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Karl Cordell, Stefan Wolff

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Chris Gilligan

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Chris Gilligan

The distinction, or commonality, between race and ethnicity is a recurring problem in ethnic and racial studies. Attempts to try and separate the two and treat them as distinct categories continually run into theoretical and practical difficulties, but using the terms interchangeably is also unsatisfactory. Confusion over the use of the terms is compounded by the different, sometimes inconsistent, meanings given to them. The term race is also a morally and politically charged one. Given these difficulties it is perhaps understandable that scholars who study ethnic conflict, for the most part, avoid using the term 'race' at all. There is, however, something lost when this approach is taken. In terms of intellectual resources, for example, there is a rich and extensive literature on race and racism which scholars of ethnic conflict rarely, or only superficially, engage with. Using the term ethnic instead of race might appear to be more enlightened, but it can easily be used to evade the difficult moral and political issues associated with the use of the term race or, worse, to pretend that they have no relevance to the study of ethnic conflict. In this chapter I aim to help students of ethnic conflict to engage with the broader literature on race and ethnicity, by providing some guidance to help grapple with the slippery concepts of race and ethnicity.

Pinning down slippery concepts

In the social sciences, in political discourse and in everyday conversation the English language meaning of the term ethnicity is closely related to the terms race, nation, a people, clan and tribe (Connor, 1978; Eriksen, 2002; Fenton, 2003; Hughey, 1998; Jenkins, 2008). The terms are sometimes used as synonyms for each other, but there is also slippage between the uses of the terms. Krishnamurthy, commenting on the alternating use of the terms 'ethnic' and 'tribal' in a newspaper article, asks: 'If the two terms are genuinely synonymous, is "tribe" ever used of the people of former Yugoslavia? … Is "ethnic" the superordinate term, with "tribal" available only for subsets of the human population such as Africans?' (1996: 132). Krishnamurthy's rhetorical questions point to an inconsistency in use of the terms. The use of the term tribal in the African context, but not the former Yugoslavia, indicates that there are underlying assumptions which inform the use of the terms. Tribal, he suggests, is being used pejoratively to convey primitiveness and lack of industrial development as explanations for ethnic conflict in African countries. This kind of usage is intimately bound up with a deeply ingrained world view which assumes that people in the West are white, modern, civilised, industrialised and affluent and people in Africa are black, traditional, primitive and impoverished (a view which also assumes that blackness is non-Western).

One approach which social scientists take to avoid this kind of slippage in use, and to try to make their assumptions evident, is to attempt to specify the meanings of the key terms which they employ. Fenton, for example, explains that the terms 'ethnic group', 'race' and 'nation' share 'a single centre – or "core" … Common to all three is an idea of descent or ancestry and very closely implicated in all three we find ideas about culture … [which] typically include myths about the past, beliefs about the "kind of people we are", and the idea that "culture" defines a group' (2003: 13). He also points out some of the divergences between the three terms. Nation, unlike the other two, is assumed to be 'associated with a state or state-like political form' (ibid.: 23). Race contains two ideas that make it distinctive: 'that 'local' groups are instances of abstractly conceived divisions of humankind, and…that race makes explicit reference to physical or 'visible' difference as the primary marker of difference and inequality' (ibid.: 23). And there are three specific features of the term 'ethnic group': '1. that the group is a kind of sub-set within a nation-state, 2. that the point of reference of difference is typically culture rather than physical appearance, and 3. often that the group referred to is "other" (foreign, exotic, minority) to some majority who are presumed not to be "ethnic"' (ibid.: 23). Fenton's distinction between a common core and distinctive ideas provides a way of understanding why the terms race and ethnicity sometimes appear to be synonyms for each other (due to their common core) and sometimes appear to be distinct terms (due to the distinctive ideas encapsulated in them). Part of the reason for the slippage is that in some contexts the terms *are* synonyms for each other, while in other contexts they are not. Fenton provides orientation points for our reading of his text. This is useful, but only up to a point.

