TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF "RACE"

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A NEED FOR RETHINKING

For most of us that there are different races of people is one of the most obvious features of our social worlds. The term "race" is a vehicle for notions deployed in the organization of these worlds in our encounters with persons who are significantly different from us particularly in terms of physical features (skin color and other anatomical features), but also, often combined with these, when they are different with respect to language, behavior, ideas, and other "cultural" matters.

In the United States in particular, "race" is a constitutive element of our common sense and thus is a key component of our "taken-for-granted valid reference schema" through which we get on in the world. And, as we are constantly burdened by the need to resolve difficulties, posing varying degrees of danger to the social whole, in which "race" is the focal point of contention (or serves as a shorthand explanation for the source of contentious differences), we are likewise constantly reinforced in our assumption that "race" is self-evident.

Here has entered "critical" thought: as self-appointed mediator for the resolution of such difficulties by the promotion (and practical effort to realize) a given society’s "progressive" evolution, that is, its development of new forms of shared self-understanding—and corresponding forms of social practice—void of the conflicts thought to rest on inappropriate valorizations and rationalizations of "race." Such efforts notwithstanding, however, the "emancipatory project" has founedered on the crucible of "race." True to the prediction of W. E. B. Du Bois, the twentieth century has indeed been dominated by "the problem of the color line." It will clearly be so for the remainder of the century, and well into the twenty-first. For on one insightful reading, we are now in a period in which a major political struggle is being waged, led by the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, to "rearticulate" racial meanings as part of a larger project to consolidate the victory of control of the state by those on the Right, control that allows them to set the historical agenda for America, thus for the Western "free" world.

Of course, it must be said that the persistence of social struggles—in the United States and elsewhere—in which "race" is a key factor is not due simply to a failure to realize emancipatory projects on the part of those who championed them. While there is some truth to such an analysis, the fuller story is much more complex. Nor has the failure been total. It is possible to identify numerous points in history, and various concrete developments, that were significantly influenced—if not inspired entirely—by emancipatory projects informed by traditions of critical theoretical thought: from the New Deal to the modern freedom (i.e., civil rights), Black Power, and anti-war movements; to the modern women’s and environmental movements in the United States and elsewhere; to anticolonial, anticapitalist, antidictatorial, antiracist struggles throughout the so-called Third World and Europe.

Still, the persistence of struggles around matters involving "race" requires that those of us who continue to be informed by leftist traditions of critical thought and practice confront, on the one hand, unresolved problems. On the other, by way of a critical review of our own traditions, we must determine the extent to which those traditions have failed to account appropriately for "race" (i.e., provide an understanding that is sufficiently compelling for self-understanding and enlightening of social reality) in a way that makes practically possible mobilization sufficient to effect social reconstructions that realize emancipatory promises. It may well be that we will need to review what we think will constitute "emancipation" and whether our notions coincide with those of liberation and self-realization indigenous to persons and traditions of various "racial" groups enables him to see through socially unnecessary authority and control systems.” Trent Schroyer, The Critique of Domination: The Origins and Development of Critical Theory (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 31.

that would be assisted by us, or who wage their own struggles with assistance from leftist traditions.

No more compelling need is required for our undertaking such reviews than that of getting beyond the interminable debate whether “race” or “class” is the proper vehicle for understanding (and mobilizing against) social problems with invidiously racial components. The present essay is another installment in this ongoing rethinking. Here the focus will be less on the limitations of traditions of critical theory and practice with respect to the privileging of “class” over “race” and more on rethinking “race.” A primary concern will be to question “race” as an obvious, biologically or metaphysically given, thereby self-evident reality—to challenge the presumptions sedimented in the “reference schemata” that, when socially shared, become common sense, whether through a group’s construction of its life world and/or through hegemonic imposition.

This rethinking will involve, first, a review of the career of “race” as a concept: the context of its emergence and reworking, and the changing agendas of its deployment. Second, a brief recounting of approaches to “race” within traditions of critical theory will facilitate responding to the central question of the essay: “Why a critical theory of “race” today?” This question is generated by the need to face a persistent problem within Western societies but, in the United States and European societies in particular, one that today presents a new historical conjuncture of crisis proportions: the prospects—and the concrete configurations—of democracy in the context of historic shifts in the demographics of “racial” pluralism. The centripetal, possibly balkanizing forces of racial pluralism have been intensified during the past quarter-century by heightened group (and individual) “racial” self-consciousness as the basis for political mobilization and organization without the constraining effects of the once dominant paradigm of “ethnicity,” in which differences are seen as a function of sociology and culture rather than biology.

According to the logic of “ethnicity” as the paradigm for conceptualizing group differences and fashioning social policy to deal with them, the socially divisive effects of “ethnic” differences were to disappear in the social-cultural “melting pot” through assimilation, or, according to the pluralists, ethnic identity would be maintained across time but would be mediated by principles of the body politic: all individuals, “without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin,” were to win their places in society on the basis of demonstrated achievement (i.e., merit). For both assimilationists and pluralists, group characteristics (ethnicity) were to have no play in the determination of merit; their legitimacy was restricted to the private sphere of “culture.” This has been the officially sanctioned, and widely socially shared, interpretation of the basic principles of the body politic in the United States in the modern period, even though it was, in significant measure, a cover for the otherwise sometimes explicit, but always programmatic, domination of Africans and of other peoples.

For the past twenty years, however, “race” has been the primary vehicle for conceptualizing and organizing precisely around group differences with the demand that social justice be applied to groups and that “justice” be measured by results, not just by opportunities. With the assimilation project of the ethnic paradigm no longer hegemonic, combined with the rising demographics of the “unmeltable ethnics” in the American population (and the populations of other Western countries, including Great Britain, France, and West Germany) and the preponderance of “race thinking” infecting political life, we have the battleground on which many of the key issues of social development into the twenty-first century will continue to be waged. Will “critical theory” provide assistance in this area in keeping with its traditions—that is, enlightenment leading to emancipation—or will it become more and more marginalized and irrelevant?

