

FROM INSTITUTIONAL RACISM TO EVERYDAY RACISM: EXPLORATORY NOTES

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In the entry on "Institutional Racism" in the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*, British sociologist Michael Banton criticizes the term as problematic in lumping together cultural assumptions, motives, institutions, attitudes and beliefs about racial superiority that need to be disguised and analyzed separately for the sake of social policy and remedial action. Introduced in 1967 by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton who questioned the persistence of racial disadvantages in the midst of liberal reforms, the term is meant to designate a phenomenon that "relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices," in particular the racist attitude of white superiority that permeates the whole society "on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly" (1968:5). Various thinkers since then have refined the theoretical substance of the concept. Their aim was to distinguish it from "racism" as prejudice or belief-system in the form of deterministic theories based on biology or psychology, ideas which entailed practices of racial discrimination. Racism as an ideology can be described for the present context as "the deterministic ascription of real or supposedly negative characteristics to a

particular group" (Banton and Miles, 1988) whose social significance implies differential treatment (sometimes known as "racialism") or differential exclusion in the realm of politics, economy, and other areas of public life. David Mason (1982) surveyed the usage of the term "institutional racism" and found three versions of varying analytic worth. The first version known as the conspiracy or instrumentalist type is predicated on prejudice, or the concealed interest of the state or a hegemonic class, as the motive behind discriminatory policies; hence, if no evidence of prejudice or vested interest can be found, institutional racism doesn't exist. The second kind labeled "structuralist Marxist" locates institutional racism "neither in the purposes nor the articulations of interested groups and their agents but in the consequences of state policies." For example, the superexploitation of migratory labor in Britain and their racist segregation in housing, jobs, education, etc. result from system constraints tied to the structure of the capitalist economy at a certain stage of historical development, not from the ascertainable interests of officials or corporate managers. Because institutional racism is dictated by the imperatives of the capitalist mode of

production, this argument does not have much to say about purposive human agency, much less the unintended consequences of the state's role in maintaining the system. The last "colonialism" version focuses on the conditions under which groups are incorporated into the "host society." While Robert Blauner (1972) argues that the entry of blacks as slaves affected their long-term allocation to social roles and their claim to rights and political power, John Rex (1970) posits the formerly colonized status of migrants to the United Kingdom as a causal factor in their relative disadvantage. The colonial (or slave) experience is thus a system of structured inequality not derived from beliefs or attitudes. For Blauner, "institutions either exclude or restrict the participation of racial groups by procedures that have become conventional, part of the bureaucratic system of rules and regulations. Thus there is little need for prejudice as a motivating force" (1972: 10).

What is at issue then in elucidating the analytic value of the concept is the ratio of structure to agency, of object to subject, which it defines, a calibration crucial for a politics or ethics committed to changing power relations. So far, institutional racism has been conceived as an effect of structural determinants of a social formation instead of being the product of actions of groups or individuals formulating and implementing policies that benefit particular groups or classes. Whether racist ideology functioning as policy initiator or rationale plays a role or not, depends on the given historical conjuncture. Thus, even in the absence of racist policies or psychologi-

cal racism among those who govern, one can explain the disadvantage suffered by racialized groups to be the effects of institutional racism. What seems to be lacking in such accounts is the linkage between the structural characteristics of a social formation and the actions by which subjects (interpellated by various state and civil-society apparatuses) produce and reproduce their positions/modalities of social existence. What exactly is the connection between this level of abstraction and the social imagery that people mobilize to interpret their worlds and represent themselves to others? What is the precise interplay between social structures and individual performances, between material conditions and the complex sphere of subjectivity (or subject-position, in the post-structuralist idiom), in the field of "race relations?"

Controversy persists over the theoretical viability of "institutional racism." In *Race and Ethnicity* (1986), Rex points to the institutional orientation of "unconsciousness racism" embedded in common-sense reasoning. In a society like the United States with a long history of colonial and imperial wars, what passes for the common-sense knowledge of average citizens is pervaded with racist and paternalist assumptions, as demonstrated for example by the research of David Wellman (1977:216-236), or by recent mass media commentaries on the Los Angeles "riots." As for racial disadvantages, Rex seems to think that the central institutions involved in producing it are the free market system and the formal bureaucratic processes of a competitive liberal society which can be corrected with the infusion of a universalist morality sponsored by the government. If

so, Rex has not advanced that much from Myrdal's notion of racism as a distinctly American moral dilemma.

Meanwhile, in his recent *Racism* (1989), Robert Miles envisages two sets of circumstances in which the operations of institutional racism can be perceived: one where exclusionary practices arise from or embody a racist discourse although they are no longer explicitly justified by it, and one where the explicitly racist element in the discourse is absent but another (say, cultural) discourse substitutes for it. In the latter case, the exclusionary mode of conduct may be said to have institutionalized the discourse, for instance, the British government's strategy of withdrawing from its former colonial subjects the right of entry because they cause social problems. Practices of selective coding and of inscribing subtexts into legislation criminalizing immigrants illustrate that institutional racism may be captured in the history of discourse, not in the consequences of actions (84-87).

