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Affect, Race and Identities

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Visceral, viscous theories of race after social constructivism

One of the opening moves of cultural studies has been to assert the primacy of culture in defining race and to argue that there is no biological foundation for racial differentiation; race is a myth, a social and cultural construction. This has been argued and the arguments for racial taxonomies imploded time and again through the work of scholars such as Hall (1990; 1996; 1997), Robert J.C.Young (2008) and many others. However there appear two gaps in where this work has led us.

First, racial categorisation is felt and enacted through a profoundly emotive register. Yet social constructivist demythologising claims to speak in the language of analytic, rationalist critique. While it is familiar enough to say that race (and nation) demonstrate there is nothing 'mere' about social constructs, it also begs the question why the defence is so often needed. What we seem to lack is a way to engage with the tempestuous forces of inter-racial encounters. It is a conceit that our societies are founded upon rational orders, and a conceit of social science that rational orders might describe these processes. Our turn to the affective register then is to address those emotive forces that otherwise escape, evade and exceed, or are belittled by, academic accountings. In doing this we echo moves in geography

that have seen the rise of studies of the emotional and affective. What emerges in the difference between 'emotional' and 'affective' is the sense that the affective represents the ways in which flows of emotion coalesce to form a social phenomenon that is beyond the individual subjective responses, feelings and sensibilities. Affect also moves us on to a terrain where race as felt identity is immanent to interactions – and in that sense, it materialises the felt world. In Thrift's account (2004) the affective economy drives our geopolitical arena, our urban landscapes and is central to everyday life, beyond the individual. This transpersonal dimension seems vital for our understanding of the social forces of race. Examining affect as the capacity to affect another, to ask not what a body is but what it does offers a chance to find accounts of race in the relational construction of identities, in the forces created between people rather than in fixed social categories.

Second, in the 21st century there is a re-emergence of a fashion for materialising difference through the physical codes of the body; DNA, cells and inherited physicality are accounted for in race difference within medical science, and new philosophies of the body (Nash 2008). The developing of genotyping and racially targeted drugs speak both to renewed understandings of biology and descent but also themselves encode the social assumptions of scientists as to the existence and boundaries of races (Fullwiley 2007, page 16). In the last few years the possibilities for tracing continuities of first constant Y chromosomes, that is male descent, (as popularised in the TV series 'Meet the Ancestors'), and then mitochondrial DNA have expanded; so much so that there are now claims for a study of 'genetic geography' that can identify current European nationals from their DNA (Novembre et al. 2008). Using similar techniques, arguments over the (existence, extent and

origins of) Celtic peoples, the origin and succession of inhabitants of the British Isles in prehistoric times have been rekindled - with books such as Stephen Oppenheimer's *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story* arguing for an original settlement from Northern Spain (for a summary see his precis in Prospect magazine 2006). All of which seems to raise the spectre of debates we might have thought long gone on the biological existence of races, although now they are (sometimes) deliberately seeking to destabilize (some) essentialised national identities. Meanwhile some strands of anti-racist thought have also been reliant on materialist scientific, physicality (of shared genomic composition) to challenge the 'myth of race'.

This moment of challenge to the hold of social constructivist approaches however produces numerous pitfalls and paradoxes regarding how we might move forwards. These we wish to address these first through a brief reprise of the history of racial phenotyping then to sketch out some dangers that illustrates for affective accounts, before asking how the papers gathered here address those.

The Dangerous Embodiments of Race

There is a long history of attempts to secure racial identities upon taxonomies of the human species grounded in biological characteristics – of physical science as ground for racial myths. Some cases of this are relatively well known to the point of being stock lectures on the curriculum, such as the debate between the polygenists and monogenists over whether races were separate species (Gould 1994)) and how the very doing of 'racial

science is a history of accommodations of the sciences to the deeply held convictions about the 'naturalness' of the inequalities between human races' (Gould 1977 page 144).

Subsequent scholarship has shown that many of the carefully compiled, tabulated and categorized figures on cranial capacity, developed on the skulls of so many scientific artefacts collected from the colonies were erroneous and misused to produced hierarchical results (Gould 1994).

