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## Sociologists, Archbishops, and ‘making a verb of a noun’

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary discussion about race has a tendency to set off out without first checking the rear view mirror. In *Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives*, in contrast, Murji and Solomos identify what has and has not been covered, and so appeal at the outset for a ‘more sustained’ account of changing research agendas of race and ethnic relations. Taken as a whole, the collection allows the editors to contemplate ‘what factors explain the mobilizing power of ideas about race and ethnicity in the contemporary environment?’ and whether indeed ‘it is the “real” rather than race that should be placed in quotation marks’.

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In their final chapter to *Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives*, the editors summarize their project as one that specifies ‘the multiple, sequential and contradictory processes at play in contemporary social science approaches to race’ (Murji and Solomos 2015, 263). If ‘sequential’ also describes something about time, and especially continuities and discontinuities in race scholarship, then the challenge that the book sets itself is both welcome and ambitious.

A couple of years ago Robert Moore (2011), now Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Liverpool University, reflected on the media reception to his *Race, Community and Conflict* (1967), co-authored of course with the late John Rex. In and amongst the press he recalls how *The Telegraph* lead article, penned by none other than Enoch Powell, ‘devoted just seven of its thirty one column inches to a discussion of the book. The remainder was a familiar rant about “the menace” of coloured immigration and how the “invasion” was changing the face of ... localities in the UK’ (Moore 2011, para 1. 6). While this was not an isolated reaction to the text, Rex and Moore’s empirical work centred less on immigrant ‘arrival’ and more on a site in which minority

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settlement could be explored, specifically the extent to which minorities had become incorporated into welfare state institutions, had access to housing, education, and employment, as well as the broader impact of racial inequality in forging (and re-forging) black and white working-class consciousness. Alongside detractors, notes Moore, there were also supporters – not least Chair of the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants Michael Ramsey, who also happened to be the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury. ‘Rex and I probably remain the only sociologists whose work has been defended by the Archbishop of Canterbury,’ Moore (2011, para 1.11) reminds us. As I return to shortly, Archbishops can, it would seem, assume unlikely signposts in contemporary debates about race and ethnicity.

I start my contribution to the symposium on Murji and Solomos’ (2015) *Theories of Race and Ethnicity* with this (perhaps eccentric) vignette partly because I find that some contemporary discussion about race has a tendency to set off out without first checking the rear view mirror. Many of the questions Rex and Moore pursued empirically were informed theoretically by concepts that would easily resonate in contemporary sociologies of race and ethnicity, including what we describe today as issues about ethnic capital (Modood and Khattab 2015), racialization (Meer 2014), and institutional opportunities structures (Bolognani and Statham 2013), amongst numerous others. (Perhaps the most obviously there is a line of continuity concerning the question of ‘integration’ – the Janus-face of citizenship approaches since the early-twentieth century within as well as beyond Britain.)

In their collection, Murji and Solomos (2015) are keenly aware of this tendency and I think consciously set out to identify what has and has not been covered, and so they appeal at the outset for a ‘more sustained discussion of the changing research agendas of race and ethnic relations that have emerged over the past two decades or so’ (xiii). Some chapters are especially good at offering this – in particular those which take a social science vocabulary to places that are less well trodden, for example Soo-Jin Lee’s discussion of the growing fields of genomics is especially novel, and arguably plugs a gap that colleagues in Science and Technology Studies (and other such surrogates of Sociology) have thus far shown little interest in. Other chapters move our thinking on from debates that have started to feel stale in recent years: St Louis’ exquisite chapter on post-race (discussed below) really stands out here from the wider literature on this topic, while Wing’s discussion of critical race feminism presents a set of critical *challenges* to the critical *challengers*. I would include too Hughey’s treatment of whiteness and how this relates to the under-theorized role of race and *affect*. Those mentioned here are but a third of the collection and each chapter yields a return on the reader’s investment.

As Murji and Solomos (2015) show in their wide-ranging concluding chapter, taken as a whole the collection allows the editors to contemplate

why 'it is the "real" rather than race that should be placed in quotation marks as the key problematic term in relation to the wide and numerous debates about the ontology of race' (274). In some obvious respects, this follows on nicely from their necessary collection revisiting racialization ten years previously (Murji and Solomos 2005), which has had an important impact on my thinking as it has on many other's. In both collections, the editors take a thematically broader approach but are also sensitive to what is pressing, something that marks a stand out strength of this new collection too, and further signals how both editors have been leading researchers across different 'generations' of race scholarship.

