Is "Race" Essential?

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COMMENT AND REPLY

IS "RACE" ESSENTIAL?

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In his recent article in the *American Sociological Review*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997, henceforward EBS) argued that "the central problem of the various approaches to the study of racial phenomena is their lack of a structural theory of racism" (p. 465). He identified several limitations of existing approaches, including the tendency to treat racism too narrowly: as psychological and irrational (as opposed to systemic and rational); as a "free-floating" ideology (as opposed to structurally grounded); as a historical legacy (as opposed to a contemporary structure); as static and epiphenomenal (as opposed to changing and autonomous); as evident only in overt behavior (as opposed to both overt and covert behavior). EBS believes that a structural theory of racism based on the concept of "racialized social systems" can overcome these shortcomings (p. 469).

Although I agree completely with EBS about the importance of improving our understanding of the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of "racial phenomena,"[1] I argue that his "structural theory of racism" is decisively not the best analytical framework for accomplishing this goal. The utility of his theoretical framework is undermined by

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[1] It should be clear from this that I oppose the claim made by some theorists that "race" is no longer relevant and should not be a focus of sociological analysis.

three critical pitfalls: (1) confounding categories with groups, (2) reifying "race," and (3) maintaining the unwarranted analytical distinction between "race" and "ethnicity." These three flaws undermine the usefulness of his "racialized social system" framework for improving our understanding of historical and contemporary meanings of "race" and consequences of "racism."

To avoid these pitfalls and to understand more fully how "race" shapes social relations and becomes embedded in institutions, "race" should be abandoned as a category of analysis. This would increase analytical leverage for the study of "race" as a category of practice.[2] To improve our understanding of "racial" phenomena we do not need a "structural theory of racism" but rather an analytical framework that focuses attention on processes of boundary construction, maintenance, and decline—a comparative sociology of group-making—built on the Weberian concept of social closure.

CONFOUNDING CATEGORIES WITH GROUPS

The first major pitfall of the framework EBS proposes is that it treats as natural and automatic the move from the imposition of racial categories to the existence of concrete groups that embody those categories. "Racialized societies" are defined as "societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races" (p. 469). "Race" thus seems to be used as a synonym for "racial categories." EBS, however, does not maintain this analytical usage of "race." In his next paragraph, he argues: "In all racialized social systems the placement of some people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations between

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[2] Refering to "race" as a category of practice does not imply in any way that "race" is merely epiphenomenal, just as recognizing that "race" is a social construction does not imply in any way that it is not real in its consequences.

the races" (p. 469). Clearly, "racial catego-
ries" and "races" have ceased to be synony-
mous—"racial categories" have produced
"races" in an entirely different sense.

EBS thus uses the term "race" analytically
to mean both "racial category" (p. 469) and
"racialized social group" (p. 471). The prob-
lem is not simply that the conceptual frame-
work employs this dual analytical under-
standing of "race," but that it *hinges upon* the
analytical conflation of "race" as category
with "race" as social group. This conflation
appears warranted, given the assumption that
racial categories both create and reflect the
experienced reality. According to EBS, cat-
egorization into "races"—or "racializa-
tion"—engenders "new forms of human as-
sociation with definite status differences."
After racial labels are "attached" to a
"people," "race becomes a real category of
group association and identity" (pp. 471–72).

Although this may be the case in particu-
lar contexts in particular historical periods,
it is not axiomatic that membership in a cat-
egory will correspond directly to experi-
enced group boundaries or social iden-
tities.[3] The extent to which categories and
groups do correspond, and the conditions un-
der which they do so, should be recognized
as important theoretical questions that are
subject to empirical research (Jenkins
1994).[4] By adopting a conceptual framework
that fails to maintain the analytical distinc-
tion between category and group, classifica-
tion and identity, such potentially rewarding
avenues of research and theorization are
foreclosed.

