

Chapter 16

Critical 'Race' Approaches to Cultural Geography

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For most of its history, human geography has tended to address the more positive aspects of human existence. Consider the founding legacy of the Berkeley School in establishing cultural geography, with its emphasis on the creative transformation of human landscapes, on the cohesive nature of human communities, and on the many fascinating ways in which cultural practices and artifacts differentiate one part of the world from another (see especially the collection by Wagner & Mikesell 1962). Indeed, when I was a student (some decades ago now), one of the things I found most exciting about my geography courses was the prospect of learning all the fascinating things I could about people in different parts of the world – and, about what made them different from one another.

More recently, although the tendency to study the world as an intriguing mosaic of difference remains very strong, 'critical' cultural geographers have placed a new emphasis on what makes human beings different from one another, replacing what many would view as a naive fascination with the exotic with a critical recognition that the exotic is a social production, both of the scholar and of the historical context in which the scholar works. In his recent text, Don Mitchell (2000) refers to "culture wars" as a more appropriate way of designating the struggles over identity, power, and territory that he – along with the majority of New Cultural Geographers – sees as inherent in the development of human culture. Arguably, the most unpleasant, and deeply troubling, product of the struggle for culture is 'race.'

I approach the concept of 'race' in two ways. First, it is a way of life, a fundamental product of Western cultures, deeply embedded in the European colonial past, lived out in the present as a taken-for-granted reality. Secondly, it is an analytical concept that has conditioned both academic and everyday ways of interpreting the world around us. For cultural geographers, it is important that 'race' was part of our earliest efforts, rooted in the geographical lore that accompanied the first European voyages of exploration that brought knowledge, riches, and power to the imperial/colonial dynasties. It was developed as a fully fledged theoretical system by Enlightenment thinkers whose treatises on such far-fetched theories as environmental determinism fit so neatly with the purposes of expanding European powers

and with the by then highly developed sense of European cultural superiority and civilization. It was modified but by no means forgotten in the cultural theories of the twentieth century that eschewed environmental determinism in favor of culture as means of differentiating human systems, yet maintained an implicit belief in the fundamental differences that 'race' makes, and failed to apply a critical understanding to the human fallout of racialization: inequality; poverty; degradation; denial of human rights and dignity; erasure or exotification of the very cultures that we study with such enthusiasm. If cultural geographers are not directly culpable in the creation of inequality, they have certainly been complicit in erasure and exotification. (In the present volume, see especially Braun's chapter 11, as well as the chapters contained in part VI, on colonial and postcolonial geographies.)

In this short chapter, I am concerned with the latter definition of 'race.' I wish to show that geographies have geography; that our ideas are produced in context, and in turn contribute to the production of that context, as we express ourselves as members of cultural systems, and as our intellectual ideas and our actions as scholars influence the world around us. I wish both to chart some of the intellectual history of geographical ideas about 'race,' and to speculate on how the course of our history might be altered by critical assessment of our role in the process of racialization. The chapter begins with a review of the concept of 'race' as it is understood in contemporary antiracist geography, then moves to a brief analysis of how the production of antiracist geography has developed in three contemporary Western and Northern contexts.

The Geographical Concept of 'Race'

Recent cultural geography has seen a proliferation of studies of 'race,' embedded in a larger discourse on social construction. Although the concept of social construction is perhaps the intellectual hallmark of the paradigmatic shift that underlies all poststructuralist thinking, nowhere has the concept more salience than in understanding the construction of 'race,' or the process of racialization. Perhaps the most significant contribution of antiracist scholarship to the discipline of geography, then, is the development of this concept as part of its integration into virtually all areas of human geography.