Whether the locus is discourse or disciplinary regimes (in Foucault's sense), it appears clear that the complex of themes and notions encapsulated by the term "institutional racism" enlarges its compass too exorbitantly, forfeiting any rigorous delineation of historically specific practices, processes, and events. In another attempt to salvage the term, Jenny Williams works to develop an empirical model that would, among others, clarify (1) the differentiation of institutional operations into material and ideological elements ideas that cannot be conflated into objective social forms or practices; (2) other ideologies with racial consequences; (3) the resistance of

the oppressed as an important influence on institutions; (4) the relations of various institutions that may suggest that racial inequality is not just the result of specific institutional operations; (5) the historical development of forums of inequality crystallized in institutions; and (6) "historical ideologies sedimented into existing understandings and racialized common sense" (1985:334). Williams poses the key question: "If institutional racism is defined by its consequences, i.e., the presence of racial inequalities, does the existence of any form of racial inequality imply the existence of institutional racism?" Her answer is negative because available empirical research has not been able to settle on what is a legitimate comparative measure of racial inequality. She insists that we keep an open mind on the still untheorized "relationship between racist intent, racial expression in practices, and racial effect, i.e., forms of inequality" (339).

Could it be that we have arrived at an aporia or impasse on this issue so that this statement from *Newsweek* (18 May 1992:30) on the Los Angeles protests can now pass for pedestrian wisdom mock-mirroring our scholarly dilemma?

"...we have no real choice but to try to disentangle this infinitely sensitive, infinitely complicated subject to separate, as best we can, the residual problems of race and ethnicity from the problems of crime, poverty and despair that so frustrate public policy and public discourse. That racism and race friction still exist is undeniable. But neither can any longer be taken as a legitimizing rationale for violence, crime or the en-

demographic problems of the urban poor. Those problems, all of them, are the results partly of the increasing concentration of poverty in the nation's cities and partly of an accelerating breakdown in the value structure that made America the least class-ridden and most optimistic society in the world."

Lest we be driven to invoke the well-known functionalist axioms of system-maintenance dependent on value consensus and blame the victims for failure to adapt, adjust or assimilate, I would like to direct your attention to the recent work of Philomena Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991).

One of the problems in deploying the term "institutional racism" is the fraught interplay between the power of ideology and the multiple functions of ruling apparatuses that are targeted for pragmatic rearrangement, that is, legislative repackaging. Essed attempts to join micro and macro approaches to racism viewed as "a system of structural inequalities and a historical process, both created and recreated through routine practices" (39). System as regularized social practices between individuals and groups cannot be comprehended without a knowledge of the macro-structures of racial inequality characterizing the whole. In other words, institutional racism is realized in specific practices of agents that "activate existing structural racial inequality in the system."

It is the concept of "everyday life" that provides the site for mediating structure and agency, mode of production and ideology, subject (consciousness) and object (life-world). Life in the everyday world may be conceived as a

matrix of multiple social relations present in and reproduced by everyday practices, relations manifesting the pressures of lived categories like race, gender, class ethnicity, etc. It is in the routine practices (cognitive, behavioral) of everyday life that racism is embodied, activating power relations that pre-structure the situation of individual subjects. Everyday racism then is a complex of heterogeneous practices mediated through gender, class, and other relations in which the dynamics of ethnic and racial domination appear insofar as differences in positions of power are racially or ethnically identified. Integrating culture and structure, everyday racism is, for Essed, a conflict-maintaining process that uses strategies of marginalizing, problematizing, and containing groups (people of color) whose labor-power and subordinate status sustain the hegemony of the dominant Eurocentric power.

Essed holds that "race" is a fundamental organizing principle of the social relations of the United States, the Netherlands, and many other societies. She defines everyday racism as "a process in which (a) socialized racist notions are integrated into meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (b) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive, and (c) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations" (52). In synthesizing knowledge with actions, meanings and situations, the concept of everyday racism underwrites the rehabilitation of "institutional racism" as an event or process where the mechanisms or hegemonic rule can be discerned, described, and

challenged. How indeed can we transform institutions and the ensemble of "rationalized" practices and discourses that constitute them? It is to the task of illuminating the gendered subject's (Surinam women in Holland, African American women in the U.S.) craft of resistance to institutional racism that Essed makes her substantive contribution.

Given the current debate on multiculturalism and the agenda of cultural diversity vis-a-vis the neo-conservative defense of a hegemonic "common culture," Essed's targeting of culturalized racism deserves close attention. The concept of everyday racism is in fact addressed to those proponents of liberal tolerance who deny the existence of racist practices, let alone institutional racism. Essed contends that the valorization of cultural differences, differences which are then hierarchically ordered to privilege the dominant Eurocentric normative standard, is one expression of everyday racism. The process of ethnization, the provision of "ethnic niches" which are occasionally active or passive tolerance (applied multiculturalism), objectifies and marginalizes people of color and thus controls them within the repressive milieu of a pluralist order. Here is one response of the tolerated subject that Essed quotes:

"You've got to start by explaining how you are different. Where you're from and so on, and if you don't eat pork, then it's usually settled for you, oh, yes, so you are a Muslim and then comes an entire volume of what they all know about Muslims and so on and so on, you know. So, it always reverts to your being different. It's

always negative, it's never nice. I think however positive they do it, it still has something negative, of not recognizing or seeing another as an equal. So, as far as that goes, for me, it is always negative [It is interesting to note that this woman is a Christian who happens to be on a special diet" (22).