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[3] This observation is not new. As Weber
([1922] 1968) explained,

> It is by no means true that the existence of com-
> mon qualities, a common situation, or common
> modes of behavior imply the existence of a com-
> munal social relationship. Thus, for instance, the
> possession of a common biological inheritance by
> virtue of which persons are classified as belong-
> ing to the same 'race,' naturally implies no sort
> of communal relationship between them. (P. 42)

Generations of Marxist scholars also have
grappled with this issue in efforts to theorize the
relationship between "class-in-itself" and "class-
for-itself."

[4] In some cases, analysis of processes of cat-
egorization may reveal more about the categor-
iz*ers* than the categoriz*ed* (Jenkins 1994:207;
Stuchlik 1979).

Although EBS is correct in arguing that the
socially constructed nature of "race" does not
make it less than "real," his framework does
not recognize the variability and contingency
of the "real" consequences of "race" as, in
Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, a principle of
vision and division of the social world. On
the one hand, EBS writes of "the classifica-
tion of a people in racial terms" (p. 471) as if
a bounded, clearly demarcated group existed
objectively, "out there," before the process of
categorization. Categories sometimes may be
superimposed on already recognized and op-
erative social boundaries, and perhaps may
change their meaning without altering their
content. But they also may create new divi-
sions, making possible the emergence of
"peoples" who had not previously recognized
themselves, nor had been recognized by oth-
ers, as such (Hacking 1986; Horowitz 1985;
Petersen 1987).

On the other hand, the extent to which
"race" becomes a basis of group association
and identity as a consequence of imposed ra-
cial categorization is historically variable.
Again, this point raises the question of the
relationship between imposed categories, the
identity of the categorized, and experienced
groupness (Jenkins 1994). EBS's analytical
framework may permit such contingency
during the initial process of racialization;
within a "racialized social system," however,
it provides no leverage for exploring the
variable relationship between categories,
identities, and the "groupness" experienced
because the analytical distinction between
categories and groups is not maintained.

EBS points out that "races" are socially
constructed, and therefore that "the meaning
and the position assigned to races in the ra-
cial structure are always contested" (p. 472).
In this formulation, however, the groupness
of the actors in a "racialized social system" is
assumed. By definition, "races" exist as col-
lective actors in a racialized social system
(even if, at some moments, nonracial—class
or gender—interests are the primary focus of
their attention). Contention occurs over the
meaning (positive/negative stereotypes) and
the position (subordinate/superordinate) of
different "races," not over the existence or
operation of racial boundaries themselves
(Barth 1969; Roediger 1991). "Racial" poli-
tics entail struggles over boundaries; this fact

is not brought into focus by an analytical lens that treats the existence of bounded, racialized collective actors—races—as the logical (natural?) outcome, as well as the defining characteristic, of "racialized social systems."

REIFYING "RACE"

After conflating racial categories with racial groups, it is only another small step to objectifying "races" as races. In racialized social systems—societies that are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories—races exist. Indeed, this is so by definition in the conceptual language used (*racial categories = racialized social groups = races*). The analytical framework proposed by EBS thus depends on the reification of "race"; races are real social groups and collective actors.

EBS seems to recognize this problematic aspect of his conceptual framework, which accounts for his comment in a footnote that "races (as classes) are not an 'empirical thing'; they denote racialized social relations or racial practices at all levels" (p. 472, from Poulantzas 1982:67). This disclaimer, however, is in profound tension with the conceptualization of races as social groups with particular "life chances" and as collective actors with "objective racial interests" (p. 470). As EBS explains, "Insofar as the races receive different social rewards at all levels, they develop dissimilar objective interests, which can be detected in their struggles to either transform or maintain a particular racial order" (p. 470).

