

Sociology 621. Lecture 9
CLASS AND RACE
February 15, 2017

I. The problem of laundry-list oppressions

There is a tendency in some currents of radical theory to want to treat all forms of oppression symmetrically. One therefore frequently encounters lists of various sorts: sexism, racism, classism, ageism. In one sense this is a legitimate move: in terms of the lived experience and identity of people there is no a priori reason to regard any form of oppression as intrinsically “worse” than others, as more harmful than another. The oppression of people with handicaps can create harms as deep as class or gender. (When middle class kids asked in a survey whether they would prefer to be poor or be grossly obese without the possibility of losing weight, they say poor). Nevertheless, if the implication of the laundry list is that the specificities of the mechanisms of oppression are of secondary importance, or that all oppressions have the same explanatory importance for all problems, then I think this is a mistake.

The task of a critical theory of class and race, then, is to understand the specificity of the causal interactions of these social relations.

II. Understanding the Theoretical Specificity of Racial Oppression, racial domination, racial inequality

1. Methodological point: what do we mean by “theoretical specificity”?

In the 2003 UN conference on Racism there was a resolution proposed by a number of delegations that “Zionism is a form of racism”. Many people regard this as an absurd statement; others regard it as capturing some underlying, deep theoretical unity between Zionism and other, more generally accepted forms of racism. The methodological problem of “specificity” involves providing a theoretical understanding of a particular form of social interaction so that we know when specific empirical cases should be treated as similar or different, as falling under the same broad category or not. This can be an arbitrary exercise in wordplay for political purposes, but can also be a more rigorous matter of figuring out how concepts fit together within theories.

[This is basically the task laid out in the Old Sesame Street ditty: “one of these things are not like the others, one of these things just isn’t the same....”. There was a funny version of this I heard on BBC Radio 4 in a spoof about Bush. Bush was given four things: a mouse, a turtle, rabbit and a waffle iron and was asked which of these was not like the other. He called up the Sesame Street hotline to discuss the matter:

Bush: “Well I think it is the turtle. It’s not like the others.”

Kermit: “Mr. President, I think it is the waffle iron”

Bush: “No, I don’t think it is the waffle iron. A waffle iron’s got a tail just like the bunny and the mouse. But the turtle doesn’t have a tail.”

Kermit: “I think it is the waffle iron because it isn’t alive. The other three are alive.”

Bush: “A waffle iron is alive. It smokes. You have to breathe to smoke.”

Kermit: “Mr. President. It doesn’t really have a tail. That is called an electric cord with a plug

on the end. You put it in the wall socket.”

Bush: “Well, you can put a little mouse’s tail in a wall socket too. I bet it would smoke then also.”

Kermit: “Anyway, a turtle also has a tail, you just can’t see it under the shell”

Bush: “You’re joking, a little turtle really has a tail?”

Kermit: “Yes, under the shell”

Bush: “Well then, that doesn’t count because you can’t put it in a socket.”]

Defining the theoretical specificity of racial oppression involves three sorts of tasks:

1. Specifying what is the abstract category within which “racism” would count as one specific type. This requires developing a real theory of this more abstract category.
2. Within this abstract category, specifying what distinguishes racism as a specific sub-type.
3. Figuring out which historically concrete forms of oppression are instances of racial oppression, which are not, which have some aspects of racial oppression, etc.

2. *The problem of “Essentialism”*

There is one more important methodological complication in this sort of classification exercise: the theoretical specificity of a particular concept or category depends upon how it figures in some theoretical problem or question. To argue that a particular category has a particular definition irrespective of its theoretical purpose is, for some people, the sin of “essentialism”, but more often it is just sloppy thinking.

Two things should be classified together if it is the case that they identify the same kind of casual process within some social phenomenon under investigation. It may turn out when you push this that some commonsense, everyday distinctions dissolve, and other things which look very similar “on the surface” may in fact be very different. This also means that for different theoretical purposes different kinds of *conceptual lines of demarcation* and *aggregation* need to be drawn. Ultimately the issue, of course, is not so much which of these get the tag “racial oppression” – there may be historical and linguistic (if not theoretical) reasons to use this label quite narrowly – but rather how we understand the *conceptual space* within which racial domination/oppression is located. This is tough work and fraught with political passion in the case of racism and racial oppression.

3. *The Abstract Category within which “racial oppression” is an instance*

Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel have an interesting proposal for how we should think of the conceptual category within which racial division is a specific example. The more abstract category is “communal identity”. The basic idea is this: at the very core of social life is the idea of “community” – the circle of people with which one regularly cooperates and feels bonds of trust and solidarity, the circle of people that provide the basic building blocks of social interaction and reciprocity. We are social animals; this is part of our evolutionary history. At its most fundamental level, the social cooperation of community is anchored in face-to-face relations and reciprocities reaching back to our hunting-and-gathering past. But now, of course, this fundamental idea extends to larger circles of people.

With this very general understanding, then, “Communal identity” refers to the criteria one uses to decide what sorts of people fall into this category of “community” and what sorts do not. One can have multiple communal identities in this sense, and the various kinds of community in which one’s life is embedded can have a shifting, fluid and potentially contradictory character.