What does the term 'social construction' mean? It suggests that the attributes that are historically associated with the human body – the qualities that are said to constitute gender or 'race' in particular – are socially constructed, or invented, rather than biologically determined. For example, traits associated with femininity, such as passivity, dependence or emotionality, or traits associated with 'race,' such as low intelligence or 'uncivilized' behavior, result from the ascription of such qualities to specific groups, not to some necessary or intrinsic aspect of their physical make-up. Similarly, opposite traits that are usually viewed positively, such as strength, rationality or the capacity for 'civilized' behavior, are ascribed historically to white males, again as socially constructed rather than physically necessary traits. It is through the practice of racism or sexism, therefore, that people are given attributes based on skin color or sex.

A theory of social construction also implies that *all* aspects of human being are socially constructed. There are not some areas that are socially constructed and

others that are not – or that the ‘invention’ of some traits is somehow invalid, insignificant, arbitrary or ‘not real’ – but, rather, social construction constitutes the entire human experience. This point runs counter to any interpretation – for example, that of realism – that would suggest that some things are *only* socially constructed, as though there is some realm of human existence that is more basic. In other words, a social constructionist approach begins with social construction; it does not add it on to a ‘natural’ base. Indeed, in a social constructionist interpretation, the term ‘natural’ has no meaning, if that meaning concerns something that is prior to, determinate of, or independent of human discourse. Moreover, there is no need to resort to idealist interpretations that divide the world into that which is material and nonmaterial, since the world may be interpreted as material existence with meaning. Again, no part of the material world is without meaning. A social constructionist position is therefore simultaneously relativist, meaning that it is subject to change according to social context, and materialist, meaning that no social construction – including thought itself – occurs as anything except a material act.

A socially constructed world – filled with socially constructed human bodies – does not become less meaningful for having being invented. It is on the contrary *full* of meaning, replete with the tremendous range of discursive actions that constitute human life. There is no meaningless human life, no meaningless human act or gesture; nor is there any meaning that is not social. The term ‘social’ in this sense refers to all that is shared in being human, to common meaning based on shared history, filled with power and ideology, and systematically produced within social, cultural systems that are themselves socially constructed. Because social systems are systematically produced, however, it is also possible for some social constructions to be more meaningful, and more powerful, than others. Both concepts of ‘race’ and gender or sex are examples of extremely powerful constructions.

The socially constructed is also profoundly normative, as notions of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, civilized and uncivilized, strong and weak, are built into notions of the power, and the place, of human bodies within a social context. The strength of a social construction to regulate, or structure, human life depends very strongly upon its status as a normatizing concept, and therefore upon the ways in which human beings have invested it with power. The social constructions that are most powerful are those that display two main features: they are so deeply normatized that they seem to those who invoke or practice them to be natural (“well, *naturally*, black people have a tendency towards . . .”); and they are systematically embroiled within a wide spectrum of social life, including the family, the workplace, educational systems, expressions of national identity, and a range of cultural practices.

Recognition of the profound impossibility of accounting for any bodily trait as purely ‘biological’ has occurred largely through the collision of theoretical perspectives on the construction of sex, gender and ‘race.’ Second wave feminist theory underwent a series of disruptive shock waves when challenged to re-examine what had become a somewhat complacent view that gender is built upon biological sex. These waves became a major force when nonwhite feminists, arguing along the same lines, claimed that biological assumptions of difference and sameness underlay a pervasive whiteness within the feminist movement (for a review, see Lovell 1996). This recognition strengthened the understanding that we need to speak of feminisms

and antiracisms – and by corollary of sexism and racism – because all are socially constructed and reflect specific historical circumstances. Nonetheless, the struggle to overcome whiteness in the feminist movement continues, as it does among those who would overcome racism. Theoretical understanding notwithstanding, both movements, and the relationship between them, have shown how hard it is to overcome our own normatized thinking, much less to marshal the social forces of change, fraught as these are with the results of historical constructions.