Preempting the criticism that "races" themselves may be stratified by class and gender, EBS argues, "The fact that not all members of the superordinate race receive the same level of rewards and (conversely) that not all members of the subordinate race or races are at the bottom of the social order does not negate the fact that races, as social groups, are in either a superordinate or a subordinate position in a social system" (p. 470). Yet this attempt to defend his framework actually reveals a more profound analytical shortcoming: Although his framework permits variability in individual life chances within a "race," the boundaries—and the boundedness—of the "races" themselves are assumed to be unproblematic.

The limitations of this reified conceptualization of "race" become readily apparent when EBS addresses the problem of "race" in Latin America. He suggests that in countries such as Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico, "race has declined in significance," but that these countries "still have a racial problem insofar as the racial groups have different life chances" (p. 471). "Race" is treated as a "thing" in this formulation; in addition, it is treated as the *same* "thing" in each of these places as in the United States. It is conceptualized as varying in salience or importance, but not in *meaning*. EBS himself criticizes other approaches for failing to recognize the change over time in the meaning of "race" in the United States. Yet his own analytical framework forecloses the possibility of comparative analysis of the varied meanings of "race" *across time and place*, and of the resulting variability in its consequences for social organization and domination.

As one example, reification of "race" obscures the problematic nature of the claim that in Brazil the "racial groups have different life chances" and hence different objective "racial interests." This assumption clashes with the experience of political activists of the *movimento negro,* whose first and most challenging task in mobilizing people around "race" in Brazil has been to make people think in "racial" terms so that they might "see" why and how "race" matters in their lives. Central to this goal have been efforts to encourage Brazilians to categorize themselves according to a dichotomous understanding of "race"—based on the U.S. "model"—that does not automatically or obviously resonate with their own experience and understanding of "race" as much more flexible and subject to context (Hanchard 1994; Harris 1970; Nobles 1995; Wagley 1965).

The assumption that "races" exist as bounded, socially determined groups is also problematic in the United States, however warranted it may seem for those accustomed to viewing "race" through the prism of United States experience. The disjuncture between discrete, mutually exclusive racial categories and the potential ambiguity and blurriness of "racial" boundaries in people's experience in the United States has come to the fore in recent political struggles over the

inclusion of a "mixed race" category in the next census.

Once it is recognized that the boundaries between "races," and hence the existence of "races," cannot be deduced from the existence or imposition of "racial" categories, whether in Brazil or in the United States, the attribution of objective "racial interests" to the putative "races" becomes all but meaningless. Even if "racial" interests are defined in a nontautological manner, the notion that such interests are objective and can be identified from the struggles of "races" over their position in the racial hierarchy falls apart once the existence of "races" per se is made problematic.

The assumption that "races" exist as collective actors cannot be the starting point if the goal is to understand what "race" means, and how, and with what consequences, it operates as a principle of vision and division of the social world across time and place. The analyst should focus on the *groupness itself*, and hence on the processes of boundary-making and unmaking in relation to systems of categorization and processes of social inclusion and closure. This requires an analytical framework that is not built on a reified conceptualization of "race."

DISTINGUISHING ANALYTICALLY BETWEEN "RACE" AND "ETHNICITY"

The third analytical pitfall is the unfounded insistence on distinguishing analytically between "race" and "ethnicity," and the attempt to theorize the former in intellectual isolation from the latter.[5] Although EBS insists that his conceptual framework is applicable only to "racialized social systems," he does not make clear the *analytical bases* for distinguishing "racialized" systems from "ethnicized" systems.

The justification offered for distinguishing analytically between race and ethnicity is based on an empirical understanding of their differences. According to EBS, "ethnicity

has a primarily sociocultural foundation, and ethnic groups have exhibited tremendous malleability in terms of who belongs," while "racial ascriptions (initially) were imposed externally to justify the collective exploitation of a people and are maintained to preserve status differences" (p. 469).