It would be too easy to simply then mark these down as defunct issues long since exposed as science being corrupted in the service of racial ideology. But the biological approaches to race have also been associated not simply with black versus white, but fine grained identifications of European peoples – whom colloquially might all now find themselves ticking the same box on an equal opportunities monitoring form, who might now be subject to analysis by 'genetic geography'. For instance, within Europe Beddoe (1971 [1885]) devised an index of Negresence that served to grade capacities of savagery and intellect. This index was founded upon more than skin pigment, and included a range of phenotypical characterisations perhaps not know so often associated with race. Thus skull shape encoded in the cephallic index (comparing length and breadth ratios) becomes the very index of civilisation; not merely its representation but its corporeal expression. This approach might lead to now surprising claims regarding a Celtic type:

“While Ireland is apparently its present centre most of its lineaments are such as lead us to think of Africa as its possible birthplace; and it may be well provisionally, to call it Africanoid” (Beddoes, 1971[1885], page 11)

The racialised bigotry as well as their colonized status, aligns the Irish with Africa then. Our purpose is not to review all the possible examples but to point to a long heritage of disciplinary regimes of knowledge based on these biological classifications emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries (Anderson, 2007; Young, 2007). The figure of the black savage according to these social scientific evidences is about temperament and emotion as much as physiognomy. Thus Carl Linnaeus from the first Swedish edition of *Systema naturae* in 1735 to the one in 1758, had split the newly minted species of homo sapiens into four types contrast *Homo Europaeus* to *Homo Afer* according to capacity for emotional governance (Pred 2004, page 9). In this as so many accounts the black savage lives his/her life in the realm of purely emotional, sensual and significantly, non-intellectual engagement; 'The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot' (Gilman 1985, page 212; see also Bhattacharyya, 1998; for an account of the tragic replacement of the 'Hottentot' in the lowest category with the Australian Aboriginal as a 'pre-Adamite' sub-human in the mid nineteenth century, see Anderson, 2007). Similarly, and with equally avid and revealing zeal science set out to classify the sexual physiology of races, with phalloplethymetry measuring penis length and the anatomical studies published by Georges Cuvier on the physiognomy of the 'Hottentot', which focused upon her skin color and the form of her genitalia to label her as inherently different symbolizing not only a "primitive" sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament via "primitive" genitalia (Gilman op.cit. page 213; Solomon-Godeau 1996). Thus, the civilised are set apart from the savage, and bodies (dispassionately promoted as) material cultures are 'scientifically classified' as evidenced in history – with Sarah Baartmen, the original 'Hottentot venus', having her brain and genitalia preserved in formaldehyde and exhibited in the Musée de l'homme till 1974, and only being

repatriated for burial in 2002. These modes of disciplinary inquiry one might say sublimated affectual economies of fears and desires to produce cultural categories of race differentiated between biology (phenotypes), each of these had associated cultural potential for a spectrum of sensibilities. And in those hierarchies of sensibilities, fears and desires we see risks for the emergence of affective accounts.

Philosophies and Histories of the emotional animal that is 'man'

A turn towards theories of emotion and affect has been gathering pace since the late 1990s. These theoretical, empirical and practical interventions are inevitably informed by philosophies and philosophers of what it is to be human, to be sentient and to be capable of affective power and emotion. And the entwining there of race and affect, is exemplified in the limits of the celebrated cosmopolitanism of Kant:

'The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that arises above the trifling. ... So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. . . The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.' Kant (1991)

As Gilroy succinctly states, Kant's 'democratic hopes and dreams simply could not encompass black humanity' (2000, page 60). Race ideology is embedded in the legacies of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche where for many of these figures, affect and emotions are at the heart of definitions of 'man' (Buck-Morss, 2002), but also of 'beauty', 'literature', 'art' and 'nature' itself. A historical memory of the basis of scientific taxonomies in an era of universal

theories of the rights of man, is necessary. Buck-Morss reflecting on Rousseau's concealing of the presence of slavery states that 'today's philosopher, who is trained to analyse theory totally abstracted from historical context will inevitably attribute a universality to Rousseau's writings' (2000, page 821). Code (2006) has argued, these types of philosophical orientations have often resulted in epistemic violence against 'others'. What is necessary within the social sciences, therefore is not a simple engagement with theories of affect and emotion, but a situated understanding of these through a genealogical account of the emergence of the figure of 'man' and 'his' affective capacities can be derived.

