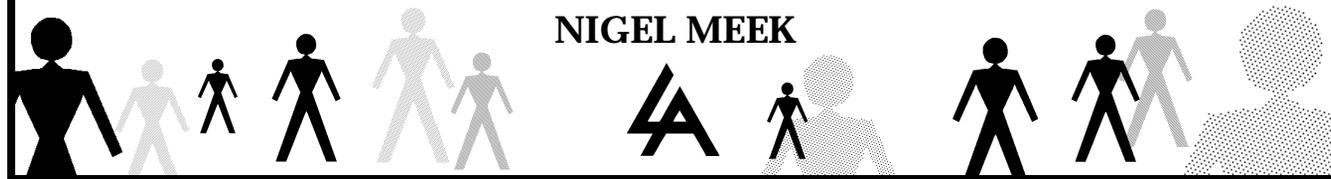


RACISM, COLLECTIVISM AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

NIGEL MEEK



WHAT IS RACISM?

In a previous Libertarian Alliance publication, Axel Davies (1995) dealt with prejudice, including racial prejudice. In this essay, whilst covering some common ground, I wish mainly to look at academic research by social psychologists into prejudice and 'simple racism' and then to go on to look at what I describe as political Racism: a concept created and propagated by collectivists.

So, what is 'simple racism'? That rather depends upon who you ask. Roentsch (1985b) offers a useful definition: "Let there be no misunderstanding. ... a racist is anyone who accepts the existence of racial collectives", i.e. assigns attributes to an individual purely on the basis of their membership of a racial group; usually of a negative kind in the way that racism is commonly meant. In practice, however, racism has become Racism: a shorthand for what nasty whites do to innocent blacks and, more profoundly for our purposes, a focal point for anti-libertarian activists.

THE 'CREATION' OF RACISM IN THE WEST

Anecdotally, it is fairly standard to be told that the main jumping-off point of racism (in the West as, curiously, no other type is mentioned; see also O'Keefe, 1990 about this one-sidedness in the debate about racism) was slavery, particularly the need to redefine blacks as inferior to ease the discrepancy between the practice of slavery and the ethics of Christianity.

There are at least two major flaws in this theory. First, Christianity as practised as a ruling theology has always tended to be one of authoritarianism and oppression. Second, this theory perpetuates the great white-guilt myth

about slavery. The 'African Trade', as slavery was euphemistically known, was always an "Afro-European commercial enterprise" (Hastie, 1985). Far from having any particular guilt about slavery it should be recognised that it is only the West that has voluntarily renounced it and made efforts to stamp it out in the rest of the world. Indeed, one of the few admirable motivations behind the nineteenth-century European colonisation of Africa was the (at least partly sincere) desire to eradicate the Afro-Arab slave trade (Pakenham, 1991: p. 20); sadly, Arab slavers are still at work in Sudan now (Davies, 1998).

Nonetheless, turning to academic studies of race, there can be no doubt that many supposed social scientists during the 19th and early 20th centuries enthusiastically embraced unequivocally racist views. For example, Carl Jung, a self-professed 'expert' on blacks, stated in 1928 that "the different strata of the mind correspond to the history of the races [and that the Negro] has probably a whole historical layer less" (in Thomas and Sillen, 1972: pp. 13-14). There was a widely held belief amongst medical doctors and thinkers in the *a priori* inferiority of blacks (Thomas and Sillen, 1921: pp. 1-22), something which Thomas and Sillen (1972: pp. 23-44) affiliate with the more modern work of Eysenck, Jensen *et al* (but see Eysenck, 1990: pp. 215-220) and would no doubt do so with even more recent work in the same field.

MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RACISM

Since before the second world war a great deal of work into all aspects of racism has been conducted, both its contemporary prevalence (e.g. see Airey, 1984: pp. 122-130) and aetiology. Academic social psychologists have

Psychological Notes No. 12

ISSN 0267-7172 ISBN 1 85637 406 8

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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conducted much of the work on the latter, and their theories can be divided into two main groups.