This rationalization suffers from the same defect as other attempts to distinguish analytically between "race" and "ethnicity" by reference to the empirical differences between them: Differences that are peculiar to the United States at particular times in its history are taken as the bases for conceptual generalization. The position that "race" and "ethnicity" are analytically distinct thus reflects the ingrained North American bias in the sociology of "race." Commonsense understandings of these categories as they exist in the United States are elevated to the status of social scientific concepts. The particular (and particularly arbitrary) operation of "race" versus "ethnicity" in the United States is thus treated as the norm, from which other modalities of categorization are considered to be deviations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999).[6]

EBS's theory relies on commonsense understandings of "race" and on circular definitions to justify its exclusive application to "racialized" social systems. The key concept of his analytical framework, "racialized social systems," is defined only in reference to the concept of "race" itself. Thus, "racialized social systems are societies that allocate differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed" (p. 474). But what are "racial lines"? How do they differ *analytically* from ethnic lines? The definitions offered are circular: Racial lines are present in racialized societies buttressed by racial ideology, in

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[5] Theorists have offered several reasons for distinguishing analytically between "race" and "ethnicity"; some are more compelling than others. Space constraints prevent a full consideration of this issue here. My comments explicitly address only the type of rationale EBS offers.

[6] As Wacquant (1997) suggests,

[T]he sociology of "race" all over the world is dominated by U.S. scholarship. And since U.S. scholarship itself is suffused with U.S. folk conceptions of "race," the peculiar schema of racial division developed by one country during a small segment of its short history, a schema unusual for its degree of arbitrariness, rigidity and social consequentiality, has been virtually universalized as the template through which analyses of "race" in all countries and epochs are to be conducted. (P. 223)

which racial contestation "reveals the different objective interests of the races in a racialized system" (p. 474).

EBS is not alone among scholars of "race" in resorting to tautology to defend the unique analytical status of "race." In their "racial formation" perspective, Omi and Winant (1994) also rely on circular definitions and essentialist reasoning to defend the independent ontological status of "race." They define "racial formation" as the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 55), but they never define "racial categories" without referencing "race." Their efforts to argue for a distinction between "race" and "ethnicity" is based on a particular reading of U.S. history rather than on any analytical foundation.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the "ethnicity paradigm," developed in reference to the experience of "European [white] immigrants," cannot comprehend the experience of "racial groups." They rule out the possibility that European immigrants could be "racialized" because they were phenotypically white. This position is not only historically inaccurate, as demonstrated in work on the racialization of Irish and Italian immigrants (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991), but it also contradicts their own contention that "race has no fixed meaning, but is constructed and transformed sociohistorically" (Omi and Winant 1994:71).

Thus the great difficulty of providing analytic justification for isolating theories of "race" from theories of "ethnicity" is revealed in "race" theorists' recent, prominent attempts to prove otherwise. Historically specific differences between the meaning and operation of "race" and "ethnicity" as systems of categorization *in practice in one society* cannot be the foundation for a *general and generalizable analytical* distinction between "race" and "ethnicity." Asserting the unique ontological status of "race" may actually undermine attempts to improve understanding of the operation and consequences of "race," "racism," and "racial domination" in different times and places. The arbitrary theoretical isolation of "race" from "ethnicity" discourages the comparative research needed to discover what, if anything, is unique about the operation or consequences

of "race" as an essentializing practical category, as opposed to other categorization schemes that naturalize social differences between human beings.

RECONSIDERING "RACE"

According to Wacquant (1997), "from its inception, the collective fiction labeled 'race' . . . has always mixed science with common sense and traded on the complicity between them" (p. 223). This complicity is intrinsic to the category "race"; it undermines attempts to study "race" as a practical category by using "race" as an analytical category.[7] This is quite clear in the framework proposed by EBS, and in the framework of Omi and Winant (1994) as well. Neither "racialized social system" nor "racial formation" is defined without reference to "race"; therefore a commonsense understanding of "race" is required to do the work of determining when a social system is racialized.