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There is, of course, nothing more fascinating than the question of the various types of mankind and their intermixture. The whole question of heredity and human gift depends upon such knowledge; but ever since the African slave trade and before the

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[4] “In contrast to biologically oriented approaches, the ethnicity-based paradigm was an insurgent theory which suggested that race was a social category, not a biological one, and that race was one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity. Ethnicity itself was understood as the result of a group formation process based on culture and descent.” Omri and Winant, “The Dominant Paradigm: Ethnicity-Based Theory,” in Racial Formation in the United States, 14–24: 15.
rise of modern biology and sociology, we have been afraid in America that scientific study in this direction might lead to confusions with which we were loath to agree; and this fear was in reality because the economic foundation of the modern world was based on the recognition and preservation of so-called racial distinctions. In accordance with this, not only Negro slavery could be justified, but the Asiatic coolie profitably used and the labor classes in white countries kept in their places by low wage.  

Race theory...had up until fairly modern times no firm hold on European thought. On the other hand, race theory and race prejudice were by no means unknown at the time when the English colonists came to North America. Undoubtedly, the age of exploration led many to speculate on race difference at a period when neither Europeans nor Englishmen were prepared to make allowances for vast cultural diversities. Even though race theories had not then secured wide acceptance or even sophisticated formulation, the first contacts of the Spanish with the Indians in the Americas can now be recognized as the beginning of a struggle between conceptions of the nature of primitive peoples which has not yet been wholly settled.... Although in the seventeenth century race theories had not as yet developed any strong scientific or theological rationale, the contact of the English with Indians, and soon afterward with Negroes, in the New World led to the formation of institutions and relationships which were later justified by appeal to race theories.

The notion of “race” as a fundamental component of “race thinking”—that is, a way of conceptualizing and organizing social worlds composed of persons whose differences allow for arranging them into groups that come to be called “race”—has had a powerful career in Western history (though such thinking has not been limited to the “West”) and continues to be a matter of significant social weight. Even a cursory review of history should do much to dislodge the concept from its place as provider of access to a self-evident, obvious, even ontologically given characteristic of humankind. For what comes out of such a review is the recognition that although “race” is continually with us as an organizing, explanatory concept, what the term refers to—that is, the origin and basis of “racial” differences—has not remained constant. When this insight is added to the abundant knowledge that the deployment of “race” has virtually always been in service to political agendas, beyond more “disinterested” endeavors simply to “understand” the basis of perceptually obvious (and otherwise not obvious, but real nonetheless) differences among human groups, we will have firm grounds for a rethinking of “race.” Such a rethinking might profitably be situated in a more sociohistorically “constructivist” framework, namely, one in which “race” is viewed, in the words of Michael Omi and Howard  

Winant, as a social “formation.” But first, something of the career of the concept.

“RACE” AND SCIENCE

The career of “race” does not begin in science but predates it and emerges from a general need to account for the unfamiliar or, simply, to classify objects of experience, thus to organize the life world. How—or why—it was that “race” came to play important classifying, organizing roles is not clear:

The career of the race concept begins in obscurity, for experts dispute whether the word derives from an Arabic, a Latin, or a German source. The first recorded use in English of the word “race” was in a poem by William Dunbar of 1508. During the next three centuries the word was used with growing frequency in a literary sense as denoting simply a class of persons or even things. In the nineteenth, and increasingly in the twentieth century, this loose usage began to give way and the word came to signify groups that were distinguished biologically.

This nineteenth-century development was preceded by others in earlier centuries that apparently generated a more compelling need for classificatory ordering in the social world and, subsequently, the use of “race” as such a device. First, there were the tensions within Europe arising from encounters between different groups of peoples, particularly “barbarians”—whether defined culturally or, more narrowly, religiously. (And it should be noted that within European thought, and elsewhere, the color black was associated with evil and death, with “sin” in the Christian context. The valorizing power inherent in this was ready-to-hand with Europe’s encounter with Africa.) A more basic impetus, intensified by these tensions, came from the need to account for human origins in general, for human diversity in particular. Finally, there were the quite decisive European voyages to Africa and Africa, and the development of capitalism and the slave trade.

The function of “race” as an ongoing, classificatory device gained new authority and a new stage in the concept’s career developed when, in the eighteenth century, “evidence from geology, zoology, anatomy and other fields of scientific enquiry was assembled to support a claim that racial classification would help explain many human differences.”


10 "Our theory of racial formation emphasizes the social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meanings and categories, the conflictual character of race at both the "micro-" and "macro-social" levels, and the irreducible political aspect of racial dynamics." Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States.

11 Ibid. 14.

12 Ibid. 13.
provided a form of "typological thinking," a mode of conceptualization that was at the center of the agenda of emerging scientific praxis at the time, that served well in the classification of human groups. Plato and Aristotle, of course, were precursors of such thinking: the former with his theory of Forms, the latter through his classification of things in terms of their "nature." In the modern period the science of "race" began in comparative morphology with stress on pure "types" as classificatory vehicles. A key figure contributing to this unfolding agenda was the botanist Linnaeus. 11

A number of persons were key contributors to the development of theories of racial types. According to Banton and Harwood, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach provided the first systematic racial classification in his Generis humani varietate nativa liber ("On the Natural Variety of Mankind," 1776). This was followed by the work of James Cowles Prichard (Generis humani varietate, 1808). 12 Georges Cuvier, a French anatomist, put forth a physical-cause theory of races in 1800 in arguing that physical nature determined culture. He classified humans into three major groups along an implied descending scale: whites, yellow, and blacks. As Banton and Harwood interpreted his work, central to his thinking was the notion of "type" more than that of "race": "Underlying the variety of the natural world was a limited number of pure types and if their nature could be grasped it was possible to interpret the diverse forms which could temporarily appear as a result of hybrid mating." 13

Other important contributions to the developing science of "race" include S. G. Morton's publication of a volume on the skulls of American Indians (1839) and one on Egyptian skulls (1845). His work was extended and made popular by J. C. Nott and G. R. Gliddon in their Types of Mankind (1854). Charles Hamilton Smith (The Natural History of the Human Species, 1848) developed Cuvier's line of argument in Britain. By Smith's reckoning, according to Banton and Harwood, "The Negro's lowly place in the human order was a consequence of the small volume of his brain." 14 Smith's former student, Robert Knox (The Races of Man, 1850), argued likewise. Finally, there was Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's four-volume Essay on the Inequality of Human Races (1854) in which he argued that, in the words of Banton and Harwood, "the major world civilizations ... were the creations of different races and that race-mixing was leading to the inevitable deterioration of humanity." 15