Group-based Theories

'Realistic conflict theory' is based on the simple idea that groups engage in a struggle for scarce resources of some description (but note, in a twentieth-century context, the implicit and erroneous (Mickelthwait, 1994) 'fixed quantity of wealth' assumption). As this competition progresses enmity between the groups increases and that "what starts out as simple competition relatively free from hatred gradually develops into full-scale emotion-laden prejudice" (Baron and Byrne, 1994: p. 225). Studies such as that by Hovland and Sears (1940, in Baron and Byrne, 1994: p. 226) have demonstrated, for example, that lynchings of blacks in the American South were more common in times of general economic hardship.

The classic experimental study along these lines was the 'Robber's Cave' experiment carried out by Sherif *et al* in 1961 (Baron and Byrne, 1994: pp. 227-228) where groups of boys at a summer camp were deliberately split up into separate and competing groups. Essentially, this demonstrated how easily conflict between groups can be deliberately induced and just how violent it can become. Apparently more optimistically, however, was the discovery that such conflict can be negated by the creation or presence of tasks on which the groups have to co-operate: the idea of 'superordinate goals'.

All of this leads on to the simple observation that we tend to divide the world into 'us and them' or 'ingroup and outgroup' (Baron and Byrne, 1994: pp. 228-229). Furthermore, that we also have a tendency to homogenise outgroups, i.e. to ascribe to individual members of outgroups similar characteristics compared to our fellow ingroupers whom we are more ready to individually consider. Not surprisingly it has also been found that there is a tendency to make more flattering comments about 'us' than about 'them' and moreover that we ascribe positive things about 'us' to "stable, internal causes" but to "transitory ... or external causes" in the case of 'them' (Baron and Byrne, 1994: p. 229).

Individualistic Theories

From a mixture of psychoanalytic and social-learning approaches comes the 'frustration-aggression hypothesis' (Dollard *et al* 1939, in Baron and Byrne, 1994: p. 444; Tajfel and Fraser, 1978: pp. 411-414). In its original form it stated that frustration always leads to aggression which in turn always stems from frustration. The theory goes on to suggest that some form of catharsis is needed (Baron and Byrne, 1994: pp. 470-471) but that, perhaps due to a social-power differential, it often cannot be directed at the actual frustrating object (person or institution). Therefore a safer and/or easier displacement target — a scapegoat — is found (Gross, 1990: pp. 341-342), often a group lacking in social or political power. It is argued that racial minorities have tended to fulfil this role all too adequately both because of their relative political, social and/or economic impotence, and also because the very difference of their physiognomy makes the targeting of them easier.

But we should be very careful about making too much of prejudice based upon differing appearance. Harris (1989, in Fletcher, Rose and Radford, 1991) showed that in selection interviewing "greater candidate-interviewer similarity is associated with higher ratings being given to the candidate". In other words, there is a tendency to prefer 'us' without there being any implication of malice, let alone racism, at work.

Parenthetically, whilst the idea that frustration, mediated by an individual's beliefs, can lead to aggression is quite acceptable, I would robustly dispute any suggestion that it *must* do so, and even more so the idea that some form of catharsis is required. See Dryden, 1994: pp. 87-90 for an excellent alternative view on anger and frustration.

The work of Adorno *et al* (1950, in Baron and Byrne, 1994: 381-382; Tajfel and Fraser, 1978: pp. 408-412) in the wake of the Nazi terror lead to the notion of a distinct authoritarian personality type marked by a "tendency to adopt a submissive, uncritical attitude towards authority figures" (Baron and Byrne, 1994: p. 381). Via a series of interviews Adorno and colleagues came to believe that, despite surface appearances, authoritarian individuals unconsciously feared their parents (especially their father) and, in line with the scapegoat theory outlined above, displaced their anger on to weaker victims.

Parenthetically again, aside from just the dubious psychoanalytic basis of this theory (Webster, 1995), one of the chief criticisms of Adorno and colleague's work was the highly biased questionnaire design which equated 'authoritarian' with 'right-wing' alone (Eysenck and Wilson, 1978: p. 4) and which speaks volumes for their personal ideological predispositions (unsurprisingly: see Tame, 1984: p. 1).

Rather simpler is the theory derived from social-learning principles (Baron and Byrne, 1994: pp. 230-231). The child acquires racist attitudes and beliefs by observing them in those surrounding it, particularly the media and popular culture, and parents and peers (the latter influences having themselves gone through this process). It seems that this process can start at a very young age. The child is positively reinforced by, for example, parental approval for demonstrating the same sort of language as them. This can also arrive via a process of the child modelling its behaviour and speech on those important to it (Reber, 1985: p. 447). This whole process can be scaled up: conforming to the norms of one's ingroup is positively reinforced.