Essed provides us with a massive catalogue of instances of everyday racism, from actions of overt intimidation to indifference; from malicious verbal insults to surveillance, petty harassment, patronizing gestures, casual jokes, and other techniques of containment and subordination. These instances are codified as "scenarios of racism" (SRs): e.g., school test SR, meeting SR, dating a white man SR, searching for a room SR, etc. She intends to expose the denial of racism (prejudice as an idea or attitude) as an ideological ruse justifying white supremacy. She seeks to uncover the micro-interactional scenarios of everyday mundane life as the site where the racism of the cultural pluralist ethos is enacted. Her thesis renders dramatically concrete for us the anatomy of the reproduction of racism in the scripts of everyday situations.

What seems to be problematic despite the convincing examples is Essed's implicit acceptance of a modified structuralist version of institutional racism I have summarized earlier. While subscribing to the view that racism is always historically specific, Essed upholds the functionality of racism as a regulatory force in the labor market. No doubt this is a factor, but does it exhaust all explanatory possibilities? While racism involves conflict over norms and

values, as well as over definitions of the social world, it concerns ultimately the competition over material and non-material resources. Essed underscores this in sight: "Whether racism is racially or culturally expressed, the basic struggle is for power and control of society's resources. In both countries [U.S., Netherlands] Black women are repeatedly and systematically frustrated in their pursuit of fair access to resources" (292).

By arguing that racism is "systematically integrated into meanings and routine practices by which social relations are reproduced," Essed directs our attention not on specific agents but on the "very fabric of the social system." What should be changed then is the logic of power relations, both superstructure and infrastructure. Everyday racism based on the experiences and understanding of Black women affords a knowledge that can be used to combat cultural racism and interrogate the legitimacy of the existing balance of power. Essed constructs a dialectical perspective that foregrounds the interaction between the structuring activity of actors and their structured subjectivity, a view that resolves the classic empiricist antimony between structure and subjectivity, system and event, in the "social praxis" (Rossi 1983:318) of Black women. While she is rightly critical of the Dutch government's displacement of opposition to racist marginalization into a program to preserve ethnic identity (reducing culture to personality features), she does not provide a historical account of how cultural pluralism, or Dutch "common sense," has evolved as an integral element in the ideological apparatus for reproducing ethnic labor seg-

mentation; or how the racist mechanisms of marginalization, problematization, and containment institutions of civil society and the welfare state.

For while everyday racism, in Essed's paradigm, indeed demonstrates in vivid scenarios the workings of institutional racism, we know that any society grasped as a dynamic and social totality is constituted by the complex articulation of various levels of determination (political, ideological, economic) of which class, race, gender, etc. over-determine each other relative to the given conjuncture. In any society, ethnic and racial differences may be conceptualized as operative in a set of economic, political, and ideological antagonisms which saturate everyday life, particularly the realm of "common sense." In describing the "common sense" of Dutch or U.S. society as a homogeneous and unitary essence instead of a fissured or unstable constellation of negotiated compromises, Essed may have invented a closure that thwarts popular intervention. One can argue that the practical everyday consciousness at work in everyday racism lacks coherence; it is usually "disjointed and episodic," fragmentary and contradictory. A product and part of history, this "common sense" is, as Stuart Hall emphasizes, the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed, the field where more developed philosophies and ideologies contend for mastery, "the ground which new conceptions of the world must take into account, contest and transform, if they are to shape the conceptions of the world of the masses and in that way become historically effective" (20).

Hall follows Gramsci in stressing the importance of this cultural arena in the struggle for radical democratic transformation: "Every philosophical current leaves behind a sediment of 'common sense'; this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. Common sense creates the folklore of the future" (326). But it remains for us to draw up the inventory of "common sense" and mobilize it for emancipatory ends. Culture is not just the historically grounded corpus of practices, representations, languages, and customs of a specific society, but also in a more decisive way the contradictory forms of "common sense" subtending everyday life. By extension, the subject enacting everyday racist practices is not a unified but a contradictory subject, a social construction, just as its victims are. More crucial is the absence in Essed's research of a framework calculating the alignment of the various political forces in each society contesting for hegemony (moral-intellectual leadership of a historic bloc or alliance), forces whose partisanship can be registered in their position toward laws on immigration, education, housing, and employment, etc. insofar as these affect the everyday life of people of color. What is required then is not more empirical data but further theoretical sharpening and testing of the conceptual tools that will articulate the various levels of each complexly-structured social formation for the purpose of estimating the weight or pressure of racial and ethnic differences in the dynamics of its historical development.

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