The Turn to Whiteness: Race, Nation and Cultural Sociology

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Abstract
Critical research into whiteness has articulated the fashion in which racial identity can become experienced and seen as ‘normal’ or ‘just human’. The invisibility of whiteness is a marker of its naturalization and dominance. Similarly, studies of masculine identities as a site of cultural domination describe the ability to represent the ‘natural’ as implicated in masculine dominance. In this paper I describe a framework for understanding the relations of whiteness. I describe differentiation within whiteness in relation to discourses of Aboriginal Reconciliation and Australian national identity. I describe the idea of the ‘logic of identity’ as used by writers like Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida and Stuart Hall and describe the different subjectivities that inhabit the discursive economy of Australian race relations. In particular I focus upon the impulse for certainty and authenticity within the logic of Australian national identity commenting upon the ways in which discourse and practice reduce or widen the opportunities for conceiving and accepting cultural difference.

Australia’s place within global relations is undergoing rapid change. As a nation we are intensely engaged with questions of cultural and national identity. These questions include our changing relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region and with our traditional allies, reactions to the social movements of the 1970’s and the liberalisation of the nation-state, strategies of managing 20th and 21st century immigrants and multiculturalism; the legitimacy of our presence on this landmass and our engagement with the Indigenous peoples; and more recently with the threat of ‘global terrorism’ the second Gulf War and our implication in the US led project of world ‘democratisation’.

British sociologist Stuart Hall remarked in the early 1990s: as sociologists ‘we must return to the question of identity, for the question of identity has
returned to us' (2000: 144). Hall is commenting upon the way in which the questions of race and racial identity have re-emerged as central to the construction of an authentic organic national identity, on being British or in our context, Australian. It seems to me that the question of identity, and identification, is central to understanding the many tensions and social changes that shape contemporary global cultural relations and Australian national identity.

My principle aim in this paper is to discuss the growth of interest in whiteness as a concept to describe the process and practices of racialisation. It is also to begin to establish a cultural sociological approach to understanding race, nation and identity. The concern with ideas of race and racial identity, as significant shapers of Australian identity, scaffolds this approach. Critical whiteness studies, I argue, is a culturally and historically relevant theoretical approach for illuminating the racial terrain of Australian cultural relations. In this paper I begin by briefly charting the move from studies of race and racism to the critical study of whiteness. I then discuss the contribution of cultural studies to theories of identity. I draw upon Theodor Adorno's notion of identitarian thinking and logic of disintegration to outline the operation of dominance and the racialisation of whiteness.

A Sociology of Race and the Turn to Whiteness

Questions of race and racism emerged strongly in western sociology after the cultural turn of late 1960s. The social upheavals of this time represented a widespread cynicism in the project of modernity as it manifested in the apparatus and ideal of the nation-state. Feminism, student protest, gay liberation and struggles for indigenous and black rights were some of the new social movements that emerged in alliance to challenge the hegemony of western systems of governance. Sociological analysis of race and racism emerged alongside to explain these cultural dynamics focusing predominantly on the disadvantage of the Other. Critical theory, encompassing feminist and post-colonial critiques also grew in stature and influence.

The racism of these times, and before, in Britain, America and Australia, for example, was seen as a raw form of racism that focused upon the physiological characteristics of the Other. Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1992: 14) explain that it is problematic to presume that contemporary racism is endemically tied to the notion of race. By this they mean that racism is not always based upon distinct racial typologies or stereotypes today. Tucker (1987) describes this as the 'new racism'. Tucker (1987:18) explains the new racism in Britain as appealing to "a homogenous society... [which] is seen as the essential ingredient for social harmony." The new racism thus appeals to different meanings and conditions than the old racism. The old racism being the belief and practice that "perceived groups possess distinctive characteristics which determine their capacities and behaviour, traits graded as inferior or superior" (Tucker, 1987:16). Stratton (1998: 13-14) argues that this new racism, in the Australian context, is most voraciously deployed by the One Nation leader Pauline Hanson as a form of culturalism where some cultures are seen to be incompatible with the Australian national culture.

