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'RACE', NATURE AND CULTURE

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This article examines the way definitions of 'race' are currently constructed with reference to an opposition between nature and culture, and how these definitions often take for granted the category of 'phenotypical variation', tending to reproduce 'race' as a problematic category. The frequently drawn contrast between the USA and Latin America is then examined. This also often rests on certain assumptions about nature and culture which distort the character of the contrast.

Introduction

Questioning the terms of an opposition between 'nature' and 'culture' is an exercise which, in different forms, has spanned many decades and various disciplines. As regards the category 'race' as cited in academic circles, many might regard the issue as relatively clear: race is, in reality, an entirely social or cultural construction; there is nothing 'natural' about it, save the mere facts of phenotypical variation. Its perniciousness lies in the naturalising tendencies of a racialised discourse which suggest to certain audiences a 'natural' basis for traits which in reality are socially constructed.¹ Some academics would suggest always putting the word 'race' in quotation marks, or avoiding it altogether in order to pre-empt and undermine these tendencies.² I wish to argue that, even within the academic usage of those who specialise in 'race', there is a need to deconstruct still further the implicit relationship between 'nature', understood as phenotypical variation and 'culture', understood as social categories built independently of 'nature' but still appropriating it as a symbolic resource. I go on to challenge some of the conventional contrasts drawn between 'race' in Latin America and North America which depend partly on such a relationship.

Nature and culture

It is not my intention to review here all the different aspects of debates about nature and culture. Rather, I want to look at a couple of recent contributions which I think can help illuminate the nature/culture opposition as it is currently articulated in studies which take 'race' as their subject matter.

Haraway in *Primate visions* challenges the 'productionist logic' of the relation between nature and culture which underlies much Western discourse: 'Nature is only the raw material of nature appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism' (1989: 13).³

Part of this nature/culture 'binarism', to use Haraway's term, is the sex/gender distinction. Here it is not just a matter of admitting that gender builds cultural categories onto the base material of sexual difference, but of disaggregating sexual difference itself, in this case by 'proliferating and problematising the variables structured into the semiotic field in which sexual difference is represented in the animal [i.e. primate] body' (1989: 342). Discussing the writings of four women primatologists, Haraway notes how 'all four engage in problematising *gender* by contesting for what can count as *sex*' (1989: 350). In the field of primatology and physical anthropology, stories about 'Man the Hunter' grounded post-war constructions of a universal man built on millions of years of a hunting and gathering lifestyle which set the basis for the unity of human kind. But exactly the same stories continued to ground ideas about sexual difference. Often inscribed via non-human primates onto both hominids and modern humans, they might admit of cultural variations of gender, while nevertheless positing powerful links between sex and gender (1989: 229, 321-2). Here there operates a powerful metaphor of depth versus superficiality in which deeply rooted nature (human nature, sex) is metaphorically a secret truth hidden behind successive layers of 'culture'. Although culture in appropriating nature may greatly alter its form, the bedrock reality leaves its almost ineradicable mark. Strathern notes how various different Western nature/culture constructs 'revolve around the notion that the one domain is open to control or colonization by the other', adding that 'Such incorporation connotes that the wild is transformed into the domestic and the domestic contains within it primitive elements of its pre-domesticated nature' (1980: 181). In these constructs, then, nature can constrain culture, even while the latter produces form and structure from the former (1980: 178).

The challenge which Haraway articulates consists in pointing out that 'biology remained a human culture-specific discourse, not the body of nature itself' (1989: 306). According to her, there can be no pre-discursive encounter with biology or, more generally, nature. Sexual difference is not simply discovered by objective investigation, but is itself constructed through the practice of biological science. 'Nature' and 'culture' are thus categories in a relationship of mutual constitution (1989: 293). Natural sciences do not necessarily get closer and closer to an objective 'nature' to be materially and symbolically appropriated, but are themselves social activities, 'inextricably *within* the processes that give them birth' (1989: 12).

