

Marxism and Race

1. Race in Ethnicity Theory, Classical Marxism, and Neo-Marxism

1) Emergence of Ethnicity and Class Conflict Theories of Race

By the early decades of the 20th century, biological essentialism of race was losing its coherence and the ethnicity-based paradigm arose as an explicit challenge (Omi & Winant 1994; Winant 2000). In contrast to biologically oriented approaches, the ethnicity-based paradigm suggested that race was a social category. In this paradigm, race was theorized as one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity. Ethnicity itself was understood as a result of the group formation process based on descent and culture, which included such diverse factors as religion, language, customs, nationality, and political identification.

Meanwhile, class conflict theories of race in the 1960s, rooted in an idea of exploitation central to Marxist analysis, posed a fundamental challenge to the ethnicity paradigm (Omi & Winant 1994). The original works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels contained a number of scattered references (e.g., race as an economic factor in the slavery of the U.S., the position of Irish migrant workers in Britain) to the pertinence of racial and ethnic relations in particular societies. While "classical" Marxism did not explicitly address the issues of race and racial conflict and contained little historical or theoretical reflection on the role of such processes in the development of capitalist social relations as a whole, it considered the problem of divisions within the working class and the nature of national oppression—the ground for later versions of Marxism and their approaches to race (Solomos 1986).

2) Critiques of Marxism on Race

Generally Marxism faced critiques for its economic determinism and theoretical abstraction. Solomos (1986) notes that Frank Parkin (1979) in his book "Marxism and Class

Theory: A Bourgeois Critique” critiqued that as a form of social analysis, Marxism is incapable of dealing with such divisions short of subsuming them under more general social relations that are production- or class-based, or treating them as a kind of superstructural phenomenon. Taking it to its extreme, Parkin asserted that the preferred Marxist response to the fact of racial or communal strife should be to ignore race. Oliver C. Cox (1948) in his study of “Caste, Class and Race”, which is widely considered as the Marxist analysis of the question, utilized concepts such as class and exploitation in order to explain the role of race and racism in capitalist societies and in a similar fashion critiqued the limitation of Marxist reductionism. Many of the problems which these criticisms highlighted within Marxist discourse, especially economic determinism and theoretical abstraction, continued to be found in much of the mainstream of Marxism (Solomos 1986).

However, in Solomos’ (1986) view, these critiques were rather based upon limited understanding of Marxism as singular and reductionist. Solomos defends Marxism by pointing out that, for instance, Cox's work was very much the product of his time and that the model of Marxism which Cox was familiar with was based upon the conceptual baggage of base and superstructure. Solomos argues that it is quite mistaken to see recent Marxist writings on the question of race and class as solely deriving from Cox and others alike, or to equate them with a simple form of economic and class reductionism. Instead, he asserts that equally important influences on recent Marxist writings on race are the works of neo-Marxist writers, which are more complex and sophisticated.

3) Neo-Marxism

Neo-Marxism further developed early theories of race and racism. In the 1970s and 80s, a wide variety of Marxist conceptualizations of race, class, and the state emerged, including a

substantial body of theoretical studies which attempt to develop a more precise and systematic understanding of racism in capitalist society as rooted in the dominant social relations and power structures (Solomos 1986).

While it can be argued that various Marxist approaches to race can be unified through a common concern with 1) the material and ideological basis of racism and racial oppression, however it may be defined, and 2) the role that racism plays in structuring the entire social, political and economic structures of societies, Solomos (1986) notes that it is quite mistaken to think of contemporary Marxism as composed of a united set of dogmas. In other words, it is woefully inadequate to see Marxism as a monolithic set of assertions or to assimilate it wholesale into some notion of economic determinism or class reductionism. Rather, Marxism can be and must be best viewed as consisting of a spectrum of competing schools of thought ranging from economic determinism to more sophisticated explanatory models which fully recognize the centrality of human agency and collective action. In the following, I will briefly survey various key Marxist approaches to race and racism.