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Gale (1999: 2-4) draws upon the British experience of the new racism in the 1980s under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher to describe the link between racism and nationalism. Gordon and Klug (1986) argue that the new racism seeks to generate a sense of the nationalist as natural, as the rightful possessor of land and nation. Within this discourse the nationalist is seen as losing their culture to the immigrant. Cultural sameness within the nation is exhorted, and the white nationalist is seen as the victim of 'reverse racism' (Gale, 1999: 2-3). Tucker argues that this form of racism has adopted a way of describing difference in racial terms, but avoiding the vocabularies of biological racism that immediately identify the subject as using racism to articulate their point.

Andrew Lattas describes this racialisation of Others based upon their relationship to the 'same' of White Australia as egalitarian racism (2001: 108). Slavoj Zizek, writing of similar concern within Eastern Europe describes this desire with homogeneity and cultural sameness as postmodern racism (1995: 226). Zizek argues that:

... what we must be particularly attentive to is the difference between this "postmodern racism" which now rages around Europe and the traditional form of racism. The old racism was direct and raw - 'they' (Jews, blacks, Arabs, Eastern Europeans...) are lazy, violent, plotting, eroding our national substance, etc., whereas the new racism is 'reflected,' as it were squared racism, which is why it can well assume the form of its opposite, of the fight against racism (1995: 226).

Lattas (2001: 106) argues that this 'squared racism' is a principal theme in contemporary Australian racism. This theme emerges in the voice of its subjects who deny that they are engaging in racism. Lattas (2001: 107) describes the new racism in Australia as articulating hostility toward the Other while refusing to inferiorise the body of the Other. In other words, previous forms of racism have explicitly inferiorised the Aboriginal body in relation to the white body, however the new 'disembodied' racism refuses to draw upon such discursive techniques. Hence, appeals to difference are made through appeals to equality, that we are all the same. Indeed, the claim is made that those others who have been constructed as the victims of racism are now racist, seeking special treatment when we should all be seeking to live equally and to be treated equally.

The turn to whiteness follows this trajectory also attempting to explain this shift in racism and racialisation from a preoccupation with the inferiority of the Other to a preoccupation with equality and sameness. The sociological concern with race that emerged previous to, and during, the 70s and 80s has thus become an anachronism. New discussions of race and racism, and the development of critical approaches to race and racism have developed alongside these cultural changes. Whiteness studies is one contemporary attempt to makes sense of these changes.

Cultural Sociology: Nation, Power, Identity
The ideal of the nation is constantly shifting and changing (Bhabha, 1990: 1). In Australia, ideas of whiteness have pervaded ideas of the nation and the
Australian. White Australian cultural policy officially ended its term in 1972 when the White Australia Policy was officially renounced. Writers like Ghas-san Hage describe the racial context in Australia as shaped by an intense national desire for a white nation (2000). Moreton-Robinson (2001) talks of the Australian nation being established upon a possessive investment in patri-archal whiteness. Schech and Haggis (2001) describe the contemporary turn to a monocultural white national identity. Moreover, the phenomena described as postmodern, new or cultural racism scaffolds these accounts – they all reflect this cultural turn to refocus the accommodation of Self within the national space.

Whiteness studies analyse these cultural practices in terms of a reversal of the focus on the Other to a focus upon the Self as well. Mainstream sociology has been criticised for the tendency to focus upon the victims of racism rather than the perpetrators. Richard Dyer explains that 'race' is usually attributed to Others: to the oppressed, violated and disadvantaged (1997:4). Dyer (1997) suggests that race has become a label signifying simply 'difference', in many contexts leaving the attributes of the commentator unquestioned. The invisibility of whiteness, or the capacity of whiteness to contrib-ute to a representation of sameness, is thus a fortress of white race privilege (Frankenburg, 1993, 1997). Australian scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes that, “as long as whiteness remains invisible in analyses ‘race’ is the prison reserved for the ‘Other’” (2000: xix).