Two significant achievements resulted from these efforts. First, drawing on the rising authority of "science" as the realization and guardian of systematic, certain knowledge, there was the legitimization of "race" as a gathering concept for morphological features that were thought to distinguish varieties of Homo sapiens supposedly related to one another through the logic of a natural hierarchy of groups. Second, there was the legitimization of the view that the behavior of a group and its members was determined by their place in this hierarchy. "Homo sapiens was presented as a species divided into a number of races of different capacity and temperament. Human affairs could be understood only if individuals were seen as representatives of races for it was there that the driving forces of human history resided." 16 These science-authorized and -legitimated notions about "race," when combined with social projects involving the distinguishing and, ultimately, the control of "racially different" persons and groups (as in the case of the enslavement of Africans) took root and grew to become part of common sense. "Race" was now "obvious."

For Banton and Harwood, this science of "race" peaked during the middle of the nineteenth century. By the century's end, however, a variety of racial classifications had brought confusion, in part because "no one was quite sure what races were to be classified for. A classification is a tool. The same object may be classified differently for different purposes. No one can tell what is the best classification without knowing what it has to do." 17 The situation was both assisted and complicated by the work of Darwin and Mendel. Social Darwinism emerged as an effort by some (notably Herbert Spencer and Ludwig Gumplowicz) to apply Darwin's principles regarding heredity and natural selection to human groups and endeavors and thereby provide firmer grounding for the science of "race" (something Darwin was reluctant to do). Such moves were particularly useful in justifying the dominance of certain groups over others (British over Irish, Europeans over Africans . . . ). On the other hand, however, Darwin's Origins shifted the terrain of scientific discourse from morphology and the stability of "pure types" to a subsequent genetics-based approach to individual characteristics and the effects on them of processes of change, thus to a focus on the

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11 "The eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Linnaeus achieved fame by producing a classification of all known plants which extracted order from natural diversity. Scientists of his generation believed that by using the categories to which animals, plants and objects belonged they were uncovering new sections of God's plan for the universe. Nineteenth-century race theorists inherited much of this way of looking at things," Banton and Harwood, The Race Concept, 46.
12 Ibid. 24-5. Both works were closely studied in Europe and the United States.
13 Ibid. 27.
14 Ibid. 28.
15 Ibid. 29-30. These authors observe that while Gobineau's volumes were not very influential at the time of their publication, they were later to become so when used by Hitler in support of his claims regarding the supposed superiority of the "Aryan race."
16 Ibid. 30.
17 Ibid. 38.
analysis of variety. In the additional work of Mendel, this development proved revolutionary:

A racial type was defined by a number of features which are supposed to go together. ... The racial theorists of the nineteenth century assumed there was a natural law which said that such traits were invariably associated and were transmitted to the next generation as part of a package deal. Gregor Mendel's research showed that this was not necessarily the case. ... [It] also showed that trait variation within a population was just as significant as trait variations between populations. ... Traits do not form part of a package but can be shuffled like a pack of playing cards. 28

And, since environmental impacts that condition natural selection, in addition to heredity and the interplay between dominant and recessive traits, are important factors in the "shuffling" of traits, the notion of "pure" racial types with fixed essential characteristics was displaced: biologically (i.e., genetically) one can only speak of "clines." 29

The biology of "races" thus became more a matter of studying diversities within—as well as among—groups, and, of particular interest, the study of how groups "evolve" across both time and space. To these efforts were joined others from the social science of "race": that is, understanding groups as sharing some distinctive biological features—though not constituting pure types—but with respect to which sociocultural factors are of particular importance (but in ways significantly different from the thinking of the nineteenth-century theorists of racial types).

For many scientists the old (nineteenth-century) notion of "race" had become useless as a classificatory concept, hence certainly did not support in any truly scientific way the political agendas of racists. As noted by Livingstone, "Yesterday's science is today's common sense and tomorrow's nonsense." 30

Revolutions within science (natural and social) conditioned transformed approaches to "race" (although the consequences have still not completely supplanted the popular, commonsensical notions of "races" as pure types as the Ku Klux Klan, among others, indicates).

The conceptual terrain for this later, primarily twentieth-century approach to "race" continues to be, in large part, the notion of "evolution" and was significantly conditioned by the precurseor work of Mendel and Darwin, social Darwinists notwithstanding. In the space opened by this

28 Banton and Harwood, The Race Concept, 47-9; emphasis in original.
29 "An article by an anthropologist published in 1962 declared in the sharpest terms that the old racial classifications were worse than useless and that a new approach had established its superiority. This article, entitled 'On the Non-existence of Human Races', by Frank B. Livingstone, did not advance any new findings or concepts, but it brought out more dramatically than previous writers the sort of change that had occurred in scientific thinking ... The kernel of Livingstone's argument is contained in his phrase 'there are no races; there are only clines'. A cline is a gradient of change in a measurable genetic character. Skin colour provides an easily noticed example." Ibid. 56-7.
30 Ibid. 58, quoted by Banton and Harwood.

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concept it became possible at least to work at synthesizing insights drawn from both natural science (genetics, biochemistry) and social science (anthropology, sociology, psychology, ethnology) for a fuller understanding of "geographical races". 31 Studies of organic evolution focus on changes in the gene pool of a group or groups; studies of superorganic evolution are concerned with changes in the "behavior repertoire" of a group or groups—that is, with the sociocultural development. 32 And it is a legitimate question—though one difficult to answer—to what extent, if at all, superorganic evolution is a function of organic evolution or, to add even more complexity, to what extent, if at all, the two forms of evolution are mutually influential. The question of the relations between both forms of development continues to be a major challenge.