A cognitive explanation of racism utilises the idea of stereotypes. People simply tend to find life 'easier' the less cognitive effort they have to use, and effort is saved by the use of mental schemas or sets. Stereotyping individuals by mentally assigning them into homogeneous groups with identifiable traits just makes things easier for us (Baron and Byrne, 1994: pp. 231-239). Once these mental schemas of groups and traits have been formed they are activated very easily and completely denied only with the greatest of difficulty. For example, it would appear that we attend more readily to new information which fits our existing stereotypes than to information which confounds them.

In short, we seem highly predisposed to form ‘us and them’ groups, and that “race is used as a criterion for categorisation” (Tajfel and Fraser, 1978: p. 318). The ‘minimal group studies’ by Tajfel *et al* in Bristol (Tajfel and Fraser, 1978: 439ff) not only reiterated this fact but also demonstrated just how predisposed we are to exhibit prejudice and discrimination to ‘them’ whoever ‘they’ are — even when divided into groups on the trivial basis of mere artistic preference as Tajfel did — even at a cost to ‘us’.

The Absence of Volition and Responsibility ...

It will be noticed that in the preceding, even in the supposedly ‘individualistic’ theories (apart from perhaps modelling), the individual as a self-willed agent is largely absent. Racism, we are told, results from either deterministic external environmental forces or equally deterministic internal psychological forces. There is no allowance for the notion that someone might *choose* to adhere to racist views.

The importance to anyone casting a critical eye over the social sciences of being aware of this bias towards determinism of one sort or another cannot be over-emphasised. This denial of human volition has rightly been likened to an infection which runs through the vast majority of work in this and allied areas (Flew, 1991: p. 157).

All of this has the effect that, to a non-racist libertarian, the sin of racism is actually worse than perhaps it might be to many others since the responsibility for such views is placed fairly squarely on the individual racist’s shoulders.

... Except in Self-racism Amongst Non-whites

Studies first conducted by Clark and Clark (1947, in Baron and Byrne, 1994: 256) appeared to show that a substantial proportion of non-white children had in some manner internalised white racist attitudes. It was suggested that the phenomenon of a third of black children misidentifying a white doll as looking most like themselves was an indication of their internalisation of white society’s lack of value for them. The even greater proportion who actually wanted to *be* white was taken as either evidence of the same or a simple acknowledgement of their generally lowly place in the socio-economic pecking order.

Interestingly, since the sixties and advances in the status of non-whites, the misidentification rates have massively decreased, perhaps demonstrating a greater self-confidence. In any case, we should perhaps be grateful that here at least there is *some* acknowledgement that racism, of *any* type, can be a volitional phenomenon.

THE MYTH OF ‘POLITICAL RACISM’

That prejudice and discrimination exist is beyond doubt. That one form of this is based upon genetics — race — is also beyond doubt. That it manifests itself in forms ranging from petty annoyance though instances of interpersonal violence on to murderous frenzy is, again, beyond doubt. But whatever the validity of any of the above explanations, I would submit that Racism, as some qualitatively unique evil abroad in the world, does not exist.

And in fact, as ‘anti-Racism’, is frequently the cover for ‘cures’ more sinister than the ‘disease’.

A Curious Omission

One of the more interesting — but sadly not surprising — discoveries that a student of social psychology soon makes is that just about all of the books, articles and lectures on racial issues one encounters concern the racism of whites towards non-whites. Generalising, virtually all the information one encounters on ‘prejudice and discrimination’ concerns that done *by* male, heterosexual, middle-class WASPs *to*, well, anyone who isn’t a male, heterosexual, etc. There is hardly a word on non-white on white racism (see Kossy, 1994: pp. 21-39 on the black Nation of Islam), nor for that matter about non-white on *other* non-white racism.