Building upon the historicity of the social construction of 'race,' it has become customary to refer to the process of 'racialization' as what Miles (following upon Fanon 1966; Banton 1977; and Guillaumin 1980) defines as:

a representational process whereby social significance is used to refer to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct collectivity. (Miles 1989: 74)

The concept of racialization implies that 'races' are constructed through historical processes, that they emerge in specific historical contexts without which they would have no meaning. By shifting from the *idea* of 'race' to its social production, we are also able to analyze racism – the belief in the concept of 'race' as a marker of human difference, as well as actions taken based on such a belief, whether implicit or explicit – as dynamic, discursive, and complex.

For the geographer, it is axiomatic to claim that all human processes *take place* in context. They occur within historically produced landscapes; they have spatial extent and distribution. It makes as much sense, therefore, to speak of 'spatialization' as it does racialization. Indeed, the two occur simultaneously. Racialization, therefore, is always a historical geography. In the context of western society, notwithstanding its considerable prehistory, most writers place the construction of 'races' within the so-called Enlightenment period of the latter half of the eighteenth century, simultaneous with the age of Imperialism, the spread of systems of capitalism, and the burgeoning and spread of modern scientific discourse.¹ During that period was established much of the geography of the world: the building of nation states based on ideas of inherent superiority and inferiority; the mapping of the world into 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' sections; the establishment of trade, production, and other economic factors that would profoundly influence human outcomes for centuries to come. During that period also the discipline of geography came into its own, as both a product and a producer of imperial, colonial systems. While cartographers mapped the world as a grid of political power, early human geographers speculated on whether climate was the dominant factor explaining the putative superiority of the white European man over the black African. In so doing, they legitimized and fed the notion of 'race' that would by the end of the nineteenth century become a thoroughly naturalized and normatized part of modern Western life. In retrospect, although perhaps they may have denied it at the time, they were entirely complicit in strengthening a racialized – and racist – society, while establishing the map as a significant statement not simply of location, but of moral values. As Livingstone's detailed account of the development of geography in the nineteenth century shows, the "interlacing of geographical knowledge and imperial drives" (Livingstone 1992: 219) in the expansion of imperial power represented not only

an economic and political bid for power, but also an attempt to establish moral authority. The result was a racialized landscape that reflected the dominant values of the time.

Racialization, then, has a historical geography, in which we can understand the production of power, territory, and inequality in a systematic way, as systems through which the thread of 'race' runs deeply, justifying the actions of the white north against the black and brown south and east, as well as the production and justification of racial inequality in the creation of modern multicultural societies. The most important lesson of racialization, perhaps, is understanding not only that these large-scale historical processes have produced specific results, but also that such processes occur through the imposition of the human imagination upon specific landscapes. The human imagination is the collective – and usually also contested – discourse through which the normative, the taken-for-granted and the implicit is worked out, acted upon, coded and de-coded, as it is integrated into every aspect of living. I turn now to a brief discussion of the ways in which cultural geographies of 'race' have been thus produced, through the geographical imaginations of two social, cultural contexts.

Antiracist Geography in Context

It would be difficult, indeed hypocritical, to avoid the fact that the discipline of geography is dominated by Northern, Western, white scholars whose lives and careers have been constructed out of the very colonial systems that produced them. If the most important precept of critical thinking is continually to cast back our ideas upon themselves, examining not only their logical consistency but also the motives through which they are produced, then our ideas about 'race' are supremely susceptible to critical analysis. Part of that analysis, especially for the geographer, consists of recognizing that if racialization has a geography, so too does our attempt to understand it.

My purpose in this discussion, however, is not only to show that intellectual endeavors have a context. It is also to say something about the discourse of 'race' itself. One of the most important features of contemporary antiracist theory is the recognition that racisms are so highly variable and adaptable. This adaptability is based in what Foucault (see especially 1985) defines as a series of historical (and geographical) discourses mapping the "technologies of power" through which times and places gain their specific characteristics. As Laura Stoler (1995: 72) suggests:

race is a discourse of vacillations. It operates at different levels and moves not only between different political projects but seizes upon *different* elements of earlier discourses reworked for new political ends.

