

PART OF THE PROBLEM, OR PART OF THE SOLUTION?

COMMISSIONED RESEARCH AND THE CREATION OF RACE MEANING

Introduction

My presentation draws on a larger study, which is based on eight applied research projects, conducted over a period of six years in Britain. During this period I became aware of a notable gap between the epistemology of race and government policy in Britain.

Despite claims that government policies were based on robust race research and evidence, they lacked a coherent philosophical grounding. This led me to explore the relationships between academic theorising, race meaning and the reality of everyday race experiences in Britain.

It was not surprising to note that government policies on race drew selectively from research evidence. By and large, government policies are informed by mainly research that is contracted for specific policy purposes, many of which paid little attention to epistemology.

Instead, race research in Britain generally uses constitutionally defined race meaning as reflected in the Race Relations Act and Government census. So in reality, a dialectic relationship exists between race research and state in that the state creates and maintains a conceptual definition of race, which is reflected in most race research in Britain.

Methodology

In turning the critical gaze on my own research I undertook a deconstructive analysis of a sample of applied research, I conducted over a six-year period.

By adopting a position of both an insider and outsider to the research process, I examined common-sense understandings of race as expressed generally in race research, government policies and empirical narratives in local contexts.

The analysis covered; the nature of power relations, research processes, policy discourses and the social and political conditions within which the research was planned and conducted.

Applied research in Britain, by its very nature, allows little room for ideological expansion and is often closely 'managed' by the contractors who generally determine the scope, parameters and depth of analysis in tightly written research tenders.

Indeed, a key element of this process involves a notable degree of airbrushing to ensure conventionally accepted use of language and terms. This in effect, produces sterilised data sources from which researchers continue to draw on and develop.

Findings

As predicted, the study revealed that in essence 'race' as a concept in Britain is continually created, destroyed and re-invented in policy and research processes, driven by power structures and civic elites.

Race Research, especially projects that are contracted by institutions, are intrinsically situated in the context of state legislation and broader racialised state policies.

The study therefore concluded that;

- i) That the validity of applied race research contracted by government and state agencies is questionable (not neutral or objective).

And

- ii) Second, that applied research is influenced by and influences the broader dynamics of power relations that shape and sustain versions of race meaning over different era and context.

Although my focus was primarily on applied research, during my analysis, I uncovered evidence to suggest that these patterns might not be necessarily exclusive to contract research.

To test this, I situated my findings within the wider body of race research in Britain. I reviewed past race studies and current patterns of development in political discourses to detect the emergent trends in contemporary research on race.

Discussion; Understanding Race in Britain

And this is what I noted:

Efforts to make sense of race and racism started with a flurry of research towards the middle of the 20th century during a period of intense community unrest and political unease over the prevailing pattern of immigration.

Literature revealed that the patterns identified in my study in terms of state influence, were mirrored in the research conducted during this period. Importantly, in post-colonial Britain, race researchers had a tendency to problematise immigrant groups rather than institutions of power and this focus was significantly influenced by political discourse and state policies of the time.

The majority engaged with issues of culture and diversity. Often referred to as “new racism” the body of knowledge emerging from this approach, examines mainly immigrant, minority cultures, their perceived needs, experiences and social problems associated with them.

By highlighting cultural differences and diversity, matters of epistemology were overtaken by a desire to understand the behaviour of the alien 'other'.

The Post War 2 period which saw the explosion of race studies strongly contributed to key legislation¹ aimed at controlling the so-called 'social problems' associated with poor race relations between immigrants and settled communities.

This is evident in the simultaneous establishment of race and immigration legislation, during the 60s 70s and 80s. While the Race Relations Act (1976) aimed at preventing racial discrimination, a response to the evidence provided by researchers at the time, the Immigration Legislations attempted to control and restrict so-called coloured immigration. In effect, a response to political angst and public opinion.

Paradoxically, while the primary intention of the RRA was to eradicate racial discrimination, it created a complex legal category of race classification. This paved the way for the state to include race classification in the 1991 census. This served to officially create, enforce and

¹ Which adopted a victim protection stance - strongly influenced by scholarly works at the time-as discussed earlier

embed the idea of a racially divided society. This classification was changed and made more elaborate in the 2001 census and is expected to change again in the next census.

The essentialist system of ethno-racial categories formed the basis for developing a confused '*common-sense*' notion of race. It formalised divisions along ethnic, racial, colour and nationality lines and increased public fear of diversity. This invariably shaped the racial landscape of research in ways that studies problematised specific racialised groups rather than the racist constitutional arrangements..

In effect, the involvement of agencies of the state and powerful civic elites, including academics, served to make this racialised system appear respectable and '*acceptable*' thereby endorsing a contradictory, racial hierarchy which attempts to protect and consolidate a majority '*White British*' identity.

