views of race. It seeks to explain differences as accruing from environmental change (James, 1981, p. 19). Despite attempting to read as a scientific study, it demonstrates some significant bias towards the North Europeans, describing those who live in the humid heat of a warm climate, which he states produces 'a thick, turned up nose and thick fatty lips' (Kant, 2000, p. 17). The skin needs to be oily to avoid the absorption of the 'foul, humid air' (Kant, 2000, p. 17). This thus demonstrates that the scientific foundation became the vector for the view of 'racial development and the perceived superiority of white.

The foundation of the racial paradigm can therefore be discerned in the need to classify elements of the human race in a manner similar to the natural world (Lazarus, 2011, p. 4). As has been seen, the development of classification resulted in a derogation of the non-European races. From one point of view, this can be seen as a natural progression, as those doing the classification may tend to regard themselves as the superior race, simply defining all alternatives as the 'other' (James, 1981, p. 19). However, this went much further than a simple scientific approach to considering all races to be inferior in a general sense to a kind of opposition to other races (Bayly, 2004, p. 227). The classification was extended not simply to demonstrate different racial characteristics to ones that included personalities, attitudes and associated capabilities. The urge to categorise therefore does not simply predetermine the unequal distribution of racial characteristics between different races (Cohen 1974, p. 207).

Darwinism can be seen as a significant academic contribution to the racism paradigm. The notion that some races had evolved to a more complete end than others dominated the discourse (Bayly, 2004, p. 230). This represented a significant departure from the old notions of racism and pointed towards the solution: the other, more advanced races would attempt to educate the other races and complete their evolution. The triumph of Western Capitalism was seen as a self-evident manifestation of evolution's triumph in the Western Europeans, with the success of the ex-colonies such as the United States being seen as further proof of a racial superiority of white people (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2006, p. 563). This was intertwined with the notion of social Darwinism, where the formation of societies were seen as

corresponding to the same principles of evolutionary racism. This can be seen in the declaration by the German General Friedrich von Bernhardi in 1907: 'war is a biological necessity of the first importance... since without it unhealthy development will follow, which excludes the advancement of the race, and therefore all real civilization' (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2006, p. 563).

The development of Eugenics in the late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries represents the clearest manifestation of the racial characteristics. This can be described as the science of racial improvement (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2006, p. 564). This characterises the racist paradigm at that time, whereupon differences had become interpreted as significant and strong manifestations of elements that are better or worse within a race (Benedict, 1983, p. 45). Selective breeding was seen as a method by which the tendency of racial characteristics would tend towards an average could be modified. This provided further scientific rationale that justified racial stereotypes. Furthermore, it demonstrated that intermixing between the races could result in interbreeding, and thus 'pollute' racial stocks (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2006, p. 546). The formation of the British Society for Eugenics in the early Twentieth Century represented a significant development of the scientific rationale attempting a social cause, whereby some elements of society were encouraged to breed whereas others were discouraged. This, evidently reached its apogee in the Nazism of the 1930s and 1940s, but the principles were prevalent before this took a particularly strong manifestation. The Nuremberg laws in 1935 redefined German citizenship on racial grounds and ultimately this resulted in sterilisation and genocide of undesirable elements in society. It was the extremes that this

manifestation reached that contributed to its dramatic decline in popularity following the war (Benedict, 1983, p. 46).

Biological determinism offers one starting point for the justification of slavery in the mid-Nineteenth Century and therefore offered a starting point for the justification of racial oppression; in other words it provided the means of defining unequal power relationships (Cohen, 1974, p. 209). The associated racial characteristics applied to other races by Europeans and their descendants can be seen in the manifestation of power (James, 1981, p. 25).

At a point where the anti-slavery movement was growing in importance across the old colonial powers, it seemed required that justification of the submissive state of such individuals in society was required (Gupta, 1983, p. 27). Slavery in the USA became to be seen more as a paternalistic benevolence by slave owners to a race who, by their nature, were unable to thrive for themselves outside the framework of slavery (Bayly, 2004, p. 277). It was widely held in the USA in the Nineteenth Century that black people were slow of learning and had little natural intelligence (Hannaford, 1996, p. 188). The power relations that were involved in the suppression of one group by another therefore justified the characterisation of that race as limited in natural ability, and thus suggested the oppression of the race was of benefit to them rather than the exploitative relationship it was. This idea will be further explored in the development of nationalism and imperialism, but it is important to note the manifestation of power relationships in a wide range of contexts before the late-Nineteenth Century developments (Hannaford, 1996, p. 189).

The notion of racism also developed to encompass not only significant differences of race, but differences in nationality (Gupta, 1983, p. 23). This ‘racism without colour’ requires attention owing to its growth in the period of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries (Gupta, 1983, p. 22). It has been argued that race and racism are ‘inextricably linked’ but this is difficult to support (Morris, 1994, p. 845). Although there is significant racial heterogeneity in the UK, there are strong arguments that suggest that a perceived racial homogeneity is a cultural construct (Gupta, 1983, p. 23). The growth of nationalism can be seen as a significant contribution to the development of racist ideologies (Lazarus, 2011, p. 3). According to a number of studies of nationalism, the notion became increasingly important in the Nineteenth Century resulting in the theme of nationalism that is present today (Brubaker, 2011, p. 1785). The later Nineteenth Century was the period during which the theme of nationalism was very strong (Anderson, 2006, p. 11). This, therefore, resulted in the development of racism to extend to national characteristics rather than simply focusing on biological differences.