The turn to the transpersonal and transhuman might at first seem to offer a move beyond these legacies of the figure of 'man.' And indeed this is often an intent behind the invocation of Leibnizean flavoured monism; to flatten hierarchical taxonomies by seeing humans, animals and things as existing on the same strata and of the same substance. However along with the gains come the risks of a language and approach effecting 'an extensive indifference between the countless objects of the world (human and nonhuman), subsequently ending up portraying them as potentially all the same' and recollecting previous vocabularies that dehumanised geography in the name of a geometric language of abstract forces (Simonsen 2004, page 1335). There is then a problematic politics to the posthuman elements of the affective turn; a politics which leads inevitably to *which* human states are to be abandoned (Thien 2005). In this respect there is an element of a continuing universalism framing arguments on the affective (Tolia-Kelly 2006). However there are areas where visceral affects and capacities are the site of inquiry; these are sites where there is a positive challenge to the prejudicial philosophical orientations that have gone

before (Conradson and Latham, 2005; 2007; Conradson and MacKay, 2007). As Simonsen notes, 'the fleshy world of other bodies... is not a general world of humanity, but a differentiated world, and in such a world ... [e]ncounters with other bodies therefore involve practices and techniques of differentiation' (2007, page 177). We need a theory of affect that is historically conscious and sensitised to power, where the shared substance of Leibniz is an invitation to new ethical action, where:

'folds and monads open up a space for those who bring to the event histories of fear, oppression or undesirability to fold these histories together with new affects ... and thus to unfold new modes of relating in the world. Such a practice of thought is not solely about forging an ethical approach to acting in the (future) event, but also involves how we make sense of the event, in retrospect, through our historicising practice.' (Lim, 2008, page 233)

Paradoxical positionings, questions opening:

The current moment of debate then is one of opportunity and danger. Firstly there is a need to engage with debates over the biological elements of race while facing the risk of re-entering an age of both biological essentialism but also, secondly, of creating social referents and discourses that become sedimented and systemically entrap citizens of colour into a positioning (social, cultural, economic) which is figured through their colour. How do we materialise race in ways that grasp the vitality of bodies, the corporeality of emotion in

the face of the narratives of race, of phenotype that fix the marked body through a different regime of truth and value, postcolonial, yet fundamentally biologic.

Third, how do we address the relation of emotional and affective dimensions? If we divide them and align affect with the pre-cognate and emotions with individual reflection then that surely 'misses how that which is not consciously recognised might still be mediated by past experiences, and on the other hand it risks cutting off emotions from the lived experience of being and from having a body' (Simonsen 2007, page 176). Fourthly, and relatedly, we need to think of how affect divides and sediments, as well as energises and flows – and how those patterns may be all too familiar.

This special issue on *Affect, Race and Identities* originates from a symposium, held at Durham Geography department that tried to open a conversation to address these issues. The intellectual agenda at the symposium focussed on three sub-themes of identity politics: (i) that of 'non-representational theory and affect' (ii) thinking 'Race and ethnicity' via praxis and (iii) Post-Marxist theories of power, politics and struggles for equality and an ethics of care. Lim and Swanton in particular exemplify how theories of affect can be transformative for new theorisations of ethnicity, identity and race. They attend to the stubbornness and stickiness of some categories that pervade the day-to-day. Their more than human geographies look at the affective economy binding peoples, things and racialisation. All the writers attend to a notion of an embodied ethical practice embedded within affective modes of being. They steer us towards recognising the potential for a new politics of care

and the 'progressive' struggle to engender anti-racist action in everyday life. Saldanha directly attends to the material categorisation of phenotype, in his account of bodies. His approach enables us to think through the power politics of race, thus relocating political understandings of affect and emotion in differently powerful, racialised bodies. The issue of the spatial scale of terms and identity is taken up by Bonnett in his piece where he investigates the politics of the left and locates a 'white nostalgia' in the political manifestos of particular left communities and their practice. Bonnett exposes the contradictory notions of an 'internationalist' imperative of this group and their particularly parochial nostalgia which is historicised through the consideration of key political texts as evidence. Nayak similarly researches the discourses and sensibilities' of racialised groups within urban street culture, with a focus on the ways in which 'Chav' culture reflects that of subcultures that have gone before – demonised as a lament against the failure of a mythical consensus of nationhood and national culture. Tolia-Kelly and Crang reflect critically on the potentialities of theories of affect and race, and their sedimentation in work on cultures of heritage and nation. Finally, Thrift's commentary responds to the perceived particularity of affectual work, unpacking its universal claims and appropriations and reinserting it in a realm of economic inequality and power. The papers collectively chart geographies of the circulation, contagion and transmission of racialised affects, alongside their solidifications, sequestrations, and accumulations. They show how race is necessarily a matter of affect and affect does not walk innocently of race.

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