But what is a "race" in the framework of organic evolution and the global social context of the late twentieth century? Certainly not a group of persons who share genetic homogeneity. That is likely only in the few places where one might find groups that have remained completely isolated from other groups, with no intergroup sexual reproductions. Among other things, the logics of the capitalist world system have drawn virtually all peoples into the "global village" and facilitated much "interbreeding." But capitalism notwithstanding, "racing" (i.e., the development of the distinctive gene pools of various groups that determine the relative frequencies of characteristics shared by their members, but certainly not by them alone) has also been a function, in part, of chance. Consequently:

Since populations' genetic compositions vary over time, race classifications can never be permanent; today's classification may be obsolete in 100 generations. More importantly, modern race classifications attempt to avoid being arbitrary by putting populations of presumed common evolutionary descent into the same racial group. Common descent, however, is inferred from similarity in gene frequencies, and here the problem lies. For . . . a population's gene frequencies are determined not only by its ancestry but also by the processes of natural selection and genetic drift. This means that two populations could, in principle, be historically unrelated but genetically quite similar if they had been independently subject to similar evolutionary forces. To place them in the same racial group would, as a step in the study of evolution, be quite misleading. In the absence of historical evidence of descent, therefore, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that classifying races is merely a convenient but biologically arbitrary way of breaking down the variety of gene frequency data into a manageable number of categories. 33
When we classify a group as a "race," then, at best we refer to generally shared characteristics derived from a "pool" of genes. Social, cultural, and geographical factors, in addition to those of natural selection, all impact on this pool, thus on raciation: sometimes to sustain the pool's relative configuration (for example, by isolating the group—culturally or physically—from outbreeding); sometimes to modify it (as when "mulattoes" were produced in the United States in significant part through slave masters of European descent appropriating African women for their—the "masters'"—sexual pleasure). It is possible to study, with some success, the evolution of a particular group over time (a case of specific evolution). The prospects for success are more limited, however, when the context of concern is general evolution—that is, the grouping of all of the world's peoples in ordered categories "with the largest and most heterogeneous societies in the top category and the smallest and most homogeneous in the bottom." In either case—general or specific evolution—the concern is with superorganismic evolution: changes in behavior repertoires. And such changes are not tied to the genetic specificities of "races."

But not all persons (or groups) think so. Although evolutionary—as opposed to typological—thinking, in some form, is at present the dominant intellectual framework for systematic reconstructions and explanations of human natural and social history, it, too, has been enlisted in the service of those who would have "science" pass absolulon on their political agendas: that is, to legitimate the empowerment of certain groups, certain "races," over others. Even shorn of the more crude outfittings of social Darwinism's "survival of the fittest" (those in power, or seeking power, over others being the "fittest," of course), the field of the science of "race" is still occupied by those offering orderings of human groups along an ascending scale with a particular group's placement on the scale being a function of the level of their supposed development (or lack thereof) toward human perfectibility: from "primitive" to "civilized" (circa the nineteenth century); from "undeveloped" or "underdeveloped" to "developed" or "advanced" (circa the twentieth century).

Such arguments find fertile soil for nourishment and growth now that "evolution" (organic and superorganic, often without distinction), frequently conceived as linear development along a single path which all "races" have to traverse, is now a basic feature of our "common sense." Creationists excepted, and as we still face political problems emerging from conflicts among "racial" groups. "Race" continues to function as a critical yardstick for the rank-ordering of racial groups both "scientifically" and sociopolitically, the latter with support from the former. At bottom, then, "race"—sometimes explicitly, quite often implicitly—continues to be a major fulcrum of struggles over the distribution and exercise of power.

Certainly one of the more prominent contemporary struggles has centered on the validity of measurements of the "intelligence" of persons from different "racial" groups that purport to demonstrate the comparative "intelligence" of the groups. This struggle is propelled by the social weight given to "intelligence" as an important basis for achievement and rewards in a meritocratic social order. At its center is the question of the dominant roles played by either the genes or the environment in determining "intelligence" (and, by extension, in determining raciation).

Whichever way the question is answered is not insignificant for social policy. If the genes predominate, some argue, then social efforts in behalf of particular groups (e.g., blacks, women, Hispanics, etc.) intending to ameliorate the effects of disadvantageous sociohistorical conditions and practices are misguided and should be discontinued. It would be more "rational" to rechannel the resources poured into such efforts into "more socially productive" pursuits. On the other hand, if environmental factors dominate, then in a liberal democracy, for example, where justice prevails disparities of opportunities (and results?) among "racial" groups must be corrected, especially when the disparities are the result of years, even centuries, of invidious discrimination and oppression.

The politics of "race" are played out on other fields besides that of "intelligence." Modern science has also been concerned with whether the genes of a "race" determine its cultural practices and/or social characteristics. The findings?

All the known differences between geographical races in the frequency of genes which affect behavior are . . . quite trivial. Yet in principle it is possible that there may be genetic differences affecting socially, politically or economically significant behaviours and it seems reasonable to expect that the more population geneticists and physical anthropologists look for such genetic differences, the more will they discover. Because, however, of (1) the relative plasticity of human behaviour, (2) the genetic heterogeneity of all human populations, and (3) the mass of data suggesting the importance of situational determinants (e.g., economic and political factors) in explaining race relations, there is at present little reason to expect that a substantial part of intergroup relations will ever be explicable in genetic terms. 27

But if not the genes, what about "evolution"? Has it produced differences in behavior and biological mechanisms for survival in different "races"? Is it possible to extrapolate from studies of the evolution of animal behavior to the evolution of human behavior? According to Banton and Harwood, such

26 Banton and Harwood, The Race Concept, 77.

27 Ibid., 127-8.
efforts are inconclusive, the conclusions being at best hypothetical and difficult to test on humans. Moreover:

... the difficulty with generalizing about evolution is that it is a process that has happened just once. With relatively few exceptions it is impossible to compare evolutionary change with anything else, or to say what would have happened had one of the components been absent. Therefore everything has its place in evolution... If everything has its place then, by implication, everything is justified.\textsuperscript{15}

What, then, after this extended review of the science of "race," are we left with by way of understanding? With the decisive conclusion, certainly, that "race" is not wholly and completely determined by biology, but is only partially so. Even then biology does not determine "race," but in complex interplay with environmental, cultural, and social factors provides certain boundary conditions and possibilities that affect race and the development of "geographical" races. In addition, the definition of "race" is partly political, partly cultural. Nor does the modern conceptual terrain of "evolution" provide scientifically secure access to race-determining biological, cultural, social developmental complexes distributed among various groups that fix a group's rank-ordered place on an ascending "great chain of being." Racial categories are fundamentally social in nature and rest on shifting sands of biological heterogeneity. The biological aspects of "race" are inscribed into projects of cultural, political, and social construction.\textsuperscript{15} "Race" is a social formation.