Defined in this way, community and communal identity need not imply anything about oppression; just trust, cooperation and sociability. Communal identity becomes the basis for oppression when it gets combined with mechanisms of domination and exclusion. One might want to call this an “alienated form of community”. Just as class can be thought of as an alienated form of the division of labor – i.e. an economic relation which gets linked to mechanisms of domination, exclusion and exploitation – and male domination is a form of alienated gender relations (i.e. the gender division of labor gets linked to mechanisms of domination), so too can communal identity become a form of alienated solidarity. Ethnicity, religion, language, nationality, tribe, and other forms of communal identity all can, in certain situations, be alienated in this way and become sources of communal division, antagonism and oppression. Racial division is one specific form of such communal division.

4. *The specificity of Racial Oppression*

Consider the following list of social divisions each of which in various times and places is a source of both conflict and – arguably – oppression:

- black and white in the US
- Jew and Muslim in Israel/Palestine
- anti-Semitism in Europe
- catholic/protestant in Northern Ireland
- Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda
- untouchable castes in India

Which of these constitute instances of *racial* oppression? You see that in the absence of a theoretical agenda and some explanatory purpose, the question is very hard to resolve.

Now, I will give a provisional definition of racial oppression, but it is one whose boundary conditions – the criteria for what is included or not – may shift depending upon explanatory contexts. But here is a provisional definition:

- i. Racial division is a *socially recognized distinction* between people based on *biological lineage*: you are born into a racial category by virtue of the racial category of your parents. It is an *ascriptive category*, although in some special cases there are socially validated ways of “escaping” a racial classification. Classification systems based on biological lineages are *socially constructed* rather than “natural”: they always constitute a social transformation of the raw material of biologically based lineages. (Note the arbitrariness of the U.S. “one drop rule” – imagine a “one drop” whiteness-making rule).
- ii. Typically the biological lineage is linked to some socially recognized and symbolically salient *visible physical attribute* (technically: phenotypic differences), but this need not be the case. Anti-Semitism in Europe was not linked to any consistent, visible phenotypic characteristics, although there was always a stereotyped “Jewish look”. You could be

blonde and blue-eyed and be a Jew.

iii. Racial *division* becomes racial *oppression* when it corresponds to some form of socially-significant exclusion, typically with an economic dimension, but also political and cultural.

iv. Racial classification distinctions become stable, socially reproducible forms of exclusion when they are systematically connected to communal identities. *Racial oppression, then, is grounded in biological lineages embodied in communal identities.*

v. When racial division takes the form of racial oppression, the oppressed group is also invariably stigmatized, given an inferior social status, in the extreme case regarded as an inferior type of human beings in the biological not just social sense (and sometimes even subhuman). It is possible that the stigmatization and status denigration can continue even if the exclusions have largely disappeared. The most striking example was anti-Semitism in Germany.

Now, this provisional definition of the distinctively *racialized form of oppression* did not, directly, make any reference to class. But a class-relevant idea enters in criterion iii: exclusion. Remember that in the definition of exploitation one of the three principles was the exclusion principle, and the idea of social relations of production centers on rights and powers over resources, which are fundamental powers of exclusion. There is a sense, then, that at the heart of racial oppression there is nearly always a connection between race and class: the stakes in racial oppression are in significant ways access to class-resources. This could be called a materialist thesis about racial oppression: the stakes are not just status inequalities; they are material interests.

III. The Class Analysis of Racial Oppression

1. The central Question

In thinking about racial oppressions and their link to class structure, the important question to ask is less: “What are the origins of racial inequality?” but rather, “What explains the durability of racial divisions and the difficulty in eliminating racial inequality?” The central claim of class analysis is that the interactions of class and race help to answer both of these questions. This does not mean that class and class alone is sufficient to explain the durability of racial inequality and oppression, but that it is one of the central processes involved. In particular, there are certainly cultural processes embedded in racial orders which play a critical role and have autonomous effects independently of their interactions with class. I will not attempt to sort out those cultural processes here or weigh their importance. Rather I will focus on the problem of the class/race interconnection.

2. *Who Benefits from Racism*

A useful way of approaching these issues is to begin by asking what seems like a simple question, and then seeing what makes this question more complex (and more interesting). The simple-sounding question is this? *Who benefits from racial inequality?* Let us try to answer this

question with an initially quite simple model of the relevant actors about whom we ask the “who benefits” question: White capitalists; White workers; Black workers.