These orientation points help us to follow many of the contemporary academic texts on race and ethnicity, but they will not help us navigate them all. If we assume that there are correct and precise definitions of the terms, and Fenton has provided these, we will soon become confused again. We can illustrate this through looking at the idea that race refers to the use of physical features as markers of difference while ethnicity refers to cultural ones. This idea is disputed by a number of authors who, since the 1980s in Europe and more recently in the United States, have pointed to the development of a 'new racism' (or 'cultural racism') which tries to promote negative measures against non-whites on the grounds that they are culturally incompatible with 'white' society (Barker, 1981; Giroux, 1993; Lentin, 2004: 85–96). Some authors even argue against the distinction between culture and physical features as markers of difference. Van den Berghe, the leading proponent of a sociobiological perspective on race and ethnicity, argues that 'All organisms are programmed to be nepotistic, i.e. to behave favourably (or "altruistically") to others in proportion to their real or perceived degree of common ancestry' (1995: 360). He argues that biology and culture are interrelated, rather than being distinct domains. That, for example, 'human culture is necessarily "carried" by biological organisms who reproduce … culture itself is non-genetically transmitted, but it cannot be transmitted except through flesh and blood individuals who, if they fail to reproduce, generally stop passing on their culture' (1988: 255). This approach suggests that people procreate with others who share the same cultural background and consequently, in practice, there is a major overlap between biological and cultural reproduction, and physical and cultural markers of difference. This approach elides the distinction between race and ethnicity made by Fenton. The examples of sociobiology and analyses of 'new racism' indicate that the way in which the terms race and ethnicity are defined can vary significantly according to the theoretical perspective employed by the author.[1]

Pinning down concepts, through defining them, helps us to get a clearer picture of the phenomena we are studying. In the case of race and ethnicity, however, slipperiness is not a distraction which prevents us from understanding the phenomena. Slipperiness is inherent to phenomena which are categorised as ethnic and racial. Attempts to pin down the terms run the risk of turning historically and social fluid, contingent and highly contextual phenomena into eternal, fixed, static and universal ones. To understand the phenomena we study in ethnic and racial studies we also need to understand why the terms are slippery. Defining them does not help us to do that.

Race and ethnicity in context

One problem with attempting to define the terms race and ethnicity is that in order to do so we are forced to generalise. Generalisation requires us to remove the terms race and ethnicity from any particular social or historical context, and consequently it can appear as though the definitions are universal and eternal. Fenton, however, is well aware that the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' do not have fixed meanings, and that 'how ethnicity is discussed is very much contextual' (Fenton 2003: 25). The terms race and ethnicity only come to life and have meaning in particular social and historical contexts. Take, for example, the categories Malay, Black, Irish, Jewish and Ethiopian. Each of these has, at one time or another, been referred to as a racial group, or as an ethnic group, or as a nation. The terms themselves do not help us to determine whether the people being referred to are considered to be a nation, a race or an ethnic group. To determine this we need to look at the geographical context in which people are being categorised; the social milieux in which the categories are being employed; and the historical period in which the process of categorisation takes place.

Different milieux

One of the reasons for the slippage in usage, which Krishnamurthy identifies, is that the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' (nation, tribe, clan…) are being employed in newspaper articles. In newspapers there is not usually the same requirement for precision that is demanded from academic texts. Journalists generally make less demands on their audience. Journalists usually attempt to address their readers in terms that are immediately explicable. They tend to draw on widely held tacit understandings to convey the stories they want to tell. In many instances the difference between academic and journalistic writing is not a particular problem, they serve different purposes and address different, but overlapping, audiences. The difference is also often unproblematic because different milieux not only have their own way of talking, their own idiom, but they also have their own technical language. Terms such as acculturation, ethnie, primordialism, and racialisation, for example, are rarely found outside of academic texts on race and ethnicity. The terms race and ethnicity – and subcategories such as Malaysian, Black, Irish, Jewish or Ethiopian – are, however, categories employed in both academic analyses and everyday discourse.