2. Various Neo-Marxist Approaches to Race and Racism

1) Relative Autonomy Model, Autonomy Model, and Migrant Labor model

Within the broad spectrum of recent Marxist approaches to race, class, and the state, it is possible to detect a wide variety of theoretical models, historical analyses and political arguments. Solomos (1986) identifies three as the most important approaches to race, class, and state.

a. Relative autonomy model: This model, originating from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies when Stuart Hall and his research students became involved in a

project whose goal was to understand the development of moral panics about the involvement of young blacks in a specific form of street crime (i.e., mugging), is concerned with developing an analysis of racism which accepts its relative autonomy from class-based social relations and its historical specificity in relation to the laws of motion of capitalist development (Solomos 1986). The model suggests that racism is a historical phenomenon and works separately from social relations, but at the same time affects them. Consequently, class and race should be examined together.

Stuart Hall and his colleagues attempted to develop an analytic framework that locates racism in historically specific social relations while allowing for a degree of autonomy of the racial aspects of society. From this as a starting point, Stuart Hall posed two key questions. For the first question, he focused on the relationship between racism and the structural features of capitalist society and asked: "How does racism function within capitalist social relations and how is it produced/reproduced?" And for the second which points to a related but more concrete set of concerns about how racism is actually constituted in specific societies or institutions, he asked: "How does racism influence the ways in which class, political, gender and other social relationships are actually experienced?"

Hall suggested three principles as starting point for a critical Marxist analysis of racism in the view of relative autonomy model. First, he rejected the idea that racism is a general feature of all human societies, arguing that what actually exist are historically specific racisms. Though there may be features common to all racially structured societies, it is necessary to understand what produces these features in each specific historical situation before one can develop a comparative analysis of racism. Secondly, although racism cannot be reduced to other social relations, one cannot explain racism in abstraction from them. Racism has a relative autonomy

from other relations, whether they are economic, political or ideological. This relative autonomy means that there is no unidirectional correspondence between racism and specific economic or other forms of social relations. Third, Stuart Hall criticized a dichotomous view of race and class, arguing that in a racially structured society, it is impossible to understand them through discrete modes of analysis. Race has a concrete impact on the class consciousness and organization of all classes and class factions. But class in turn has a reciprocal relationship with race, and it is the articulation between the two, which is crucial, not their separateness.

b. Autonomy model: Marxists of autonomy model argue that scholars need to go beyond the notion that racism is a relatively autonomous social phenomenon and to break away more definitely from the economic and class-reductionist elements in Marxist theory.

This model sees "relative autonomy model" as defective from both a theoretical and a political perspective. Marxists of autonomy model see the relative autonomy model as still supporting a deterministic analysis of political struggles against racism and thus allowing little room for anti-racist political strategies to be effective rather than symbolic. In the autonomy model, racism can be best be understood as the product of contemporary and historical struggles, arising independently of class and social relations, which are by no means reducible to wider sets of economic or social relations. Racism cannot be reduced to class conflict, as it exists as a consequence of ideological and political practices. The starting point of a Marxist analysis should be the ideological and political practices which work autonomously to produce racism. To Marxists of autonomy model, racism has its own autonomous formation, its own contradictory determinations, and its own complex model of theoretical ideological production, as well as its repercussions for the class struggle at the levels of the economy and the state.

In addition to autonomy model's critique of traditional reductionist Marxism and relative autonomy model, supporters of autonomy model argue that their analysis provides a more relevant guide to the complex political realities of racist politics and anti-racist struggles. Starting from the position that the state as an institution is not monolithic but the site of constant struggles, compromises and administrative decisions, they argue that the most important task of research on race is to highlight the political ideological context in which anti-racist struggles occur.

c. Migrant labor model: Meanwhile, migrant labor model takes a radically different starting point from relative autonomy model and autonomy model. This model argues on the basis of a critical reinterpretation of classical and neo-Marxist theories of class, the state, and ideology. The sufficient difference between migrant labor model and relative autonomy-/autonomy models is that migrant labor model seeks to prioritize the role that class and production relations play in the reproduction of racism. Central to this position is that race and racism should be distinguished where racism can only be understood by analyzing it in relation to the basic structural features of capitalism while race is an ideological category which requires explanation and cannot be used for either analytical or explanatory purposes.

