

*Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity*

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The imperative inclusion of race in sociopolitical context:

A review of *Philosophies of race and ethnicity*

That something which does not exist can silently claim so much power warrants mention in current discussions of sociopolitical reality but few philosophers include race in their theoretical formulations. What follows is a review of a collection of seemingly unrelated essays regarding various aspects of the effects of race in the [post]modern world. What binds these fascinating essays together is their focus on heretofore neglected aspects of race and the ways in which they broaden our understanding of this issue in many different contexts, including India, Brazil, France, China, and Japan, among others. Although it is not this author's intent to focus on each individual essay included in this important collection, these works provide intimate knowledge of cultures and experiences that are not often considered in the race-related literature of the West. Although not an exhaustive list, this review makes mention of several key concepts with respect to the philosophy of race, including race as illusion, the historical exclusion of race in philosophical discourse, assimilation theory and its continued influence in the United States, Orientalism, and reparation.

Osborne and Sandford (Introduction) discuss the permanence of race as an illusion while Schwarz (Chapter Five) discusses ethnic identity as a matter of "imagination" and something within one's control. Race is experienced differently, depending on many factors, including geographical location, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., making it "a dangerous illusion" (p. 19). This becomes relevant when we speak of "white identity" and the diaspora, which Schwarz describes as

. . . a way of imaging oneself, a way of positioning oneself or being positioned as a social being in the modern world . . . Simply put, to think in terms of 'diasporic relations to identity' can serve as an imaginative and intellectual counter, or antidote, to those concep-

tions in which the figurative ideal of the white man governs what is (and what is not) deemed to be real identity. Diasporic becomes a metaphor which condenses all that the white man *is not*. (pp. 94-5)

This implies that “white” is only defined in relation to some aspect of history and cannot exist by itself. One wonders how something that cannot exist alone holds so much power in sociopolitical space. Further, we must “. . . ask why and how one group of people can continue to pose as the scientific investigators and moral custodians of another culture while the ethnic and racial premises of their own operations remain, as ever, exempt from interrogation” (p. 139).

One wonders what race actually is, especially since it does not seem to have a referent philosophically. In Chapter One, Alcoff provides a compelling definition:

Race is a particular, historically and culturally located form of human categorization involving visual determinants marked on the body through the interplay of perceptual practices and bodily appearance. Race has not had one meaning or a single essential criterion, but its meanings have always been mediated through visual appearance, however complicated. (p. 18)

While race is not defensible philosophically, one cannot ignore its sociopolitical realities. However, philosophers tend to ignore race because they do not consider it a valid postmodern construct. It is important to understand that this is just another form of racism: “Refusing the reality of racial categories as elements within our current social ontology only exacerbates racism, because it helps conceal the myriad effects that racializing practices have had and continue to have on social life, including philosophy” (p. 16).

Alcoff suggests that one of the reasons race is ignored in the United States is because to acknowledge race would require an acknowledgement of “Whiteness,” which may prove too uncomfortable to those enjoying privilege and status among the very hierarchies they consistently ignore. It is impossible to consider race without noticing its deleterious effect on the world: “Race . . . is difficult to focus on for very long without it working to discredit the imagined landscapes of pluralist difference that

cultural studies so often presupposes” (p. 21). One cannot exclude philosophy from this discussion.

In Chapter Four, Young discusses French colonial theory and the idea of the ‘melting pot,’ once common in the United States, as an extension of France’s assimilation model. Such theories typically see racial differences as “resolvable” through education or assimilation into the dominant culture. He describes America as “. . . struggling against the results of the assumption that a nation can only develop successfully through the processes of assimilation and the erasure of the differences of all minority cultures and their languages within it” (p. 78).

Chapters Six and Eight focus on China, beginning with a description of the philosophies of race found in China. In a fascinating overview of Chinese history, we see how these philosophies were originally created in an attempt to cope with modernity and China’s place in the global context instead of a way to mark others as “non-Chinese,” as is often thought. These theories are inclusionist on the level of global, political solidarity while exclusionist locally and nationally, which is often seen in globally subordinated regions.

Chapter Eight has as its focus sinology and the politics of Orientalism in the West which “. . . often includes impassioned denials of biased representation by its white practitioners, who as a rule believe that they have specialized in a non-White culture out of love” (p. 132). The author describes how theory is used in China as “cultural capital” in order to gain membership on the global scene. However, the model of theory construction was inherited by the West, along with its inherent Western racism. This is also true with respect to language as Mandarin, or “White man’s Chinese,” is the only language of China considered authentic. Thus

. . . the enforcement of Mandarin in China and the West is rather a sign of the systematic *codification and management of ethnicity* that are typical of modernity, in this case through language implementation. Once we understand this, we see that the acquisition of the Chinese language . . . is never merely the acquisition of an instrument of communication; it is, rather, a participation in the system of value production that arises with the postcolonized ascriptions of cultural and ethnic identities. (p. 140)

This occurs with many, if not all, cultures in the West as they struggle to gain representation in a racist system intent on their assimilation.

Chapter Nine describes the politics of reparation, which the author ties inextricably to race and Christian ideology. Da Silva claims that the notion of reparation is particularly attractive for racialized peoples because it implies they were perfect before the traumatic event for which they require recompense. Da Silva beautifully articulates how belief in the concept of reparation keeps minority groups bound to the dominating Other and ways out of such a stifling relationship:

There is an inevitable loss that I must mourn, a time and space that are irretrievable, while the past yet constructs a web of debts and filiations in which I am caught. Memories and expectations constitute the threads of this web, the context of these memories and expectations colour the fabric of the web and draw a pattern upon it. I am attached to the world of others and to those who constitute my world by this fabric. The process of reconstructing and recovery means disentangling the threads of the fabric in order to weave it anew. If the fabric is not to constitute a straitjacket, I might need to undo the knots that hinder my movements and construct new knots that tie me to others. (p. 159)

It seems that only by movement through expectations of reparation may one ever hope to be free. We have seen from this modest review that there is much light to be shed on the quandry of race in the [post]modern, postcolonial world. The essays included in this text are varied in their focus but maintain a common theme regarding the importance of understanding race in sociopolitical context. Although there does not exist sufficient space to discuss the myriad of relevant topics covered by the contributing authors, we were able to understand many ideas that have not been sufficiently explored in past philosophical discourse. While the topic of race remains provocative and incapable of being captured by one theory, its importance as focal matter cannot be denied. The multidisciplinary approach exemplified by these authors provides sound modeling for future contributions to a topic that is likely to become increasingly salient with each passing day.

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