This observation rests on the assumption not only that racism – and by extension attempts to overcome racism – gain their power in specific contexts, but also that they are not "independently derived" (Stoler 1995: 72) but implicated in a series of overlapping and intersecting discourses that drive political and cultural goals. Is it not reasonable to expect, therefore, that a critical antiracist geography should be concerned with its own technologies of power and influence?

The British roots of racialized discourse

It is perhaps not too provocative to say that the very idea, 'British,' is historically synonymous with racial superiority. I shall not even attempt to do what others have done much more thoroughly in documenting the fundamental ways in which British society is built upon a racialized discourse rooted in colonial expansion (see, for example, Clayton 2003; Jacobs 1996; King 2003). We need only look to British imperial, social, scientific, and broadly intellectual history to see the forms of racialized discourse that have resulted both in the uneven development of colonialism, and in the construction of the racialized 'other' as inferior, uncivilized, and even inhuman. As Paul Gilroy (1987) put it, "*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack.*"

During the 1980s and 1990s, British academics produced a series of powerful critiques of British colonialism. These works provided international leadership in understanding the fundamental relationship between 'race' and class, colonialism, and the downfall of Empire marked by racial tensions as Britons came to terms with social change during the 1970s. The editors of *The Empire Strikes Back* (CCCS 1982) depicted a national crisis in which the contradictions established during years of colonial domination were being worked out upon the postcolonial British landscape (Solomos et al. 1982).²

The crisis to which they refer began in Britain as a result of post-Second World War labor migration from former British colonies. This is not to say that British racialization began in the postwar period, especially if we consider the relative lack of nonwhite bodies in the British landscape prior to that time as itself a racialized expression. And, the fact that Britain was so dominantly white prior to the Second World War must also be seen as an expression of exclusion and of the notion of 'British' as an exclusively white race. Nonetheless, it was during the early 1950s that Britain underwent a transition from racialization at a distance, becoming the multicultural society that it is today through the movement of thousands of former colonial inhabitants to British cities, especially to London and the Midlands. Geographers such as Ceri Peach responded to the transformation of the British landscape with well-established methodologies to study changes in residential patterns (Peach 1975; Peach et al. 1981) that drew much from the rich dialogue between geographers and urban sociologists, in both Britain and the US, but particularly those of the Chicago School. The students of the next generation writing in the late 1980s, including such scholars as Anderson (1987, 1988), Jackson (1987, 1988), Keith (1987, 1988, 1989), and Smith (1989a, 1989b), built upon this perspective by applying the lessons of the new cultural studies approach, which Bonnett and Nayak (2003) have recently described as "representations of race and place."

Bonnett and Nayak describe more recent work, again occurring primarily but not exclusively in a British context, as moving generally from the study of representations to deeper critical cultural understanding of the symbolic meaning of such representations, that encompass "new theories of cultural identity: beyond 'race'" (Bonnett & Nayak 2003: 306–7). Strongly influenced by postcolonial theorists, such work begins with Jackson's (1995) *Maps of Meaning* and extends to Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) account of the meaning of landscape racialization in childhood, Heidi Nast's (2000) psychoanalytical account of the construction of family in racialized Chicago, Peter Jackson's recent work on the racialization of shopping patterns

(1998) or labor relations (Jackson 1992), Anderson's (1992) call to examine the nature of racialized discourse; and Kobayashi and Peake's (2000) discussion of whiteness as a basis for both local and national identity in the framing of the events at Littleton, Colorado, all of which share an emphasis on both the geographical and historical nature of racialized landscapes, and the very important perspective that we cannot understand the construction of 'race' as nonwhite without at least as much attention to the ways in which whiteness itself is constructed as a dominant metaphorical map for modern life. Bonnett's recent works (1993, 1997, 2000a, 2000b) draw out the theoretical implications of the turn to focus on whiteness as a geographical and historicized social product.