This being the case, the notion of "evolution" is particularly fruitful for critical-theoretical rethinking of "race." As has been indicated, in the biological sciences it dislodged the nineteenth-century notion of races as being determined by specific, fixed, natural characteristics and made possible better understandings of racial diversities and similarities. In addition, as a concept for organizing our thinking about change, "evolution" continues to provide a powerful vehicle for studying human sociohistorical development. It is a notion that is part and parcel of the terrain of critical social thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

ON "CRITICAL THEORY" AND "RACE"

There is some ambiguity surrounding the notion of "critical theory" within traditions of social theory—beyond the fact that it is a phrase now used in reference to certain contemporary efforts in literary studies. On the one hand, the phrase is used to refer to a tradition of significantly revised and extended Marxism initiated by a group of theorists often referred to as "the Frankfurt School."\textsuperscript{14} In this case "critical theory" is the name Max Horkheimer, an early director of the Institute for Social Research (established in Frankfurt, Germany in the late 1920s, hence the name "Frankfurt School"), gave to what he projected as the appropriate character and agenda for theoretical work directed at understanding—and contributing to the transformation of—social formations that, in various ways, blocked concrete realizations of increased human freedom.\textsuperscript{15} This characterization of the nature of social theorizing and its agenda was shared by other members of the Institute (Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno) even though still other members (Erich Fromm, Henryk Grossman) approached matters differently and used different methods in doing so. Further, there were theoretical differences between Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse (and in Horkheimer's own thinking) over time that are marked by the label "critical theory."\textsuperscript{16} Still, the label stuck and even today is used to identify a mode of social thought in the Frankfurt School tradition that continues in the work of a number of persons, Jürgen Habermas no doubt being one of the most widely known. Particularly through the influences of Marcuse on many in the generation coming of age in the 1960s during the socially transforming years of the great social mobilizations of the civil rights, black power, and antinuclear movements, it is a tradition that has been especially influential in the United States, in part because it brought many of us of that generation to Marx, without question the major intellectual precursor to Frankfurt School critical theory (along with Kant, Hegel, Freud, Lukács, and others). And here lies the ambiguity, for, on the other hand, the phrase is often expanded to include Marx's work, and that in the various currents of Marxism as well, the Frankfurt School included. In the words of Erich Fromm, "There is no 'critical theory'; there is only Marxism."\textsuperscript{17} Thus, while the various schools of Marxism, of whatever pedigree, all share important "family resemblances," there are, as well, significant differences among them sufficient to demand


\textsuperscript{17} Tubár, The Frankfurt School, 34.

\textsuperscript{18} From a personal telephone conversation with Fromm during one of his last visits to the United States in 1976.
that each be viewed in its own right. This is particularly the case when we come to the issue of “race” in “critical theory.”

For a number of complex reasons, the Frankfurt School, for all of its influence on a generation of “new” leftists of various racial/ethnic groups, many of whom were being radicalized in struggles in which “race” was a key factor, was not known initially so much for its theorizing about “racial” problems and their resolution as for its insightful critique of social domination generally. Although members of the Institute, according to Martin Jay, were overwhelmingly Jewish in origin, and the Institute itself was made possible by funds provided by a member of a wealthy Jewish family, expressly, in part, to study anti-Semitism, all in the context of Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s, “the Jewish question” was not at the center of the Institute’s work. This changed in the late 1930s and early 1940s. With the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, the Institute was eventually moved to New York in 1935 (and California in 1941) where its work continued until after the war (when it was reestablished in West Germany in the 1950s). The focus of the Institute’s work during this time was the battle against fascism with debates centering on the character of the changed nature of the economy in twentieth-century capitalism; that is, the expression of group sentiments were to be understood in the historical context of the society.

In this, notes Jay, the Institute broke significant new ground. No less so in another major contribution they made to the Marxist legacy, through the work of Fromm especially, that made their studies of anti-Semitism so transformative: the articulation, later supported by extensive empirical studies, of a social psychology—and of individual psychology and character structure in the context of the social—drawing off the work of Freud (among others), in the context of Marxian social theory. This made possible analyses that linked cultural, political, and economic structural and dynamic features of the social world, and the character structure of the person, which helped to illuminate the de facto conditions of possibility for the emergence and social maintenance of Nazi fascism and anti-Semitism. Here, particularly, is to be found the significance of Frankfurt School critical theory for our discussion of “race.”

In the course of the Institute’s work during its stay in the United States, the concern with anti-Semitism became less and less the focus as members of the Institute concentrated increasingly on “prejudice” more generally, although still fundamentally as related to authority and authoritarianism. Initiated by the American Jewish Committee in 1944 and conducted through its Department of Scientific Research established for that purpose, with the collaboration of the Berkeley Public Opinion Study, the Institute conducted major empirical studies, with critical philosophical analyses of the findings, of “one or another facet of the phenomenon we call prejudice.” The object of the studies, it was noted, was “not merely to describe prejudice but to explain it in order to help in its eradication.” The sweep of the project involved studies of the bases and dynamics of prejudice on individual, group, institutional, and community levels all in the context of the social whole.

The Authoritarian Personality, the result of an integrated set of studies and analyses, was one among a number of volumes that grew out of this project. As Horkheimer notes in its preface, it is a book that deals with “social discrimination,” and its authors, in the terms of the credo of critical theory, were “imbued with the conviction that the sincere and systematic scientific elucidation of a phenomenon of such great historical meaning can contribute directly to an amelioration of the cultural atmosphere in which hatred breeds.” It is especially pertinent to this discussion of “race,” Daniel Levinson’s chapter on ethnocentric ideology in particular.

Here two conceptual moves are to be noted. First, Levinson substitutes “ethnocentrism” for “prejudice”.