Haraway shows how in primatology, but also in fields such as sociobiology, contest over the biology of sex has been crucial for ideas about gender. By contrast, in studies of 'race' ideas about biological determinations are now rarely entertained and so contests over the 'biology of race' rarely occur. Not only is biology in this field held not to determine behaviour, but 'races' are generally said not to exist even as biological entities definable in terms of blood groups, genes and so on.⁴ This, in effect, is to see nature as undifferentiated, as substance without form. In this view, the productionist logic remains, since 'culture', or rather 'cultures', divide up the continuum in any number of different ways, plundering the substance and lending it cultural form. The difference is that since 'nature' has no inherent structure it cannot determine anything about the cultural categories imposed on it.

Leach (1964: 34) adopted this analogy in his ideas about human categorisation and Douglas (1966: 36) takes a similar stance when she says that, 'In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognisable shapes, are located in depth and have permanence'. However, the representation of 'nature' as undifferentiated is misleading here because, as Douglas says and Leach implies, our construction of a stable world is 'governed by a pattern-making tendency' which must presumably be part of our 'human nature'. Thus the question remains of what 'nature' is. As Haraway neatly puts it: 'It matters to know precisely how sex and nature become natural-technical objects of knowledge, as much as it matters to explain their doubles, gender and culture' (1989: 12).

This is one idea which I wish to use in examining the study of 'race'. Briefly I argue that in conceptual approaches to 'race', analysts frequently refer to a level of biology ('phenotypical variation') that is presented as neutral and undifferentiated, but in their usage is precisely a 'natural-technical' object of knowledge. What is in fact highly structured and historically specific is presented to the reader as unstructured and general, making the pattern appear natural. This is partly achieved by the implication that people almost 'naturally' focus on the phenotypical differences that have been labelled 'racial', as if this were part of the human 'pattern-making tendency'. I go on to argue that in concrete comparisons of the USA and Latin America, analysts often fall back on a metaphor of 'deep race' and 'superficial race' which relies for its force on a nature/culture binarism in which 'nature' is not even supposedly formless (as in most conceptual approaches to race) but in being appropriated by culture leaves its mark on social relations.

The second contribution I wish to discuss is that of Tim Ingold in *Evolution and social life*. This complex book is very alive to the different meanings attributed to nature and culture, and the different relationships held to exist between them by a variety of theorists, and I cannot do justice to Ingold's treatment here. The main point is his attempt to introduce a third element in the traditional binarisms of nature/society or nature/culture. This element is creative human consciousness constituted by social relations of intersubjectivity, that is Marx's 'social being' (Ingold 1986: 245). What are often called 'social relations', i.e. patterns of association, Ingold sees as interactive or material relations, characteristic of animals as well as humans (1986: 248 sqq.). What is often termed 'culture', i.e. a set of rules, norms, symbolic representations, cognitive ideas, etc., is not complete in itself as an account of humanity, but is a vehicle through which the consciousness of persons conducts itself. There is an instrumental relation between the social, a set of constitutive relations, and the cultural, a set of regulative relations or a set of learned and taught behaviours (1986: 250 sqq., 357 sqq.). What distinguishes humans is not 'society' understood only as interactive relations, nor 'culture' seen as learned behaviour, nor yet 'consciousness' understood as purposive action, since some non-human animals have all these things (1986: 251, 357, 315). Instead it is *self*-consciousness, implying the perception of self with respect to others, which allows constitutive relations to exist (1986: 252), and which also permits a discursive consciousness capable of representing to itself and others purposive action as prior intentions or designs.

The interest for my argument lies in Ingold's ideas about the analyst's relation to nature and to society or culture. For if the intersubjectivity of social life is ignored, an objectivist stance is possible which places the analyst outside the object of study. If the intersubjective constitution of consciousness is recognised, then the analyst must place him/herself in that intersubjectivity (1986: 103-4). It is an objectivist stance that permits a simple separation of biological organic reality from the cultural constructs placed upon it, because it assumes that the former can be known independently of the latter. A more intersubjective stance sees that boundary as one constructed by subjects, including the analyst, who participate in the world (see also Haraway 1989:13). This is not a 'form of sacrificial offering to the mysteries of subjectivity', as Bourdieu puts it (1977: 4), but a recognition of the 'constitutive and complicating role of the investigator in the formation of knowledge' and an awareness that 'it is not just that there is no position strictly speaking outside the institution [of academe] but that the history of institutionalization and the production of disciplines itself cannot be disentangled from the production of the West as "the West"' (Young 1990: 170, 172). This is not 'equivalent to standing nowhere talking about nothing but one's biases' (Haraway 1989: 13): the evaluations and critiques on the level of 'values' that sciences are legitimately subject to 'cannot leap over the crafted standards for producing credible accounts in the natural sciences because neither the critiques nor the objects of their discourse have any place to stand "outside" to legitimate such an arrogant overview' (Haraway 1989: 13). Rejection of the possibility of 'unvarnished truth' is not the same as saying that knowledge has no constraints.