In rejecting the descriptive or analytical value of race as a concept, proponents of migrant labor model insist on the importance of racism, and the discriminatory practices, which it produces, as the crucial factor in the formation of what they call a racialized fraction of the working class, and of other classes. What is at issue in the migrant labor model is not race as such but the racialization of a specific migrant population.

d. Critiques of the three models: Solomos (1986) asserts that from these three models, there are at least two problems that defy resolution: first, the question of the relative autonomy or

autonomy of racial and ethnic categorizations from economic and class determination; and secondly, the role of the state and the political institutions of capital societies in the state and the political institutions of capital societies in the reproduction of racism, including the complex role of state intervention in many countries to control immigration, to manage race relations and more broadly, to integrate racial and ethnic groupings into the wider society. And only few Marxist writers have ventured, at least until the 80s, beyond theoretical and macro-level analysis, resulting in a mode of analysis that points to contradictions and struggle but says little about the concrete historical and contemporary experience of racism at the level of everyday life and human agency. This has meant a notable failure to push Marxist analysis beyond the theoretical understanding of racism towards the practical understanding of how to overcome it.

2) Segmentation Theory and Split Labor Market Theory

Meanwhile, Omi and Winant (1994) and Winant (2000) offer a different typology, in particular, for neo-Marxism on class conflict and race. They note that class conflict theories of race can be divided into two opposing viewpoints: 1) segmentation theory and 2) split market theory.

a. Segmentation theory: Segmentation theory examines the notion of labor market segmentation as the key determinant of racially based inequalities in production relations. Omi and Winant (1994) note that segmentation theory has been developed in the Marxist tradition most centrally by Michael Reich (in collaboration with David M. Gordon and Richard Edwards), and in the institutionalist or stratification tradition by Michael Piore and Peter Doeringer.

Reich, Gordon, and Edwards have developed the segmentation perspective in two basic ways: first, Reich has explored the microeconomics of racial inequality in a rigorous critique of the neoclassical or market-based approach. Second, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich have

chronicled the historical evolution of labor control and labor market processes in the U.S., linking these to long-run trends or "swings" in the capitalist accumulation process. This evolution, they argue, has culminated in a segmented labor system in the contemporary period.

In his microeconomic analysis, Reich develops evidence for the divide and rule hypothesis by measuring the effects of racial inequalities on wage levels and on the distribution of social spending in such areas as education and welfare. He effectively demonstrates the limits of the market-based approach by introducing class variables (measurements of class cohesion and class segmentation across racial lines), which account far better for empirically observed inequalities than do pure market-based variables.

b. Split market theory: Split market theory, which has been most effectively advanced by Bonacich (1972), suggests that a split labor market is the central source of racial inequalities. In a split-labor market, where groups, at least two, get paid differently for the same work, there develops class antagonism. Bonacich argues that the price of labor is not a response to the race or ethnicity of those entering the labor market, but instead this price differential results from differences in resources and motives which are often correlates of ethnicity.

Bonacich's conception stresses the existence of a group of dominant workers, which is threatened by the competition of cheap labor. Class conflict takes place between capital and the dominant group, which seeks to maintain its wage levels and defends whatever controls that the group may have of production process, etc. Then, racial/ethnic conflict takes place between dominant and subordinate workers as the former seek to prevent the latter from bidding down the price of their labor.

A split labor market produces a three-way conflict between business and the two labor groups, with business seeking to displace higher paid by cheaper labor. Ethnic antagonism can

take two forms: exclusion movements and "caste" systems. Both are seen as victories for higher paid labor since they prevent undercutting.