What stands out about Bonnett's and Nayak's account, however, notwithstanding its theoretical sophistication, is the fact that all of the works cited above (and others that, for reasons of brevity, are not fully cited here) occur at a methodological distance from the 'sites of struggle' in which racialized discourse occurs. Although a few of the works cited involve the collection of interview material, and all of them depend upon detailed archival research, none involves the immediate engagement of members of racialized communities, nor a political – much less activist – commitment to the places involved. The politics of difference and cultural identity are, therefore, constituted as analytical categories that – notwithstanding their obviously political roots – need to form the basis for scholarship:

We have argued in this chapter that it is only by understanding such normative terms as 'white' and 'western' – the ones against which others are defined as exotic – that wider systems of racial privilege can be brought into view. By making it clear that categories such as whiteness are also the products of racialization, that they too have a history and a geography and, hence, are changeable, we can help transform the critique of race and ethnicity from a 'subfield' into an essential theme running throughout a rigorous geographical education. (Bonnett & Nayak 2003: 309)

The American context

If British culture can be defined historically as racism at a distance, American society has by contrast been built upon the fundamental notion of a landscape shared, albeit unevenly and unequally, by white and nonwhite. Both the institution of slavery, and the practice of ridding the land of aboriginal cultures, are fundamental to what defines 'America,' and between the two account for most of the bloodshed that has occurred on American soil. The refinements associated with whiteness that are a trademark of British culture developed a much more blunted popular appeal as a result. While I would not wish to become too deterministic in this analysis, it is perhaps not insignificant that whereas British antiracist scholarship has been characterized as somewhat aloof and theory-driven, American scholarship has been on the whole more empirical, as well as more fraught and engaged with social struggle.

I have pointed out (Kobayashi 2003) that the roots of antiracist scholarship in the American context arose not through the direct application of social theory, but through a very raucous discourse over the moral obligations of geographers as citizens that began with an Association of American Geographers meeting in Ann Arbor Michigan in 1971, and led to the establishment of the journal *Antipode*. American antiracist scholarship has emerged from not only the deep social division

of the legacy of slavery, but the post-Second World War social responses that include reactions to the Cold War, the civil rights movement in the context of the peace movement of the 1960s, and geographer's early attempts to combat racism on the ground through such pedagogic experiments as Bunge's 'Detroit Expedition' (Bunge 1971). For many American scholars, colonialism has meant not the construction of the other from a distance that spans all the pink on the globe, but colonialism represented by "the ghetto as neo-colony" (Blaut 1974). Others, while eschewing the rhetoric of radicalism as well as that of postcolonial theory, set their sights more immediately upon the lived conditions of African Americans, and upon a policy- as well as research-driven agenda for eradicating the results of a historical geography based on slavery (Rose 1970, 1972), while more recent work drawing upon that tradition but in addition applying an antiracist theoretical perspective calls for direct political action to intervene with and on behalf of racialized people (Gilmore 1998–9, 2002; Kobayashi 1994, 2001; Peake & Kobayashi 2002; Pulido 1996, 2000, 2002; Schein 2002; Wilson 2000a, 2000b; Woods 2002). These works discuss blood and guts, racialized killing, environmental degradation, the abuse of women and children, the burning of neighborhoods, and cultural genocide. They ask for an accounting not only of the cultural construction of whiteness, but of the power of whiteness to exclude in ways that are often violent (Dwyer & Jones 2000) or that invoke the potential violence of the state (Delaney 2002). The focus shifts in such works from the actions of the dominant majority to define and represent racialized subjects to the actual experiences of those subjects in everyday landscapes, with a reflexive agenda for the role of the geographer in his or her subjects' lives. In addition, the majority of the geographical scholars working in an American context are themselves members of racialized minority groups.