Banton draws our attention to this problem when he says that in everyday talk about race and ethnicity a person 'rarely employs any concept of ethnicity. He or she uses a practical language embodying proper names, such as Malay, Chinese, and Indian' (Banton, 1994: 6). These terms are employed within what he calls an actor's model of the social structure, and they are used 'to navigate a course through daily life, helping

to identify the shallow water, the best channels, and the likely reactions of other vessels' (ibid.: 6). These categories help people to orientate themselves in the real world which they inhabit. In this context, Banton suggests, a certain looseness is useful. In real-world contexts people often recognise that there are different degrees of ethnicity. As Banton puts it, '[a]nyone who speaks this [practical] language knows that persons assigned to these categories vary in their cultural distinctiveness. In the languages they use, the costumes they wear … some are more culturally distinctive, and in this sense, more "ethnic"' (ibid.: 6). Put simply, one Chinese neighbour might be more Chinese than another and all Chinese neighbours might be more Chinese at particular times of the year. This actor's model differs from what he calls an observer's model, which looks 'for regularities of which the actors are unaware or about which actors have insufficient information' (ibid.: 6). An observer's model seeks to penetrate surface appearances and understand the social processes which give rise to phenomena such as ethnic identification, or racial discrimination. Actor's models rely on tacit everyday understandings which come from being embedded in that particular social context. The observer attempts to generalise from these particular embedded contexts. They attempt to discern patterns, to infer underlying dynamics or to make explicit the tacit understandings which people hold.

Brubaker makes a similar distinction between 'categories of practice' and 'categories of analysis' (2004). Categories of practice are '"native" or "folk" or "lay" categories … of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors' (ibid.: 31). They are used by lay actors in 'everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activity, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others' (ibid.: 31). But they are also used 'by political entrepreneurs to persuade people to understand themselves and their predicaments' in ways that serve the interests, or objectives, of those political actors (ibid.: 32). Social analysis, he points out, 'requires relatively unambiguous analytical categories' (ibid.: 29). At first sight the use of categories by administrators – ethnic categories used in censuses, ethnic monitoring forms and racial and ethnic terms in legislation are good examples – might appear to be relatively unambiguous, and certainly less slippery than everyday use. The terms are fixed in ink by the people who draw up the forms, or the legislation. Fixing the terms in ink, however, does not fix their meaning. This meaning is, at least in part, given by the person filling in the form, or the judge interpreting the law. When you fill in the form you decide if you are 'black' or 'white', 'Asian-American' or 'Chinese'. The person who inserted the terms into the form cannot be certain that the person who filled it in has the same idea in mind when they do so (although that does not usually stop administrators from acting as if they can be certain of the intended meaning). The purpose of these forms is not to understand the meaning of the categories but to allocate people to categories for some purpose, or to enable the judiciary to adjudicate on disputes which are brought before them. In this sense they are what Brubaker calls categories of practice.

There are several different ways of talking race and ethnicity, and these vary by setting. The way that terms are used depends on the ideas that are being conveyed and ideas are in part shaped in relation to the audience they are being conveyed to and the purpose they are being conveyed for. The fact that the actual terms used in these milieux are often the same should not blind us to the fact that they are sometimes being used with different meanings.

Spatial contexts

Discourses of race and ethnicity are also different in different countries, and often differ in different parts of the same country. They are, for example, different in the United States compared with the United Kingdom. This is partly due to the different histories of the countries. Fenton draws attention to the significance of the different contexts when he says that in the United States a discourse of race dominates and 'ethnic groups and ethnic differences often have a "white" connotation. By contrast, in Britain, where the public discourse focuses more on ethnicity, the term "ethnic groups" retains its meaning of minority status and foreign origins; ethnic groups in the United Kingdom are not white' (ibid.: 39). (The term 'white' is also relational, contextual and conflates myriad differences: Garner, 2007.) Discourse of race and ethnicity also differ in different regions within a country, between the southern and northern United States, for example. Even within a particular city discourses around race and ethnicity can vary. One study of London in the 1980s, for example, found that in one district the 'decline in the housing and economic circumstances of these residents was "explained" by correlating these changes with the presence of variously defined "problem families", black people and Vietnamese refugees' (Back, 1996: 239). The other district, by contrast, was viewed by its inhabitants 'as a place where harmonious [race or ethnic] relations existed' (ibid.: 239).