The exclusionist movements that arise as a result are not racially motivated or "nationalist" per se, but the product of historical accident, which produced a correlation between ethnicity and the price of labor. They are the result of pre-existing differences between the costs of racially (and ethnically) defined labor, differences which in turn stem from the existence of a worldwide division of labor, migration patterns, unequal exchange and uneven development processes, etc. Bonacich argues that while the existence of a cheap labor pool creates an obvious incentive for lowering wage costs and thus boosting profits, the resistance of dominant labor to these tactics forces capitalists into accommodations they would otherwise not choose to make.

Meanwhile, if cheaper labor cannot be excluded, then higher paid labor will resort to a caste arrangement. The higher paid group controls certain jobs exclusively and gets paid at one scale of wages, while the cheaper group is restricted to another set of jobs and is paid at a lower scale. And the higher paid group prevents the lower paid group from getting skills and bargaining power and forming an organization.

c. Critiques of segmentation theory and split market theory: Roediger (1991) argues that while segment theories have made useful point that racism benefits the capitalist class, at times in language so careful to avoid any notion of conspiracy that it is clear they are not offering a theory of racism but an empirical observation about racism. Meanwhile, split labor market theory at best explains the result, not the origins, of white working class privilege. Also typically, neither segmentation theory nor split labor market theories offer the possibility that racism is not a matter of bread alone, but is in addition a way in which white workers have come to look at the world.

3. Marxism and Whiteness

Roediger (1991) argues that the main body of writing by white Marxists in the U.S. has both naturalized whiteness and oversimplified race. These weaknesses, and the fact that they largely reproduce the weaknesses of both American liberalism and neo-conservatism where race is concerned, have limited the influence of the very real Marxist contributions to the study of race.

Also Roediger also argues that while it is certainly true that racism must be set in class and economic contexts, the privileging of class over race is not always productive or meaningful. To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary, but to reduce race to class is damaging. Another critique of traditional Marxist analyses of race is that while the class dimension of racism, they have tended to concentrate on the ruling class's role in perpetuating racial oppression, and to cast white workers as dupes.

In his attempt to amend Marxist approaches to race, Roediger's study on the construction of whiteness in the U.S. through working class in his book "The Wages of Whiteness" begins its analysis in the colonial period to show that race, in particular whiteness, became intertwined with the notions of freedom and servitude as different forms of bonded labor were introduced in North America. Roediger's essential starting point is that because the white working class in the U.S. emerged in a slaveholding republic, its members came to define themselves by what they were not (i.e., slaves and blacks). Building on Alexander Saxton's analysis of the ambivalent stance of white workers in a racist society, Roediger pays particular attention to the efforts of Irish immigrants who faced such extreme prejudice, how they tried to differentiate themselves from black slaves, establish their own whiteness, and thereby prove their Americanness (also see

Ignatiev 1995). Roediger reconceptualizes race in the U.S. as a problem of whiteness, not just of and about blacks. Roediger argues that the formation of the American working class cannot be separated from the systematic development of a sense of whiteness, thus moving away from privileging class over race but rather providing an example of kin analysis of how race and class are intertwined in their articulation.

4. Challenges in Marxism on Race in Contemporary Era

Solomos and Back (1995) note that the Neo-Marxist debates on race from the 1970s and 80s continued to influence research agendas. However, recently in particular starting from the 1990s, neo-Marxist critiques have not been able to cope with the complexities of theorizing racism. For instance, Winant (2006) argues that the global racial situation in the 21st century still remains seriously under-theorized. One key challenge may be the need to examine the complex of deep attachments and conflicts among anti-racist/anti-colonial movements, women's movements, and labor-based/anti-poverty movements. Also there have been calls for a radical revision of class analysis to incorporate political movements that mobilize around forms of identity other than class, as well as for a need to move away from Marxism as a framework of analysis and to take on some of the concerns of poststructuralism and postmodernism (Solomos and Back 1995).

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