Having presented these two broadly-based approaches to the study of racism in geography, one dominated by British scholars and focused on postcolonial theories of cultural representation, the other dominated by American scholars and focused on on-the-ground struggles that often involve participant activism on the part of the researcher, as well as coming-to-terms with the violence and human degradation that racism brings, I do not mean to present a clear-cut categorization of the two contexts. Indeed, there has been over the years, whether in the pages of *Antipode*, at both general and specialized academic conferences, as well as in joint publications, a great deal of interaction between the two contexts. Indeed, there is some overlap among the scholars whom I have named above, a number of them work in both broadly described fields and in a number of empirical sites. Not all can be categorized according to nationality.³ Nor would I want to forget the contributions that have come from other parts of the world, notably southern Africa and the Caribbean. There are in addition a number of Canadians on the list – in addition to myself – whose work represents its own context, including that of recognizing the Aboriginal presence in Canada, but which often occurs in collaboration with both American and British colleagues. By all means, therefore, I wish to avoid lapsing into a new form of naive cultural reductionism.

In both countries, of course, the complexities of racialization cross-cut the landscape of racism in various ways. The two contexts are not unique, both because they have much cultural history in common, and because there is a wealth of collaboration among many countries. My distinction is therefore partly a heuristic one.

It illustrates, however, the important fact that the discernibly different manifestations of 'race' in the two national contexts need to be linked to the distinctive ways in which geographers have approached the study of racialization. The point is that the two countries illustrate the profound historical effects of such forces as colonialism, slavery and state policy, to the extent that these processes can become dominant, if by no means monolithic, forces in the development of racialized cultural conditions. The extent to which geographical scholarship reflects that dominance is both an expression of our reaction to a distinctive cultural milieu, and an expression of the extent to which our own work is normatized and reflects common experiences and conditioning discourses. I believe that the dominant historical fact in Britain of racism at a distance through the process of global colonialism (brought home most definitively in the postwar era), set against the historical fact of the legacy of slavery in the United States, with its legacy of deeply racialized and divided American cities and a particular history of social activism among American geographers, point to some significant contextual differences that, although I do not have the time nor space to develop them here, deserve serious further consideration. At least one major difference between the two contexts is that the British scene remains dominated by white geographers (hence an understandable focus on the significance of whiteness in geographical scholarship), while the American scene is much more diverse, but owes much of its legacy to both the scholarship and the dedication to social change of African American and other minority-group geographers. At the very least, my analysis points to a need to understand studies of racialization as themselves racialized.

Without also lapsing into yet another set of essentialized categories, therefore, I would simply make the point that there is a cultural geography of antiracist scholarship, that it matters not only where but *who* does the work (as well, no doubt, as who speaks to whom), that there can be no disengagement of the political and the academic without very serious consequences, and that in the end our discipline is thoroughly socially constructed, within a broader historico-intellectual context. My purpose here is to engage that process of construction, not only by pointing out discernible differences in intellectual contexts, but also by promoting dialogue between/among geographical cultures. For that project, too, is part of the political project of destabilizing the categories of 'race.'

NOTES

1. For accounts of the history of racialization see Malik 1996 or West 2002. While many writers see antecedents to racial thinking in certain Greek and Roman writings, the modern concept arises in the writings of eighteenth-century thinkers, whose power to normatize the concept was considerable (Kobayashi 2002; Livingstone 1992). I have confined my discussion here to racism in the western context, recognizing both that similar forms of creating difference exist in other contexts, and that there has been considerable historical overlap in various parts of the world, especially through the agency of colonialism. At the same time, however, I do not wish to reduce racialization to a single universal process.
2. I could also point to work done in France during the same era, especially that of Guillaumin (1980) or Fanon (1966), building upon the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre

and Hannah Arendt. But, while these works are of tremendous importance in geographical theories today, they did not play such a significant role in the production of geographical works in France at the time, and my purpose is to discuss the context of antiracist geography.

3. Indeed, I include my own work in reference to the context in which it has been published, not in reference to my own nationality, which is neither British nor American.

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