Prejudice is commonly regarded as a feeling of dislike against a specific group; ethnocentrism, on the other hand, refers to a relatively consistent frame of mind concerning “aliens” generally. Ethnocentrism refers to group relations generally; it has to do not only with numerous groups toward which the individual has hostile opinions and attitudes but, equally important, with groups toward which he is positively disposed.

A theory of ethnocentrism offers a starting point for the understanding of the psychological aspect of group relations. (p. 102, my emphasis)

Equipped with a wider gathering concept, Levinson is able to make yet another move, one he thinks crucial to gaining the understanding being...
sought: "The term 'ethnocentrism' shifts the emphasis from 'race' to 'ethnic group'" (p. 103). What was gained by this?

... apart from the arbitrariness of the organic basis of classification, the greatest dangers of the race concept lie in its hereditary psychological implications and its misapplication to cultures. Psychologically, the race theory implies, whether or not this is always made explicit, that people of a given race (e.g., skin color) are also very similar psychologically because they have a common hereditary family tree. Furthermore, the term "race" is often applied to groups which are not races at all in the technical sense. There is no adequate term, other than "ethnic," by which to describe cultures (that is, systems of social ways, institutions, traditions, language, and so forth) which are not nations. From the point of view of sociology, cultural anthropology, and social psychology, the important concepts are not race and heredity but social organization (national, regional, subcultural, communal) and the interaction of social forms and individual personalities. To the extent that relative uniformities in psychological characteristics are found within any cultural group, these uniformities must be explained primarily in terms of social organization rather than "racial heredity." (p. 105)

As noted in the previous section, the conclusion had been reached in contemporary natural and social science that, at the very least, "something other than racial heredity," understood as biological homogeneity, had to serve as a basis for understanding group characteristics and intergroup dynamics. Frankfurt School critical theory was distinctive as critical philosophical theory and material, social, analysis (a la Marx), fortified by Freudian psychology, deployed in cultural analyses of authority and mass culture. In the Institute's American sojourn particularly, there developed an explicit concern to bring critical thought to bear on the problems of invidious group-based and group-directed discrimination and oppression. "Race" was viewed as an adequate vehicle for such a task. Conditioned by a commitment to engage in critical praxis as an interdisciplinary venture that drew on the best science available (including that on "race"), these social theorists, through an approach to prejudice and assimilation fashioned from Hegelian, Marxist, Freudian elements, provided a means for getting at the problems of "race"—more precisely of race-ism—that was both critical and radical: within the context of an emancipatory project, it cut through social thought based on a refined, erroneous, even fraudulent philosophical anthropology that derived the culture, psychology, and social position of various groups from the biologizing of their "racial types.

Herbert Marcuse, among all members of the Frankfurt School, is most responsible for conveying this legacy to the "New Left" generation of the United States and Western Europe. In contrast to other members of the Institute, he became the most integrated into the American scene and chose to remain in the country when other members returned to Germany in the 1950s. Influential as a teacher and colleague in a number of institutions, his One Dimensional Man inducted many of us into critical theory. Here was an understanding of the social order in a way the necessity of which had been driven home to many of us as, in the context of concrete struggles, we came up against the limits of the idealism fueled by the thought of liberal democracy. For a significant group of persons involved in struggles over the "color line," the limits—and their attempted transcendence—were indicated in the evolution of the struggle for "civil rights" to one seeking "Black Power." But the Frankfurt School did not introduce Marxism to the United States. Nor, consequently, was it the first group of Marxist radical theorists to confront the problems of "race." There were other, much older legacies, in fact. It is this history of multiple legacies that makes for the ambiguity of "a critical theory of race" when "critical theory" covers both the Frankfurt School and Marxist traditions in general. For an obvious, critically important question is, "Why, given other Marxist legacies, did the New Left seek guidance in the work of the Frankfurt School which might be applied to the problems of race," among others?"
With respect to what we might call the black New Left, but with regard to many nonblack New Leftists as well, this question has been insightfully probed by Harold Cruse. For him, a crucial reason had to do with what he termed the “serious disease of ‘historical discontinuity’”.

... since World War I a series of world-shaking events, social upheavals and aborted movements have intruded and sharply set succeeding generations of Negroes apart in terms of social experiences. The youngest elements in the Negro movement today are activists of one quality or another, who enter the arena unfortified with the knowledge or meaning of many of the vital experiences of Negro radicals born in 1900, 1910, 1920, or even 1930. The problem is that too many of the earlier-twentieth-century-vintage Negro radicals have become too conservative for the 1940s. Worse than that, the oldsters have nothing to hand down to the 1940s in the way of refined principles of struggle, original social theory, historical analysis of previous Negro social trends or radical philosophy suitable for black people. All the evidence indicates that the roots of the current crisis of the Negro movement are to be found in the period between the end of World War I and the years of the Great Depression. Most of the issues that absorb the attention of all the Negro radical elements today were prominently foreshadowed in these years. Yet the strands between the period called by some the “Fabulous Twenties” and the current Negro movement have been broken.

The disease of discontinuity affected more than black youth. It was further facilitated by the anti-Communist repression led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, which had “a distinctly deleterious effect” not only on the leadership of black movements at the time, as Cruse notes, but on “radical leadership in general.”

This discontinuity, bolstered by McCarthyism, was institutionalized in the curricula of most American colleges and universities, both black and white: virtually none provided systematically mediated learning regarding the history of previous struggles in which “radicals” had played important roles. Thus, when we remember that the U.S. New Left generation emerged principally on campuses and was forged in the crucibles of the modern civil rights and antiracist movements whose troops and general staff included thousands of students, the availability and attractiveness of Frankfurt School critical theory was in part a product of history. It was available when members of a generation were in need—and actively in search—of understandings to guide them in the transformation of a society that, when measured by its own best principles, was found to be seriously deficient.


... “The hysteria of the time (which was labeled as McCarthyism, but which ranged far beyond the man) had shaken many persons, cowed others, silenced large numbers, and broken the radical impetus that might have been expected to follow the ferment and agitation of the 1930s and 1940s,” Vincent Harding, The Other American Revolution, Center for Afro-American Studies Monograph Series, iv, Center for Afro-American Studies (Los Angeles, Calif.) and Institute of the Black World (Atlanta, Ga., 1980), 148.