What is perhaps overlooked – though can be found elsewhere in the editor's other work – is a dedicated discussion of a very salient example of racialization, with the figure of the 'Muslim'. This is where we meet our second former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, whose public lecture a few years ago on what degree of accommodation positive law can and should give to minority communities (with their own strongly entrenched legal and moral codes) was met with a racialized media frenzy. In truth, the reaction to this Archbishop was one of countless public controversies in recent years that have made for case studies in the mechanics of racialization, and through which some of us have tried to widen our analytical apertures (often in the face of intellectual and political resistance).

In these ways, recent years have seen us *expand* race, rather than move *past* it, through accounts of race-making that are not anchored in Atlanto-centric indicators, and signal an attempt to pluralize racial categories (see also the concluding chapter of the collection, which does a difficult job well). The collection does not entirely get beyond this tendency, and I appreciate the impulse that it *should* is not without criticism, and is notably met with the charge that we are witnessing a 'growing culture of racial equivalence' (Song 2014, 109). In this view, 'the concept of racism has suffered from conceptual inflation, resulting in the declining utility of this important concept' (108). The recognition of racism's plural character (and its many possible incarnations) is not therefore unequivocally welcomed.

Yet this is what we must do if we are to meet the underlying challenge of the book, which is to answer 'what factors explain the mobilizing power of ideas about race and ethnicity in the contemporary environment?' (Murji and Solomos 2015, 9). Another way to state this is to take-up Soo-Jin Lee's framing, in her chapter, that 'it may be useful to recast *race* as a verb, rather than a noun, as in *racine* or *racializing*' (27, emphasis in original). This is not purely a discursive activity, but includes an interaction between biology and human environments. Gravlee (2009) illustrates this in one study where he makes a distinction between cultural and biological dimensions of skin colour in Puerto Rico. He does so in order to explore the relationship between biological and environmental indicators of race by studying

local ways of talking about skin colour and how skin colour shapes Puerto Ricans' exposure to racism and other social stresses. To measure this he developed a survey to compare blood pressure to the significance of colour, as local people understood colour. Strikingly, he found that the darker people were associated with higher blood pressure, in a way that supports the thesis that the *social aspects* of race, such as stigma and discrimination, can also have biological consequences – precisely an inversion of what is often presumed to be the case.

In the words of the editors, this is 'about what race *does* and what is *done* in the name of race' (Murji and Solomos 2015, 2–15, 276, emphasis added). I find these clusters of descriptions interesting because they simultaneously give and take away agency from 'race'. We might identify this tendency in the debate about white working-class resentment and the ways this is linked to hostility to immigration and multiculturalism (Ware 2008). The broader frame this rests in the relationship between the identity of post-imperial nations and the 'loss of imperial prestige' (Gilroy 2004, 98). In Gilroy's (2006) terms, this postcolonial melancholia 'blinds us to the connections between race-thinking and the white supremacism that legitimized colonial endeavour, so much so that we fail to notice that racism is a problem until the *next* tragic death or inflammatory eruption shakes us temporarily out of our complacency' (5, emphasis in original). This messiness is another reason why I have always found the post-race thesis analytically unappealing and empirically unpersuasive. In his chapter, St Louis puts this rather more eloquently and is worth quoting at length:

As an ambition, the post-racial is characterised and haunted by a constituent dilemma. On one hand, as is the current orthodoxy across the life, social and human sciences, race is not real – it does not exist as an empirical object in nature. This epistemological assertion is central to the eliminativists rationale. But, on the other hand, race is a powerful normative idea that is believed to be real and, as such, has practical effects and consequences. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, race is *real*. (117, emphasis added)

We are back then to a socio-historical understanding of race, something that is described by Omi and Winant (1986, 68–9) as a 'cluster concept' – a way of referring to a group of persons who share, and are thereby distinguished by, several properties 'disjunctively'. In many respects this is over-riding consensus of the book, perhaps signalled in how little focus is afforded to ethnicity as a distinct organizing category. The same may be said of the relationship between ethnicity and religion and other quasi ethnic and racial categories. 'Quasi' is used to denote something similar but not the same as 'e.g.' because ethnic and religious boundaries continue to interact and are rarely wholly demarcated, hence the term 'ethno-religious' (see Modood 1997, 337). Linking back to an earlier point about the racialization of religion, we

find that 'ethno-religious' categories are increasingly signalled in the popular language of race and ethnicity, and the theoretical language should probably be and the forefront of exploring this. This book I think will help equip readers to do just that.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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