Without a clear analytical definition, the realm of "cases" of racialization is presented and understood as the set of contexts in which the language of "race" is operative and has social consequences for particular groups of people. The presence of "race talk," or racial terminology, and beliefs and institutionalized practices informed by that terminology, indicates that "racialized social system" or "racial formation" is the appropriate conceptual framework. Relevant cases are identified by the existence of "racial groups" (EBS, pp. 476–77; Omi and Winant 1994); conversely, identification of "racial groups" can be based only on commonsense understandings of "race" because they are never defined analytically without referencing "race." Case selection thus is governed by folk understandings of "race" rather than by analytical criteria such as distinctive bases and processes of social closure.

This analytical pitfall can be avoided most successfully by abandoning "race" as a category of analysis in order to gain analytical

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[7] Because of the extent of "continual barter between folk and analytical notions . . . of 'race,'" we need an analytical language that helps us avoid the "uncontrolled conflation of social and sociological understandings of 'race'" (Wacquant 1997:222).

leverage to study "race" as a category of practice.[8] By adopting an analytical framework that focuses on essentializing schemas of categorization and processes of group-making generally, one can explore empirically whether and to what extent a particular essentializing vocabulary is related to particular forms of social closure and with what consequences. Thus it becomes an empirical question whether, and to what extent, systems of classification, systemic stratification, and social injustices buttressed by ideas about "race" are historically distinct from those informed by a discourse of "ethnicity" or "nationality." Empirical research on a specific historical period in a particular nation-state could uncover important differences in the meaning and consequences of "race" and "ethnicity"; consideration of such findings within a comparative historical perspective could clarify the extent of historical contingency involved.

Such an approach is likely to discredit claims that "race" is unique in its operation as an essentializing signifier (Guillaumin 1995:30; Omi and Winant 1994), while facilitating empirical research into the different meanings and consequences of "race" in diverse places and times. It also permits a recognition of "race," "ethnicity," and "nation" as social constructions *with real consequences* without falling into the realm of reification.

Miles (1984) argues that because "race" is socially constructed, "there is nothing distinctive about the resulting relations between the groups party to such a social construction" (p. 220). In contrast, the approach I de-

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[8] The distinction between categories of analysis and categories of practice is borrowed from Brubaker (1996), following Bourdieu (1991). According to Brubaker and Cooper (forthcoming):

Reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice. As such, it is central to many social and political practices oriented to "nation," "ethnicity," "race," and other putative "identities." As analysts of these practices, we should certainly try to *account* for this process of reification, through which the "political fiction" of the "nation"—or of the "ethnic group," "race," or other "identity"—can become powerfully realized in practice. But we should avoid unintentionally *reproducing* or *reinforcing* such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis. (Emphasis in original)

scribe here keeps open the possibility that social relations constituted by the concept of "race" may entail distinct patterns, logic, or consequences. Yet it avoids treating this historically contingent *possibility* as a timeless characteristic of "race" by (tautological) definition. Rejection of "race" as an analytical concept facilitates analysis of the historical construction of "race" as a practical category without reification, and thus provides a degree of analytical leverage that tends to be foreclosed when "race" is used analytically.[9]

TOWARD A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF GROUP-MAKING

A comparative sociology of group-making focuses analytical attention on the historically contingent relationship between processes of categorization, forms of social closure, and the construction of collective identity. By deghettoizing the study of "race" and approaching it as part of a larger field of issues related to processes and consequences of symbolic boundary construction, maintenance, and decline, one could avoid the analytical pitfalls discussed above. In turn, this perspective would further the important goal of EBS's "racialized social system" approach: to improve upon previous frameworks for the study of "race" in order to understand more clearly how "race" shapes social relations (p. 476).