Whiteness studies, with its practice of reversing the gaze from the “racial ob-ject to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; the serving to the served” (Morrison, 1992:90) is employed to disrupt the integrated character of whiteness: to defamiliarise its naturalisation and its rendering as invisible and taken-for granted.

However, there is little theoretical work that uncovers the construction and operation of dominance. The literature on whiteness more often than not stops at this claim of reversal. This focus upon the relations of dominance however is central to critical theory, namely postcolonialism and global feminism, but also the work of the Frankfurt School, in particular Theodor Adorno, and Stuart Hall of British Cultural Studies.

Critical Theory, Identity and the Construction of Dominance

Concerns with identity and identification help to elaborate the concept of whiteness. These questions have always preoccupied sociologists and social theorists. The notion of Self and Other is a common distinction articulated by critical theorists like Spivak (1988), Said (1995), and Adorno (1996). The distinction between Self and Other is understood as the fundamental dis-tinction that constitutes consciousness - a sense of Self and by implication a sense of Other (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1973). After the cultural turn this dis-tinction has become a basis for understanding how subjects are shaped by language, and how subjects shape their environment and self through lan-

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guage (Torfing, 1999). Language for critical theorists is the primary medium of cultural production. Language is organised through discourse.

Discourses construct the objects of which they speak, that is language develops around particular objects of concern working to describe and actualise the object. Discourses are central to the different ways that objects of concern are represented. Language is always only an attempt to represent the object of concern, or the Self or the Other. In other words the concept (or the signified) never fully corresponds to the object; there is always lack and over-determination (Hall, 1996, Rose, 1996).

These ideas have quite particular implications for cultural sociology. Firstly, the focus of analysis has moved from the constitutive subject to language or discourse. The focus upon language or discourse is a focus upon systems of representation or discursive economies. This also means that cultural relations are always being produced and reproduced, represented, regulated and consumed through language and practice. The focus upon language effectively reorients our analysis of power as operating through discursive regimes – patterns and relations of knowing and acting. The language and cultural logics drawn upon by governments in the management of Aboriginal Reconciliation, for example, are intimately connected with broader and more generalisable discourses of race and national identity. It is important to describe the cultural contexts in which particular discursive economies of race and nation emerge. It is also important to describe the links between individual narrative and collective discourses of race and nation.

There are two points of note here: firstly that identity is considered relational and hierarchical, there are multiple forms of cultural relations, for example, gender is differentiated (see Connell, 1995), as is race or class (see Frankenburg, 1993, 1997). Secondly it is also useful to consider the 'logics of identity', that is, the ways that particular identities position themselves within cultural relations (see Hall, 1992). Adorno and Horkheimer describe the hegemonic logic of identity within Western philosophy, and Western cultures more generally, as a dialectic of enlightenment. This dialectic refers to the way that the Self valorises identity and the Other is marginalised as an assertion of difference. This reification of self and other occludes incommensurability, that is, this subject can only conceive others on his terms. In some way everything must be commensurable, able to be rationalised on the terms of the hegemonic subject. In the context of Australian racialisation whiteness has become that cocoon where an exclusive national identity has developed.