In the 1991 census, the '*White British*' category was directed at the core indigenous (English, Scottish, Welsh) '*white*' groups. Indeed, other '*white*' groups, mainly of immigrant origin (but still UK citizens) were set apart (e.g.

the Irish) or clustered together (eg, Polish, Italian, etc) in an '*Other White*' category. Post-Devolution, the 2001 census had two different racial classification systems (One for Scotland and One for England)

By adopting these state defined categories, it is argued here that race researchers in Britain invariably reaffirm the states control in creating and distroying race meaning. Race statistics now forms the basis of analysis in most national and local studies and it is difficult to find many government policies that do not make reference to them (Finney and Simpson 2008).

The pattern of relating immigration with the cause of racial unrest and social problems linked with the presence of immigrants was therefore firmly established by the early 90s in British Law, policy and research.

In Britain, theoretical work on race and racism has a common thread running through it, in that it has shifted in unison with state ideologies. The impact of this over the last five decades is reflected in the complex way in which race has been defined and understood in studies.

There is now an ever-increasing discourse that spans a wide range of different ways in which race is articulated and the manner the racialised are referred to. Race meaning in Britain is now stretched to the limit.

The direction taken by British researchers can in part be explained by the gap in Race theories. Race studies are one of few areas in Sociology, that lacks 'grand theory' or at best, consensus on meaning.

Some three years after this study was completed, a review of public debate and political discourses suggest that the trends in relation to the role of the state and race research have continued to hold.

But there appears to be a new crisis on the horizon for race studies in Britain. Contemporary debates on the epistemology of race are reigniting in light of developments towards a so-called 'post-race' society.

In this regard, while government frequently claims its commitment to 'eradicating racism and promoting good race relations' (GLG, 2010) it also promises to ensure the creation of an integrated society at ease with itself.

Post 2005 (7/7), the reference to race and racism in British political and policy discourses is being slowly erased. Racism is expressed more subtly. While the spotlight is even more firmly aimed towards immigrants, certain groups of settled immigrants are also targeted under the guise of state security and community safety.

To belong to the nation state, these groups are expected to demonstrate a new form of allegiance to the state, be able to speak English, dress and behave in a particular way and embrace a version of common British values. While the state overtly promotes diversity, it actively resists further diversity and the door is being firmly shut to certain immigrants.

Recently, the new coalition government in Britain promised to scale back net immigration. On 28th of June, the home secretary, Theresa May announced governments' intention to place a temporary limit on non-EU workers with the intention of deciding a permanent cap on immigration.

While this spells fundamental change in the way workers are selected to enter Britain, it is clear that a disproportionate number of immigrants most affected will

be from poorer countries. Such developments chime with those of the previous government who promised the Nation “British jobs for British people”. (BBC, 15 November 2007).

The power and civic elites are already starting to shape the destiny of race and racism in Britain, implying that race is no longer a national issue.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission, which now has the remit for eradicating racism, had this to say recently:

The EHRC claims:

“We are not racists. How could we be? We are an ancient multilingual state forged from at least four different ethnicities, with a people built on and used to intermarriage, compromise and negotiation.”

(Phillips, 2010)

In an earlier speech, the Chair of EHRC suggested that the term **“institutional racism be replaced with systemic bias”** (Phillips, 2008)

And as recently as the (5 July, 2010), an EHRC commissioner commented as follows:

“It's said that the Inuit people have more than 50 words to describe snow... in modern Britain though, we have only one crude term to describe a whole range of individual and institutional practices and prejudices: ‘racism’. This often blunt instrument becomes even more problematic when we consider that to be labelled a racist is only marginally better than being called a paedophile or murderer.”

(Woolly, 2010)

This movement towards ‘racelessness’, is very likely to be reflected in future race research and policy, if previous trends continue to hold firm.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, what does this mean for studies of race and racism in Britain? Current discourses suggests that the government and its agencies are striving to adopt a post-race stance by directing policy and research attention away from race to issues concerning national citizenship and integration within the nation state. This renewed fear

of acknowledging 'race' and 'racism' suggests that we have come full circle with race in Britain.

Race blindness is now couched in carefully worded messages delivered by left leaning state sponsored agencies and uttered within the context of liberal ideals - fairness, equality and justice.

In following this direction, race researchers are in danger of leaving behind 'race' and its implications (racism). Research activities in Britain play a significant part in enabling the state to retain constitutional racism by giving it credibility and, subsequently authority.

By retaining 'race' and working towards a consensus in meaning, I believe it is possible to break the dialectic relationship between the British state and race research.

In this regard, global collaboration and data sharing is crucial as this will enable us to ground race studies outside the nation state and its immediate influences.