Those who suffered the deficits were no longer willing to do so, and were moving to secure their “freedom.” Many others were moved to share in the struggles committed to the realization of what the principles called for. Marcus, himself a teacher and scholar, was among others a major contributor to the recovery from discontinuity by providing an important linkage with Marxian (and Freudian) critical social thought that aided the conceptualization and understanding of the social order as a whole, within a global, historical context, in which it was possible to situate particular problems that were the focus of struggle, including, to some extent, those of the color line.

— But only in part was this a matter of happy coincidence. The linkages between the old and new Lefts were never completely broken. Many young whites, in particular, were supported in their efforts by parents and others who were themselves graduates of the previous generation. There was another crucial factor, particularly as experienced by blacks “on the Left,” an experience that has been formed into its own legacy: the felt inadequacy of Marxian Communist and Socialist projects with respect to the Negro question, the ultimate test case of the problem of “race.” At the core of this legacy is the other side of the science of “race”: not its scientific, critical conceptualization, but the lived experiences of real persons whose experiences are forged in life worlds in part constituted by self-understandings that are in large measure “racial,” no matter how “scientifically” inadequate. Other Left theoretical and practical activities, advanced by various groups and parties, ran aground on this reality. Frankfurt School critical theory, unconstrained by dogmatic adherence to the party line, offered a conceptualization of revolutionary social transformation while, at the same time, it took democratic freedom seriously. Since, at the time, on the black side of struggles involving “race,” Black Nationalism was an increasingly ascendant force that even those on the white side had to contend with, and since participants from both “sides” had been forged in large part by liberal democracy, the vision of a new society that decisively antidogmatist Frankfurt School critical theory helped to shape (particularly by not centering on elite theory) was potentially more promising as a resolution of racism while preserving black integrity. In this regard there was the promise that the legacy of inadequacy of other traditions of Marxist thought might be overcome.

Oversimplified, the inadequacy had to do with the reductionism in the theorizing about “race” in those Marxian traditions that attempted to...
confront problems of the color line through approaches that rested on close adherence to a particular reading of the classic texts of the “mature” Marx and Engels, a reading sanctified after the Russian Revolution of 1917 by the subsequent Communist Internationals: class was the central—indeed, the only—vehicle for fully and properly understanding social organization and struggle. Problems of “race” are to be understood, then, as secondary to the “primary contradiction” of class conflict that is indigenous to social relations in capitalist social formations given the relations of the various classes to the means of production, relations that, at the very least, determine classes “in the last instance.” The prospects for progressive social transformation and development, within and beyond capitalism, on this view, are dependent on successful organization and struggle by the international working class, racial differences notwithstanding. Such differences were to be transcended in the brotherhood of class solidarity beyond their opportunistic manipulation by the class of owners and managers, who used them as devices to foster divisions among workers, and by supposedly misguided, chauvinistic blacks (e.g., Marcus Garvey).

The history of Marixan Communist and Socialist organizations in the United States and elsewhere, populated, on the whole, by persons of European descent, is littered with errors, tragedies, and faces resulting from the dogmatic application of this approach. A key source of the difficulty is the inadequate philosophical anthropology presumed by the privileging of “relations to the means of production” as the definitive determinant of groups defined by these relations, thus of the persons in those groups. Aside from problems involving the racism of white workers in the class struggle, and, frequently, the paternalism of the white leadership, for many African-Americans “proletarian internationalism” was not enough of a basis for forging a new Communist or Socialist world; it disregards—or explicitly treats as unimportant—much that they take to be definitive of African-Americans as a people. Identifying and nurturing these characteristics, and the institutions and practices that generate, shape, sustain, and mediate them, constitutes a complex tradition of its own, that of “Black Nationalism.”

It is a tradition that continues to inform approaches to “race” from the black side, within Marxian critical theory as well (though not that of the Frankfurt School). In 1928–29, for example, with impetus from black Communists (Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, and Harry Haywood), who also had roots in the decidedly nationalist African Black Brotherhood, the Communist International took the position that blacks in the “black belt” of the southern United States were an oppressed “nation.” The program for their liberation thus called for “self-determination” and “national independence.” This was the official position, on and off, for nearly thirty years (1928–57) and was carried out in this country by the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA).

The house of “critical theory” has thus been divided on the issue of “race,” sometimes against itself: the approach of the tradition of the Frankfurt School on one side; those of other Socialist and Communist organizations, of many persuasions, on the other, with numerous schools of thought and practice in-between. “Race” is without scientific basis as an explanatory notion (Frankfurt School). “Race,” white real, is a factor of conflict secondary to the primary contradiction of class struggle (“classical,” “official” Marxism), “race” is the basis of a nation—a group whose members share common history and culture (“official” Marxism of 1928–57). Certainly the divergences have as much to do with social matters as with matters theoretical: the concrete histories of different groups, their agendas, their locations, the personal histories of their members, and so forth. Still, those of us who continue to be informed by legacies and agendas of “critical social theory” must move past this “Tower of Babel” in our own midst if we are to meet the challenges of the present and near future.

47 In the African context, for example, see Aimé Césaire’s protest in his resignation from the Communist Party in 1956: “What I demand of Marxism and Communism. Philosophies and movements must serve the people, not the people the doctrine and the movement. . . . A doctrine is of value only if it is conceived by us and for us, and revised through us. . . . We consider it our duty to make common cause with all who cherish truth and justice, in order to form organizations able to support effectively the black peoples in their present and future struggle—their struggle for justice, for culture, for dignity, for liberty.” Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism, 260, as cited by David Caute, Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914–1960 (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 21.

48 For a characterization and critique of this philosophical anthropology and its relation to class theory in Marx et al., see my Race and Class in the Theory and Practice of Emancipatory Social Transformation.”
WHY A CRITICAL THEORY OF "RACE" TODAY?

Since the Black Nationalist tradition has continued to stress "race" over class, and classical Marxism class over "race," the "class or race" debates have persisted, at great expenditures of paper and ink, not to mention years of interminable struggle, confusion, and failure to conceive and secure the realization of promised emancipation. As we continue to struggle over matters of "race" in the United States and other societies, with very real possibilities for increased conflict, it is not enough to view today's problems as being brought on by the "heightened contradictions" of late capitalism attendant to the policies of neocolonial administrations conflicting with struggles for national liberation and socialism/communism in the "Third World." More is needed, both theoretically and practically.