The way that different national contexts shape discourse can be seen by looking at an example of one particular category. If we take the category Irish, for example, we find different discourses around Irishness in Ireland than in other national contexts. In recent years significant immigration into the Republic of Ireland has led to considerable debate about who can be considered Irish. In 2004 the Constitution was changed to racialise, or ethnicise, citizenship by making descent rather than residence the principle criteria by which citizenship was determined (Mulally, 2007). In the context of Northern Ireland Irishness is usually a reference to the section of the population who identify themselves politically and culturally as Irish nationalists, in contrast to those who identify themselves politically and culturally as British or Ulster unionists (Gilligan, 2007). To make matters more confusing Irishness and Britishness are often conflated with the religious categories Catholic and Protestant (see Ruane and Todd, this volume). In the rest of the United Kingdom Irishness is usually employed in discussions of immigration from Ireland, and the second and third generation descendents of immigrants from Ireland. In the United States the discourse around Irishness is also usually focused on immigrants from Ireland, and their descendents (Garner, 2003).

Historical context

At the beginning of the twentieth century the superiority of the White race was an important component of the world view of political elites on both sides of the North Atlantic. The idea of White superiority was used to justify the colonial domination of large parts of the 'non-White' world by European powers, and a range of racially discriminatory measures in the United States. A wide range of factors have been identified as playing a role in the discrediting of racial thinking since then. Prominent amongst these have been: the growing influence of egalitarian ideas; political agitation for civil rights for Black people; horror at the consequences of the racial exterminationist policies of the Nazis; the rise of Japan as a non-White international power; the rise of

anti-colonial movements; the discrediting of the science behind ideas of biological superiority; and ambivalences about the promotion of White solidarity (Barkan, 1993; Bonnett, 2003; Furedi, 1998; Grant, 1968: 175–214; Lauren, 1988; Malik, 1996; Wolton, 2000). The marginalisation of assertions of racial superiority is indicated by the inclusion of clauses on 'respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples' and 'promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' in the Charter of the United Nations (UN), ratified in 1945 (UN, 1945: ch. 1).

The discrediting of the idea of racial superiority did not, however, mean that practices based on this idea ceased. Policies of racial segregation continued in the United States, and Britain actually expanded its empire, after 1945. After the Second World War, however, ideas of racial superiority could not be used as justification, and instead there was a shift to a welfarist discourse of development and a race relations discourse of the protection of minority peoples. This new language helped provide 'justification enough for the European powers to re-establish their empires' (Wolton, 2000: 154). After 1945 racial language became increasingly coded, as it became increasingly politically and socially unacceptable to speak openly about race. As Furedi puts it, 'in the new egalitarian climate the assumptions of racial superiority did not disappear, they merely became less explicit' (1994: 55). This can present difficulties for social scientists because it is more difficult to assess the extent to which racial thinking has an influence on the phenomena that we investigate in the post-war period. The end of the Cold War has shifted the discourse again. Furedi suggests that a 'new moral equation between a superior North and an inferior South helps legitimise a two-tiered international system … Race no longer has a formal role to play since the new global hierarchy is represented through a two-tier moral system. Gradually the old silent race war has been replaced by moral crusades and by "clashes of civilisations"' (1998: 240). The development of ethnic conflict studies, as a clearly identifiable sub-discipline, dates from the post-Cold War period. And the rationale for Western intervention in situations of ethnic conflict is often motivated in moral terms. This raises a range of uncomfortable questions for scholars of ethnic conflict, one of these is the extent to which the use of the term ethnic may involve an implicit reworking of older racial thinking.

The historically changing nature of discourses around race and ethnicity can be seen in the shift away from the term race and the coining and subsequent rise in use of the term 'ethnicity'. The story of how the term 'ethnicity' came to eclipse 'race' is still a major gap in the literature on ethnic and racial studies.[2] If the shift is mentioned at all it is usually treated as a pragmatic choice on the part of social scientists. As one introductory textbook puts it, because 'of its confusing usage and its questionable scientific validity, many sociologists and anthropologists have dispensed with the term *race* and instead use *ethnic group* to describe those groups commonly defined as racial' (Marger, 2000: 25: italics in the original). Changing the terms, however, does not end the confusion. At best it allows the researcher to investigate the social dynamics involved, without getting too hung up on tortuous discussions of terminology. At worst it is used to evade the history of race as something which is no longer relevant.