The conceptual foundation for a comparative sociology of boundary construction and group-making already exists, set forth by Weber in his classic formulation of the concept of social closure. Social closure focuses analytical attention on how groups come together and dissolve through social interaction in diverse spheres of life. The concept of social closure is inherently relational; it draws analytical attention to the ideal and

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[9] For example, in her exemplary analysis of the racialization of slavery and slaves in the United States, Fields (1990) rejects the use of "race" as an analytical concept in order to explain its emergence, utilization, and ideological function as a category of practice in a specific historical moment characterized by a particular, contradictory ideological configuration. Fields argues that attempts to explain "racial phenomena" in terms of "race" are no more than definitional statements (Fields 1990:100).

material motivations for constructing boundaries between "us" and "them" (Weber [1922] 1968:43). In doing so, it gives priority to analysis of the relational construction or dissolution of boundaries, rather than to the "substance" on either side of the boundaries (Barth 1969).[10] The concept of social closure also implies that the degree of "groupness" can vary along different dimensions; at a given time, for example, a particular "us-them" distinction may profoundly influence spouse selection but may have little effect on hiring practices.

The concept of social closure highlights how social groups are constituted (to varying degrees) by the construction of symbolic boundaries (categorization) by collectivities with varying degrees of prior "groupness," and how such collectivities become groups with the potential to recognize and act upon collective interests to generate social change. Boundaries constructed through social closure may represent the interests of those on only one side, but they have implications for those on both sides. They may even become a resource for those whom they were meant to exclude or dispossess (Parkin 1979; Wallman 1978).

In the approach proposed here, I accept Wacquant's (1997) claim that "to understand how and with what consequences the 'collective fiction' of 'race' is actualized," the analyst must study "the practices of division and the institutions that both buttress and result from them" (p. 229). For the study of these practices, Wacquant (1997:230) proposes an analytical framework that focuses on five "elementary forms of racial domination": categorization, discrimination, segregation, ghettoization, and racial violence. Although his description of these practices as forms of "racial" domination seems to be in tension with his sustained and insightful critique of the problematic nature of "race" and "racism" as social scientific concepts, the substance of his framework could be conceptualized easily, if not more prosaically, as "elementary forms of social closure" based on imputed

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[10] Although this "substance" remains relevant and important for empirical analysis of specific cases of social closure, its relevance is "secondary" in that it matters only insofar as it both reflects and influences the motivations for social closure.

essential characteristics. Therefore, Wacquant's framework is a promising starting point for a comparative sociology of boundary construction and group-making that could improve our understanding of "race" (as well as "ethnicity" and "nation") as social constructions with real consequences by incorporating them into a common framework.

This is not to suggest that "social closure" is the only concept needed to understand processes of group-making, nor, much less, that "social closure" is itself a sufficient or comprehensive sociological theory of group-making. Rather, I emphasize how the concept of social closure can serve as a primary foundation for sociological inquiry into the construction, reproduction, or decline of symbolic boundaries. An explanatory framework built on such a foundation would provide more analytical leverage for improving our understanding of "race" than is offered by EBS's "structural theory of racism."

A comparative historical approach to the study of "race" as a category of practice, constitutive of social relations in given contexts, has far greater analytical and theoretical potential than a "racialized social system" approach. Even if such a perspective could avoid the reification of "race," the empirical and theoretical justifications for isolating the study of "race" are tenuous at best. Moreover, comparative analysis of social processes involved in the construction, maintenance, and decline of symbolic boundaries in diverse contexts promises to yield significant insights clarifying why particular systems of symbolic differentiation emerge and are sustained (or not), and are salient to varying degrees, at particular points in history.

A comparative approach to the study of boundary construction and group-making built on the Weberian concept of social closure also could facilitate identification of forms of closure associated with particular symbolic-boundary dynamics (emergence, maintenance, decline). Such a framework could permit identification of the patterns of relations between particular social processes and particular structural conditions that trigger certain boundary dynamics; consequently, it could improve social scientific understanding, explanation, and theorization.

These promising research avenues are foreclosed by approaches that reify "race" in

their attempt to employ it analytically. To investigate and explain the causes, dynamics, and consequences of "race" as a category of practice, social scientists would be better off eliminating "race" as a category of analysis.

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