"Both race and class" has been the response of some participants in the debate. "Left Nationalists" such as Manning Marable, on the one hand, theorists of the role of race in market relations and in social stratification (i.e., the social distribution of resources) such as William J. Wilson and Edna Bonacich, on the other. Still others have proposed notions of "people-class," "eth-class," and "nation-class." Yet all of these approaches, mindful of nationalist traditions from the black side, as well as of previous running-accounts on "race," still presuppose the reality of "race." But what is that reality? And "real" for whom? Would it be helpful for contemporary critical theory to recover the insights of twentieth-century science of "race" and those of the Frankfurt School regarding "race," "prejudice," and "ethnocentrism" and join them to recently developed critical-theoretic notions of social evolution to assist us in understanding and contributing to the emancipatory transformation of the "racial state" in its present configuration? For, if Omi and Winant are correct: the United States, the state is inherently racial, every state institution is a racial institution, and the entire social order is equilibrated (un/stably) by the state to preserve the prevailing racial order (i.e., the dominance of "whites" over blacks and other "racial" groups), during the decades of the 1950s through the 1970s, the civil rights, Black Power, Chicano, and other movements assaulted and attempted the "great transformation" of this racial state; however, the assaults were partial, and thus were not successful (as evidenced by the powerful rearticulation of "race" and reimagining of the racial state consolidating power and dominance in the hands of a few "whites" in service to "whites" presently under way), because "all failed to grasp the comprehensive manner by which race is structured into the U.S. social fabric. All reduced race to interest-group, class faction, nationality, or cultural identity. Perhaps most importantly, all these approaches lacked adequate conceptions of the racial state—if they are correct, might this not be case enough (if more is needed) for a new critical theory of "race" cognizant of these realities?

Omi and Winant think so, and propose their notion of "racial formation." It is a notion intended to displace that of "race" as an "essence" ("as something fixed, concrete and objective..."), or, alternatively, as a "mere illusion, which an ideal social order would eliminate." Thus, race should be understood as

... as unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle... The crucial task... is to suggest how the widely disparate circumstances of individual and group racial identities, and of the racial institutions and social practices with which these identities are intertwined, are formed and transformed over time. This takes place... through political contestation over racial meanings...

Central to their argument is the idea that "race" is socially and historically constructed and changes as a consequence of social struggle. "Race," in a racial state, is thereby irreducibly political.

The discussions and analyses of Omi and Winant, facilitated by their notion of "racial formation," are insightful and informative, particularly for their reading of the "rearticulation" of "race" by the Reagan administration. What these theorists offer is an important contribution to a revised and much-needed critical theory of race for the present and near future. And part of the strength of their theorizing lies in advance it makes beyond the reductionist thinking of other leftist theorists while preserving the sociohistorical constructivist (socially formed) dimensions of "race." Part of the strength lies, as well, in the reimagining of "race" as a "formation." For what this allows is an appreciation of the historical and socially constructive aspects of "race" within the context of a theory of social
evolution where learning is a central feature. Then we would have to dispose of the prospects of an understanding of “race” in keeping with the original promises of critical theory: enlightenment leading to emancipation. Social learning regarding “race,” steered by critical social thought, might help us to move beyond racism, without reductionism, to pluralist socialist democracy.

Lest we move too fast on this, however, there is still to be explored the “other side” of “race”: namely, the lived experiences of those within racial groups (e.g., blacks for whom Black Nationalism, in many ways, is fundamental). That “race” is without a scientific basis in biological terms does not mean, thereby, that it is without any social value, racism notwithstanding. The exploration of “race” from this “other side” is required before we will have an adequate critical theory, one that truly contributes to enlightenment and emancipation, in part by appreciating the integrity of those who see themselves through the prism of “race.” We must not err yet again in thinking that “race thinking” must be completely eliminated on the way to emancipated society.

That elimination I think unlikely—and unnecessary. Certainly, however, the social divisive forms and consequences of “race thinking” ought to be eliminated, to whatever extent possible. For, in the United States in particular, a new historical juncture has been reached: the effort to achieve democracy in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society where “group thinking” is a decisive feature of social and political life. A critical theory of “race” that contributes to the learning and social evolution that secures socialist, democratic emancipation in the context of this diversity would, then, be of no small consequence.

See Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society.

WHITE WOMAN FEMINIST 1983–1992

MARILYN FRYE

INTRODUCTION

This essay is the latest version of something I have been rewriting ever since my essay “On Being White” was published in The Politics of Reality. In a way, this is that first essay, emerging after several metamorphoses.

“On Being White” grew out of experiences I had in my home lesbian community in which I was discovering some of what it means for a woman, a feminist, to be white. These were very frustrating experiences: they played out and revealed the ways in which the fact that I am white gave unbidden and unwanted meanings to my thought and my actions and poisoned them all with privilege.

An intermediate version of this work, delivered at various colleges and universities around 1984-86, began with the following account of my attempts to come to grips with the fact of being white in a white-supremacist racist society, and with some of the criticism my first effort had drawn.¹

Many white feminists, myself included, have tried to identify and change the attitudes and behaviors which blocked our friendly and effective comradeship with women of color and limited our ability to act against institutional racism. I assumed at first that these revisions would begin with analysis and decision. I had to understand the problems and then do whatever would affect the changes dictated by this understanding. But as I entered this work, I almost immediately learned that my competence to do it was questionable.

The idea was put to me by several women of color (and was stated in writings by

¹ The working title during that period was “Ritual Libations and Points of Explosion,” which referred to a remark made by Helenene Westfall in a review of my Politics of Reality which appeared in The Women’s Review of Books, 11(1) (Oct. 1983). Westfall said: “Even when white women call third world women our friends, and they us, we still agonize over “the issue.” The result is that when we write or teach about race, racism and feminism we tend either to conduce everything we have to say to the point of explosion, or, fearing just that explosion, we sprinkle our material with ritual libations which evaporate without altering our own, or anyone else’s consciousness.” And, coming down to cases, she continued: “Frye has fallen into both of these traps.”
RACE AND RACISM

Edited by
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