Having outlined two central and connected ideas – the impossibility of a pre-discursive encounter with 'nature'; and the constitution of persons, and thus also in certain 'crafted' ways of their theories, through intersubjective social relationships – I want to look at their relevance to current ideas about 'race'.

'Race'

With respect to the concept of 'race', it may appear that the critiques outlined above have less force than in the case of, say, the sex/gender binarism or ideas about human 'nature' in general. At least since Boas, the separation of 'race' and 'culture' has progressed to the point where 'race' is accepted as having no determinative impact on patterns of culture, or intellectual abilities (Banton 1987; Ingold 1986: 55).⁵ People are seen as essentially plastic and the differences of appearance commonly called 'racial' are just that: appearance. Questions about what 'race' might mean in 'nature' are therefore irrelevant. In addition, writers such as Banton have demonstrated that over time there have been different discursive encounters with the 'facts' of varied human appearance which have been linked to contemporary understandings of the world and living beings (Banton 1987). Therefore it is quite clear that there have been changing and contested notions of what constitutes 'nature' or 'biology' with respect to 'racial' variation. 'Race' as a 'natural-technical object' of knowledge is thus already quite well known.

But things are not quite that simple. Let us look more closely at how some principal writers on 'race relations' define their subject matter. We can start with Banton, since he has done so much to deconstruct the term 'race'. In *Racial and*

ethnic competition, a major statement of his ideas about the subject which supersedes his earlier *Race relations* published in 1967, Banton says race relations exist when people use 'beliefs about the significance of race in order to draw social boundaries' (1983: 136). 'Race' itself is, he emphasises, a changing concept (1983: 32; 1987) and he abstains from giving it a straightforward definition. What exists is 'phenotypical variation' onto which people construct changing categories that have been termed 'racial' (1983: 34). There are biological differences but these are unconnected to social categories. 'Social classifications ... are influenced by social determinants and serve purposes of their own' (1983: 17). There is, then, a neutral biological bottom line of 'phenotypical variation'. This is what in essence distinguishes a 'racial' as opposed to another kind of classification: it makes reference to phenotypical variation.

John Rex, another major writer on 'race', comes to a similar conclusion in *Race and ethnicity* (1986). In his earlier work, 'race relations situations' were marked by 'severe conflict, exploitation, oppression and discrimination whether they were based on phenotypical markers or not' and by the presence of 'racist justifications' in terms of 'some sort of deterministic theory (usually a biological or genetic one)' (1986: 20). By 1986, however, and in response to criticisms, he distinguishes 'racial situations' based on phenotypical differences, from 'ethnic situations' based on cultural differences (1986: 20-2).

The problem with the seemingly unexceptional approach used by both Banton and Rex is that it takes 'phenotypical variation' for granted. It poses it as an obvious objective biological fact when in fact it is a highly socially constructed one. For it is not just *any* phenotypical variation that has become racialised (in any of the changing definitions of 'race'), but a specific set of variations that have become salient in long-term colonial encounters. 'Colonial encounters' have, of course, been diverse and heterogeneous, but the ones that historically have shaped the changing meanings of 'race' and moulded the scope of 'race relations' studies have been those generated by European expansion into Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Australia.

In this sense, to establish a continuous phenotypical variation which 'cultures' appropriate to make social distinctions is analogous to Leach's continuum of natural sense impressions which 'cultures' break up into categories. Both approaches posit a natural tendency to categorise without specifying its parameters, and the case of race implies that the phenotypical attributes often called 'racial' are naturally salient as cues for categorisation (as opposed to height, eye colour or double-jointedness of thumbs). The notion of phenotypical variation used by these writers is in fact an *historically situated* one, not the general, neutral one that they imply.