In this section I have suggested that race and ethnicity are slippery concepts for good reason, and that attempts to ignore, avoid or downplay the slipperiness of the terms can lead the student of ethnic politics to misunderstand, or only gain a partial understanding, of the phenomena which they are studying.

Race and ethnicity as constructs

In this final section I will explore the idea that the terms race and ethnicity are elusive terms because the phenomena which they refer to – races and ethnic groups – do not actually exist. This might seem like an odd point. How, you might be asking yourself, can anyone study ethnic politics or ethnic conflict if ethnic groups do not exist? Indeed, how can there be ethnic conflict if ethnic groups do not exist? Hopefully I can explain, but before I do let's have a look at race. Banton warns that in attempting to make generalisations 'the observer often comes to mistaken conclusions which take a long time to clear up. One such confusion was that of race' (1994: 6). The mistake was to take the observation that people from different parts of the world look physically different in some ways and conclude that humanity must therefore be divided up into different, biologically distinct, races. The consensus view in modern science rejects that conclusion. Scientists point out that there is greater genetic variation within any given human population than between two different populations, they argue that the lines drawn to demarcate different races are arbitrary and the fact that skin colour has acted as an identifier of different races is a result of historical processes, not something which is determined by nature (Malik, 2008).

So races do not exist in any biological sense; they are social constructs. Races are created and reproduced in human minds, not through biological processes. The idea of race is sustained by people who hold racist views, but the word race also provides 'part of the rationale for all the legislation, international and national, which has been designed to combat discrimination based on ideas of race' (Banton, 1994: 7). Here we can see another reason why the term race is slippery, because it is simultaneously rejected and upheld in contemporary public policy, often by the same people. Social scientists who take a social constructionist perspective on the world suggest that we can deal with the slipperiness of race as a term by focusing on 'the construction and reproduction of the idea of "race"' (Miles and Brown, 2003: 91). Miles and Brown criticise those who set out to explain race relations, saying that in taking 'race relations' as one of their analytical categories they are participating in the process of reproducing the idea of race. Rather than examine interactions between entities that do not exist (races), they suggest, the task for social scientists is the 'generation of concepts with which one can grasp and portray the historical processes by which notions of "race" become accepted and/or used in a plurality of discourses' (ibid.: 92). They employ the analytical concept of racialisation to examine the *processes* through which group boundaries marked by biological differences are generated, and people are allocated to those groups (ibid.: 99–103).

Miles and Brown extend their argument when they say 'ethnic groups are no more objective or real than "races"' (ibid.: 96). This claim is more contentious than the claim that races do not exist. Miles, however, is not the only proponent of this idea. Students of ethnic politics may be familiar with the idea from the work of Brubaker, who suggests that one of the most problematic conceptual errors in the study of ethnicity, race and nationhood is '"groupism" … the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis' (2004: 8). Participants in ethnic politics, he observes, do present ethnic groups as bounded entities, in fact it is crucial to their practice as ethnopolitical entrepreneurs. Social scientists, however, should avoid adopting '*categories of ethnopolitical practice* as our *categories of social analysis*' (ibid.: 10, italics in the

original). This does not mean that we should avoid or ignore phenomena which are described as ethnic. We should, in fact, acknowledge that the process of ethnicisation can generate 'phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity', but we should also remind ourselves that groupness is 'variable and contingent rather than fixed and given' (ibid.: 12). Phases of extraordinary cohesion rarely endure for very long, and 'high levels of groupness may be more the result of conflict (especially violent conflict) than its underlying cause' (ibid.: 19: see also Kaufman, this volume). One straightforward way in which we can stay sensitive to the fact that ethnic conflict is not conflict between ethnic groups is to remind ourselves that 'the chief protagonists of most ethnic conflict … are not ethnic groups as such but various kinds of organizations … [including] states … terrorist groups … political parties, ethnic associations … churches … television stations, and so on' (ibid.: 14–15). These organisations may claim to represent ethnic groups, but we should not accept these claims at face value.