A significant corollary of the development of nationalism was that it was founded on shared values and national characteristics (Ersanilli and Koopmans, 2010, p. 773). This therefore provided the notion that other cultures and nations did not share such characteristics. This can be seen as part of the foundation of the notion of racism based upon essentially nationalistic characteristics. As Benedict (1983, p. 128) states ‘if Frenchman and Germans differed, by that token they were different races.’ A crucial element of a number of nationalisms was the notion that the population

within the set geographical limitations were of the same race (Anderson, 2006, p. 15). This intertwined the notion of race and national boundaries in a way that had not received such a complete notion before. However, in order for this developed to take place, the notions of racial-nationalism drew heavily upon the developing paradigm that suggests that there is a coincidence between the race of an individual or a group and other features, such as learning acumen, personality features, attitudes and so on (Ersanilli and Koopmans, 2010, p. 775).

The application of this idea to the set of national characteristics was relatively smooth: it simply posited that, in the same way the geography changed the racial characteristics of people in terms of physical features, it further had an effect on their personal characteristics (Kant, 2000, p. 17). Therefore individuals living in a nation state that had a different geographical location would thus develop similar characteristics as each other and different ones from different states. This paradigm could only apply to a certain number of states and does not fully explain the existence of entrenched racism that occurred in other areas such as the USA, South Africa and Australia (Anderson, 2006, p. 16). In such cases the notion of power represents the most significant explanatory variable. However, it is significant that there was an attempt to provide a strong adherence to a common set of values in late Nineteenth Century; particularly such values as might be deemed Anglo-Saxon, which reinforced the supremacy of the white make, the Protestant Church and the English Language (Bayly, 2004, p. 229). This can be seen as perhaps resulting from the same factors that produced a racial conception of nationality.

The later Nineteenth Century was a period during which imperialist theories were also legion (Bayly, 2004, p. 227). In the historical context of creation, these views were intertwined with nationalism. However, within the context of the development of racial arguments, they have a significant role to play. This has been characterised as ‘new’ imperialism, during which most of Africa was seized by Europeans (Bayly, 2004, p. 228). These views are considered separately as it can illustrate the significance of the importance of nationalism in emphasising the racial characteristics of nation states (Anderson, 2006, p. 11). Imperialism, however, demonstrated the importance of power relations in the development of the racial discourse. In many senses, the racial discourse can be seen as developing from a concerted attempt to justify the unequal power relationship between the rulers and ruled. This can be seen in extent to which most Europeans gave humanitarian or religious justification for their actions, suggesting that the superiority of European civilization compelled them to impose it upon the primitive cultures (Bayly, 2004, p. 229). Social Darwinism played a significant role in the development of imperialisms justified on academic racism, whereby the primitive aspects of the race were seen as justification in itself for the imperialist activities. Other motives for imperialism, such as the economic imperative, all drew on the racist paradigm to provide a less selfish justification for the new empires (Bayly, 2004, p. 230). This therefore resulted in an increase in the notion of race being a defining characteristic.

Racial ideologies were not simply advanced by a conglomeration of nationalism, imperialism, Darwinism and Eugenics (Giroux, 1992, p. 165). In the early Twentieth Century, there became evidence strands of simply

cultural racism that can be seen as running alongside the biological determinism that was largely prevalent. From this perspective, individuals were suspicious or negative towards to other races not solely on the basis on racial differences, but because those differences represented a divergence in cultural values (Giroux, 1992, p. 164). This can be seen in the number of miscegenation laws that prevailed in the USA in this period, which have been interpreted as founded on notions of biological mixing (Hirschfield, 1998, p. 24). However, there was considered to be more at stake than simply the eroding of biological race: marriage resulted in social responsibility and constituted more than simply the biological element; it did not outlaw illicit sex but simply marriage. This therefore was an attempt to assert the supremacy of the white man over all other races (Giroux, p. 165). However, during this period, challenges to miscegenation laws included the argument that the continual subdivision of racial categories made no sense in terms of an identification of race as a biological characteristic (Mason, 1994, p. 845). Therefore, this period includes not only the development of the biological classification of racism in the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, but also the gradual eradication of this notion in the courtrooms of the USA and the continued definition on the grounds of power relationships (Bayly, 2004, p. 231).

The results of this investigation therefore demonstrate the following features of the definition of racism in the late Nineteenth Century and the early Twentieth Century (Jackson, 2004, p. 4). First, the starting point was the biological definition of racism, which, coupled with unequal power relationships resulted in the definition of certain features as being undesirable, less advanced or primitive (Bayly, 2004, p. 227). Second, the

development of the sciences of evolutionary Darwinism and Eugenics provided further scientific validity to these views, justifying unequal power relationships either by pinpointing the inability of certain races to develop, or by suggesting the more advanced races had a personal benevolence to the others (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2006, p. 563). Third, the growth in nationalism resulted in the extension of the racist paradigm to encompass characteristics defined by nationalism rather than identified by biological features (Anderson, 2006, p. 11). Fourth, the growth in imperialism in this period drew upon evolutionary theory to define the colonised as less developed and therefore justifying their colonisation as a duty for the more evolved (Bayly, 2004, p. 227). Finally, cultural separatism played a role, where the biological racial argument was used as a cover to simply perpetuate the inequalities in society (Giroux, 1992, p. 165). During this period, racism went from a series of speculations to a firmly developed and justified academic discipline; different elements of the paradigm intertwined to justify unequal power relationships and vindicate oppression.

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