This dialectic of enlightenment, alternatively described as identititarian thinking, is where the Self articulates the Other as a threat to cultural and individual security, where the destabilisation of the hegemonic order is experienced as disorder, and where multiplicity is dangerous and commensurability paramount (O'Neill, 1999: 9). This striving for unity and coherence marks the hegemonic subject, it is, I argue, the hallmark of the white, masculinist, bourgeois Self (Adorno, 1996, 1973, Becker-Schmidt, 1999). It can be described as manifesting a closed subjectivity (Jameson, 1990:9). I am arguing that we can think about the logic of identity as relational, that is,
identitarian thinking presents the hegemonic logic of identification while others logics of identity sit in relations of subordination, complicity or radical alterity to this logic and its associated identities, discursive regimes and cultural practices. In other words, there are different ways of thinking and identifying and different logics of identity. Bhabha's (1990a) work on the third space, Adorno's logic of disintegration (1973), or Derrida's (1982) deconstruction are different ways of talking about the potential for critical and reflexive thought. It is argued that a logic of disintegration would generate open, radical and inclusive subjectivities.

Studies of whiteness focus upon the relations of dominance by articulating the authority of the invisible. Richard Dyer explains that “there is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (1997:2). The ability to present oneself as a representation of the norm, as the standard by which all Others should be determined, is an instrument of authority and privilege. It is part of the tradition of critical theory to work at the denaturalisation of the taken-for-granted. Although not articulated through the theoretical ideas of critical theory and cultural studies whiteness studies attempts to uncover identitarian thinking and to think itself through non-identity.

There are criticisms of whiteness studies also. A common criticism levelled at whiteness studies is that it articulates whiteness in unitary terms. To speak of whiteness as a singular, unified, coherent notion without considering the way this idea operates in practice as well as language, the way subjects are constructed through race relations, the logics of identification within different empirical contexts is to reify them and reinforce their claim to represent humanity (Bhabha, 1995).

The question of differentiation within the relations of whiteness is important. Bhabha argues that a preoccupation with singularity in race or gender analysis is a significant caveat (1995). It is significant because to think of whiteness in unitary terms neglects the reality that people are located differentially and hierarchically within the relations of race and whiteness. It is important to consider whiteness as relational, which the focus upon discourse and practice supports. Whiteness is hierarchical and multiple and there are those who are white, not white-enough and not-white. A relational understanding of whiteness contributes to the disruption of the ubiquitous naturalisation of whiteness. Arguing for differentiated notions of whiteness is a key strategy in achieving an awareness of the contingency of these discourses and relations.

Another significant reason for adopting the concept of whiteness is the effect that this concept has upon the traditional notion of racism and anti-racism. To focus upon whiteness is to acknowledge that “racial domination is a system that positions or constructs everyone that falls within its orbit” (Ware, 1996:143). Whiteness describes different relations of identification and domination: Whiteness is a way of describing the predominant and racialised axes of meaning and differentiation within the Australian context. All Australian subjects are in some way positioned within, or represented by, the relations of whiteness.
To speak of whiteness then is to recognise that all subjects are raced and gendered. Concentrating on whiteness obstructs the potential for people to stand outside of racism by placing it as a moral problem for whites and a political problem for blacks (Ware, 1996: 143). Moreover, when one identifies another as racist one is also defining who or what is anti-racist. This dichotomy obfuscates a relational understanding of race and gender, adopting highly reified notions of the 'racist' and the 'anti-racist'. The concept of whiteness seeks to understand how the discourses of race and gender are instruments for organising social reality, as opposed to categorisations of particular behaviours and identities.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the sociological problem of how to think about and understand contemporary concerns with national identity and the effects of global change. I have argued that the question of identity has returned to sociology as a principle concern. Studies of race and gender, as they emerged in the mainstream sociology of the 60s and 70s, used theoretical instruments which best represented the concerns of the time. Cultural sociology, including the discrete fields of global feminism and postcolonial studies, has reoriented studies of race and recognises the highly contingent character of identity and identification. In this paper I have outlined a number of concerns with traditional sociological theories of race and gender and have articulated the benefits of looking more specifically at the relations of dominance within a given cultural context. I have used the work of cultural studies and radical social theorists to bolster the recent turn within social theory toward whiteness studies. Whiteness studies, supported and elaborated through the ideas of cultural sociology, provide an effective and historically relevant approach to consider questions of nation, race and identity.

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