A useful strategy to avoid slipping into groupism, Brubaker suggests, is to distinguish 'consistently between categories and groups … rather than presume – the relation between them' (ibid.: 12). Ethnopolitical actors work to collapse the distinction between the category ethnic and the group. Social scientists should not assist them in this endeavour, but instead should step back and draw attention to the attempts to do so. Continually keeping in mind the distinction between categories of practice (e.g. ethnic, ethnicity) and categories of analysis (e.g. ethnicisation) should help us to maintain the critical distance necessary for analysis. We should be careful, for example, not to talk about ethnic violence because in doing so we 'do not simply *interpret* the violence … [we] *constitute* it *as ethnic*' (ibid.: 16: emphasis in the original). In situations of 'ethnic conflict', he suggests, violence 'may have as much or more to do with thuggery, warlordship, opportunistic looting, and black-market profiteering than with ethnicity' (ibid.: 19). If we are attentive to the social construction of ethnicity we can better discern the range of dynamics and processes which are at play in situations which are characterised as ethnic.

In this section I have suggested that race and ethnicity are slippery concepts because the things which they refer to – races and ethnic groups – do not exist, but in practice many political actors and domestic and international institutions act as if they do exist (whether because they assume that ethnic groups exist, or because they want to make ethnicity an important dimension of political identification). A key way to handle this slippage is to keep in mind the distinction between categories and groups, to remember that groupness is variable and contingent and to focus on processes which construct phenomena as ethnic or racial. In short, to think in terms of ethnicisation and racialisation.

Conclusion

At this point you might think the concepts race and ethnicity are just as slippery as they always seemed, or they may seem even slipperier. If so you have grasped at least part of what I was trying to do. Race and ethnicity are slippery terms for several reasons. In everyday situations and in social analysis the two terms are often collapsed into each other by the people who use the terms. At the same time there are persistent attempts to distinguish between the terms. They are also slippery because they are employed as categories of practice as well as categories of analysis, but as categories of analysis they do not usually succeed in escaping the embrace of practice. And they are slippery because ethnopolitical actors attempt to collapse the distinction between groups and

categories, while many social scientists strive to maintain the distinction. The point of this chapter was not to reassure you that the terms can be pinned down or tamed. The slipperiness is symptomatic of the lack of clarity which the concepts express. If we keep these points in mind when we carry out our research then we will be better equipped to get behind the surface appearances and the commonsense understandings of the phenomena which we seek to analyse.

Notes

1 There is insufficient space in this short chapter to outline or analyse the range of perspectives. For useful texts which do analyse a range of perspectives see Malešević (2004) and Rex and Mason (1988). All analyses, including this one, inevitably involve some kind of theoretical underpinnings. This chapter is written from a constructivist perspective.
2 Some of the elements are known. These include the discrediting of race as a concept, the shift from biological to cultural conceptions of group difference and inequality, the coining of the term 'ethnicity' to explain the persistence of group identification among third and fourth-generation descendants of immigrants in the United States, the application of the term 'ethnic' to inter-group conflict in postcolonial societies and to secessionist movements in Europe in the 1970s. For some useful texts which provide some of the pieces of the picture see Banks (1995), Barkan (1993), Glazer and Moynihan (1970), Malik (1996).
3 Many introductory student texts which cover the topics of race and ethnicity fumble over, or evade, the conceptual problems outlined in this chapter. Fenton (2003) is a notable exception, and I would recommend it to the beginner. My favourite texts which grapple with the issues in this chapter are: Malik (1996), which takes a long historical sweep from the Atlantic slave trade to postmodernism; and Brubaker (2004), which contains a collection of some of his most thoughtful articles on methodological issues relevant to the study of racialisation and ethnicisation. As a collection it lacks the narrative cohesion of Malik's study, but the contents of its chapters will seem more immediately relevant to students of ethnic politics. For excellent historical accounts of the discrediting of racial thinking, a major gap in the study of ethnic politics, read: Barkan (1993), Furedi (1998), Lauren (1988) and Wolton (2000).

Acknowledgements

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