

### **Discourse around ‘race’ and culture; a critical review**

The term ‘race’ entered the English language in the sixteenth century at a time in Europe when the Bible was accepted as the authority on human affairs; and the word ‘race’ was used in the sense of lineage, supposedly ordained at the creation of the world (Banton, 1987). Later, a vague racial awareness (of say Jews and Muslims as non-Christian ‘other’ to Europeans) evolved into modern conception of race with the rise of European power and its conquest of the Americas (Omi and Winant, 1994/2014). Major figures during the (European) ‘Enlightenment’, such as Hegel, Kant, Hume and Locke, expounded (what today would be called) racist opinions (see Eze, 1997); and a pattern of ‘race thinking’ (Barzun, 1965: ix) linked to *racism* was to engulf western civilization from then on (Omi and Winant, 1994 / 2014) right up to the second world war (WW2); except that under the influence of Darwinian ideas, race was seen sometimes to designate subspecies on the basis of which scientific racism and eugenics developed (Graves, 2002; Chase, 1997). Since WW2 and the Unesco (1950) declaration *The Race Question*, sociological theories of race have found favour—the notion of races as populations, where ‘race’ is a social concept rather than a biological one, However, whether seen as something biological or social, the idea of ‘race’ has continued to play a fundamental role in structuring the social world of humankind (Omi and Winant, 1994) interacting I would add with similar ideas (for example caste) in non-western communities.

Today, all these notions about ‘race’ exist together, giving rise to considerable confusion in thinking as we see in the current discussion on immigration. Also as the term culture evolved and was popularised by social anthropologists, ‘race’ and culture have become conflated—but a bit more of that later.

Culture originally meant ‘husbandry’ (Eagleton, 2000)—the verb ‘cultivate’ derives from that—and this meaning persists (for example) in references to ‘cultured pearls’ or ‘tissue culture’. But over the years the word ‘culture’ was transformed from being an activity to become an entity—almost an abstract concept (Eagleton, 2000). At one time being ‘cultured’ was synonymous with being civilized, but then anthropology, in association with colonialism, gave culture its modern meaning of ‘a unique way of life’ (2000: 26) initially applied to people designated (by anthropologists) as ‘uncivilized’ or racially inferior, but later applied to all societies. In the sixties, culture was defined (for example) as ‘shared patterns of belief, feeling and adaptation which people carry in their minds’ (Leighton and Hughes, 1961: 447) usually assumed to be passed on through families and personal interactions. But through the 80s and 90s this changed into a somewhat post-modern view of culture as a loose system of elements not just passed down but also actively *made*—representing the idea that if we get a group of people together (say in a working environment or family or community) a ‘culture’ of that group emerges sooner later.

The past two or three decades has seen major changes in the way the term culture is applied to individuals and groups, complicated recently by changes in social structure as a result of a various types of migration, ease of communication, travel and soon. First, following on the writings of Foucault (1967, 1977, 1988), categories which lump peoples or experiences together without contextualising them in terms of power relations have become suspect. Second, the notion of culture being *made* by people (both as individuals and groups) has extended—cultures as ‘products of human volition, desires and powers’ (Gerd Baumann 1996: 31). In fact culture is returning to its original meaning as husbandry (see above). Finally, more recently, there is much written about the frequent lack now of clear boundaries between cultural groups; of increasing *hybridity* (mixed nature) of culture of individuals; about fusions of cultural forms and formation of new ones (as we see in food and music). In *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Zygmunt Bauman (2011) argues that there is a shift in modern western societies (and that is after all where we are) from communities composed of ‘ethnic minorities and a majority’ to culturally hybrid mixtures of diasporas—groups of people whose identities are fluid and look to a variety of belongings; and that, in many cities at least, societies are becoming ‘an infinite archipelago of ethnic, religious and linguistic settlements’ (p. 34). Consider that in England and Wales, out of 9.1 million people who identify as ‘minority ethnic’ over one million see themselves as ‘mixed ethnicity’ (Economist, 2014; Rogers, 2011), with likely hybrid cultures (if ‘culture’ means anything at all).

Just a word now about term ‘ethnicity’ which aims to builds on ideas within both ‘race’ and culture, but with a personal dimension indicating a sense of belonging to a group real or (more often) imagined but no less important for being so (see Anderson, 1991). The (British) Census (2001) (as in most ethnic monitoring) in posing the question ‘What is your ethnic group?’ asks about *cultural background* not ‘race’ but implies ‘race’ (for example as white or black) in asking for self-definition. The American census keeps to ‘race’. Many research studies in UK (for instance the so-called Aesop studies—Fearon et al. 2006) identify groups of people by ‘ethnicity’ which for many people reflect ‘race’ even more than ‘culture’, but then discuss group differences in terms of *cultural* differences alone. In avoiding ‘race’ as a category, and for other reasons, a sort of ‘culturalism’ similar to racism, has developed (Bauman, 2011). Further, people identified as ‘different’ for various reasons are treated as if they are from different (usually inferior) ‘races’. This racialisation applies (for example) to asylum seekers, refugees, poor people and, most recently, Muslims. I find the notion of racialisation useful in making sense of how discrimination and oppression seem to continue in various settings and in various guises as continuity from the past, evoking notions deeply embedded in many, if not all, human societies—a continuity of racism (or casteism if you like) that changes its form according to circumstances, economic advantage and personal inclinations.

END

This piece is largely from my 2010 book—drawing mainly on the work of Barzun (1965) through Omi and Winant (1994), Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1995) and Terry Eagleton (2000) to Zygmunt Baumann (2011) and others such as Emmanuel Eze (1997) and Toni Morrison (1993), predominantly based on observations in the US and the UK.

Most of the references are in *Mental Health, Race and Culture*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Palgrave-Macmillan 2010. If you have difficulty in finding any references, please contact me directly.