There are four traditional answers to the questions of who benefits from the overall patterns of racial disadvantage of blacks:

1. *White workers exploit black workers*: there is actually a transfer of surplus from black workers to white workers → they are really in distinct classes. This is the strong version of internal colonialism arguments, theories of super-exploitation. White workers and white capitalists form a racial alliance because they share common interests in the exploitation of blacks. *White workers would be worse off if black workers simply disappeared.*
2. *White workers oppress black workers* but do not exploit them: they benefit from exclusionary practices, but do not receive direct transfers = split labor market theories. White workers would *not* be worse off if black workers disappeared.
3. *White workers neither oppress nor exploit black workers: capitalists differentially exploit different categories of workers, but all workers suffer from the differential exploitation.* This is the traditional Marxist class analysis. This differential exploitation creates cleavages within the working class which weakens workers in struggles with capitalists. Sometimes this is seen as a deliberate strategy; other times more of a functional relation. But in any case: *Capitalists alone benefit from racism.*
4. *The differential exploitation of black and white workers is of decreasing relevance.* The key issue = the marginalization of segments of the black population from the system of exploitation altogether: the theory of the underclass. *The underclass = oppressed but not consistently exploited* (e.g. welfare mothers; permanently unemployed; “criminal underclass”). Racial conflict therefore centers on the State’s intervention to deal with underclass phenomena, not directly on class antagonisms/competition between black and white workers.

Different theorists have different answers:

William Wilson: historical transition from preindustrial slave relations (white ruling class exploits black slaves), to industrial period (white workers oppress black workers through job competition and exclusion) to contemporary period (differential exploitation disappearing where class inequalities among blacks matter more than between blacks and whites).

Edna Bonacich: white workers oppress black workers through exclusions, segmented labor markets = classic divide and conquer dynamic: by structuring the labor market in particular ways, capitalists can pit the real interests of different groups of workers against each other.

Michael Reich: capitalists exploit workers of different races differentially. Racial divisions hurt both black and white workers. The econometric data on this are quite compelling: white workers are worse off under conditions where black workers are most oppressed. The wages of white workers are highest where the inequalities between black and white workers are least.

At different times and places each of these views may be correct. There is no particular reason to believe that there is a single, overarching profile of interests that link class and race.

One problem with all of these views, however, is that they fail to pay much attention to the real specificity of “racialization” as a dimension of cleavage, about why this specific form of cleavage has such staying power, such bite, through its interconnection with class. I would like to propose a way of looking at this issue that may help clarify this.

3. The problem of solidarity

Regardless of the answer to the question of who benefits from racism, one of the most fundamental ways in which race and class interact is the undermining class solidarity. The segmented labor market arguments and differential exploitation arguments all touch on this. But there is more going on than simply economic cleavages that generate strata within the working class. Here is one way to think about this:

- Solidarity is difficult to achieve and sustain within the working class because of labor market competition, short term advantages, opportunities for individual strategies, etc.
- When there are strong material inequalities within the working class – call these strata – solidarity across those categories often requires that more privileged workers restrain their advantages in favor of less advantaged workers.
- This is difficult even when there is relative cultural homogeneity across the strata.
- Where salient divisions of cultural identity are closely associated with such strata divisions, then robust solidarity is even more problematic. *This is especially the case for racial division because of the way race operates to segregate communities and kinship structures, so that identities of mutual regard and trust are demarcated along racial grounds.* Market relations continually push for an atomization of the definition of the relevant unit for self-interest; kinship and community relations push for a stretching people’s understanding of their self-interest (i.e. who they consider like themselves). Racial division obstructs this.
- And on top of this the very content of racial ideologies breeds mistrust and fear: the cultural content of racial boundaries is not just difference and otherness, but danger, disgust, disrespect.

IV. An historical study of class and race: The Transformation of the Southern Racial State

David James’ research on sharecropping and racial oppression is a specific illustration of this complex problem of the interaction of class and race.

1. **Core thesis:** The Southern racial state was instituted and stabilized because it was a solution to a serious problem in the post-civil war era. The problem was this: how to secure the extraction of surplus labor from peasants in a liberal democracy? This was an acute problem especially in cotton agriculture. Solution to the labor extraction problem = sharecropping. Problem = the need for coercive mechanisms to reproduce these relations, prevent coalitions with poor whites, prevent excessive labor migration (keep the peasants on the land). Racialized

sharecropping with political disenfranchisement was the successful solution.

Alternative hypothesis: there was a pervasive, intractable culture of racism generated by slavery. As soon as the North withdrew, this southern racism was unleashed to restore racial domination, the driving force being white racist identities, prejudice, hatred, etc.

2. Empirical claim (David James): if the class analysis thesis is correct, then prediction =

(a) that the resiliency or fragility of the racial state would depend significantly upon its correspondence to the underlying material conditions linked to the class structure.

(b) that challenges to the racial state would be both easier and more likely to be successful when the class structure no longer functionally depended upon it.

3. Historical Trajectory of creation, stability, dissolution of the Southern Racial State

1. material conditions at creation: Dissolution of Slavery: manifest problems of surplus extraction, stabilization of labor force.

2. political conditions at creation: populist threat: threat of black/white poor alliance | escalation of KKK

3. solution: the creation of widespread sharecropping

4. Superstructural consolidation: Jim Crow laws to disempower sharecroppers; vagrancy laws to enforce surplus extraction; etc.

5. New Deal Agriculture: agricultural relief programs | unintended consequence of massive incentives from above which to eliminate sharecropping | acceleration of the dissolution of this form of class relations. By 1950s coercive extraction of surplus had almost disappeared.

6. Cold War & post-WWII US world position | National geopolitical reasons to end racial state in the South

7. Resistance to destruction of racial state in late 1950s and 1960s: greatest in those countries with the strongest legacies of sharecropping.