A False ‘Cure’ for Racism

The standard putative ‘cure’ for racism proposed by many social psychologists, e.g. implied by Sherif *et al* with their ‘superordinate goals’ and explicitly stated in Baron and Byrne (1994: pp. 243-244), is the idea of ‘recategorisation’: i.e. previously hostile groups redefined as a larger, single group. Even on a purely technical level the flaws are obvious. If new groups can be so easily ‘manufactured’ they can be just as easily ‘dismantled’. One need only think of examples in history where disparate ethnic groups have temporarily allied themselves in the face of some greater threat only to return to the national pastime of massacring each other when the external danger has passed. Besides, implicit in the creation of ‘super-groups’ are the existence of other groups which to oppose. The fans of two football teams may kick the life out of each other on Saturday afternoons; the fact that, on occasion, they acquire a ‘superordinate goal’ to lay waste to the capital cities of Europe whilst masquerading as England fans hardly seems much of a victory for civilisation.

But since to a libertarian the real horror is the very notion of the creation by collectivist psycho-social engineering of such groups — literally the fostering of a false consciousness — this idea of recategorisation does allow an insight into the agenda of some of those most vociferous in its promulgation.

Political Racism: Its Creators and Their Reasons

The reason behind the phenomenon of political Racism is quite simple. It is part of an overall design to attack individual liberty by Marxists, doctrinaire socialists and the like, not least by those in universities where libertarians or conservatives make up maximally 10% of the academic staff (Halsey, in Marsland, 1995: p. 2).

Given the overwhelming economic and ethical superiority of capitalism (i.e. the positive correlation between such things as economic liberalism, social pluralism and the rule of law (Gwartney and Lawson, 1997)), those most opposed to it know they cannot hope to bring it down by persuasion and rational debate: they have no real arguments, either moral or material. But their passion for control remains as fierce as ever; they therefore employ

several different stratagems such as the formation of various ‘single-issue’ groups (Tame and Botsford, 1996).

Alternatively they may associate themselves with understandable grievances such as those that surrounded the black civil rights movement — perhaps forming ‘popular fronts’ — and then go out of their way to ferment group divisions; the last thing they want is a harmonious and free society: they’d be out of a job! They often then engage in a policy of misrepresenting capitalism as a cause of racism. This is just a lie: “Slavery, the forced labour of one man for the benefit of another, [is] the diametrical opposite of capitalism” (Reisman, 1982: p. 2).

Some black libertarian and conservative writers have noted the career-enhancing concept, used by several black ‘leaders’, of ‘black victimhood’, as opposed to one of black individual responsibility (Wortham, 1994). During the Cold War era in the USA they also noted a tendency for the advisors of such black ‘leaders’ to be “unreconstructed sixties radicals, US-haters ... and outright pro-Communists” (Cleaver, 1984).

On a ‘macro level’, since I emphatically do not deny the evil reality of sometimes violently racist individuals, it is anti-libertarian ideology that is the real enemy of blacks, not someone with a burning cross or the non-existent ‘fascist menace’ conjured up in this country by assorted ‘anti-racist’ groups.

In short, racism is a form of collectivism: “[the assertion] that the values and behaviour of some individual are the inevitable result of their race [is determinist] and, since this determinism is applied to a group, [it is] collectivist. And there’s the rub. Our Culturally Dominant Demagogues would be hard put to state publicly that racism is evil because it is a form of collectivism since the CDDs themselves are collectivists to one extent or another” (Roentsch, 1985a). And surely here at last the paradox of much of what passes for ‘anti-Racism’ is laid bare.

THE LIBERTARIAN RESPONSE TO RACISM

How much the various phenomena noted above — our overall tendency to mentally construct social groups, the situations in which we do it, the types of individuals whom we so group, and the nature of our attitudes and subsequent behaviour towards them — are the product of internalising the mores of a collectivist social milieu, and/or how much is neuro-psychologically hard-wired, and/or how much is the result of free choice, we cannot fully say. It is certainly a worthy subject for genuinely scientific psychological study (although always keeping in mind the clear collectivist ideological bias of many of the researchers and theorists).

But in any event, the only fully ideologically libertarian response to the sad phenomenon of racism, and all such unjustified group-based prejudice for that matter, is to see it as part of the overall struggle against collectivism and for individualism. As evangelical libertarians we can have no nobler aim than to bring about a state of affairs where people regard both themselves and their fellows as individuals first and members of a group only subsequently on the basis of criteria of our own individual choosing.

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