To do justice to Banton, he does to some extent recognise this. He states that 'people do not perceive racial differences. They perceive phenotypical differences of colour, hair form, underlying bone structure, and so on' (1983: 8). Notice, however, that the differences enumerated are ones easily assimilable to standard notions of what 'racial' differences are. He then says that 'It just so happens that Western European culture in a particular phase of its history has ordered phenotypical variations in what have been known as "racial" classifications' (1983: 8). The casual 'it just so happens' and the use of the *general* term 'phenotypical

variations', as if *all* this variation had been ordered into 'racial' classifications, underplays the power of particular colonial encounters of European history in defining some phenotypical variations as more important than others. Banton's recognition that differences in appearance include 'wrinkles, gait, hair colour, length of hair and bust size' (1983: 8) is thus overwhelmed in the easy movement from 'phenotypical variation' to 'racial classification'. Interestingly, in his entry under 'Phenotype' for Cashmore's *Dictionary of ethnic and race relations*, Banton states that 'The outward appearance of humans in respect of skin colour, hair form, bone structure, etc. is best identified as phenotypical variation; this is a relatively culture-free way of designating differences as opposed to the word race, the meaning of which varies' (Cashmore 1984: 195). The idea of 'phenotypical variation' as a neutral, biological base line is clear here, even though again the features offered as examples all conform to 'racial' stereotypes.

The problem arises in another form in Banton's chapter on 'Changing conceptions of race', under the subheading 'Phenotypical variation'. He states: 'Confronted with others who looked so different, people must constantly have asked: "Why are they not like us?"' (1983: 34). The next sentence sets the context as one of an encounter between Europeans, Africans and Asians, but this is presented as just one possible example, not as the very reason why the question would have been posed in this way in the first place. Instead, the interrogative takes on the form of a 'natural question' to ask. As Banton says in his entry under 'Race' in Cashmore's dictionary, 'Physical differences catch people's attention so readily' (Cashmore 1984: 214), almost, might one say, 'naturally'? The real specificity of the context which Banton implicitly presents as general is made even clearer when he lists the different answers that 'the educated European' might have given to the puzzle of phenotypical variation posed in the context of a European/African/Asian encounter over the course of two centuries. This illustrates the unquestioning move from a general, apparently self-evident question 'people' ask about appearance, to the specific question an educated European asked in a colonial or neo-colonial context. Phenotypical variation, presented as a general, neutral, 'relatively culture-free' biological base-line is thus simply assumed to be the type of difference privileged by observing through lenses moulded in a specific history of European colonial, imperial and neo-imperial expansion. The role of that history in actively constructing what is typically thought of as phenotypical variation in the first place is glossed over. The work of those historical encounters in privileging certain types of physical difference as symbols in a discourse about perceptions and impositions of difference is put, at least partly, onto the shoulders of a supposedly value-free biology, as if 'people' would 'naturally' see differences in skin colour, hair form and bone structure as *the* differences to puzzle over, even outside these colonial contexts. Banton, of course, knows that 'people do not perceive racial differences. They perceive phenotypical differences' (1983: 8). And by this he means that 'people' do not naturally conceive of physical difference in terms of the various categories Western Europeans (and others following them) have called racial. But apparently they do 'so readily' perceive precisely the phenotypical differences that have become the hallmarks of those categories, as if some differences were intrinsically more meaningful, or more likely to be attributed meaning, than others.

It is important to be clear here about the point I am making. I am not simply saying that racism is closely linked with colonialism, although I think that this is broadly speaking true.⁶ Rex, among many others, has been alive to the importance of colonialism in creating race relations situations (1986: 39), but this recognition does not prevent him from taking the categories 'race' and 'physical difference' for granted. He states that 'race and ethnicity are what Banton (1967) calls role signs which lead to the assignment of position, in the overall system of exploitation' (1986: 47). But what is 'race' in this context? Discussing 'Ethnic and racial groups as such' (1986: 15), he says that 'race as such' cannot be thought of as causing action, before going on to speak of 'physical characteristics', with the implication that these are what distinguish 'race'. Here again, then, is the specificity of race, and it is clear that Rex is not thinking of physical characteristics such as eye colour or the double-jointedness of thumbs. The very category 'physical characteristics' is of course historically situated. Rather than colonial regimes simply taking extant physical difference and using it as a role sign, the very notion of significant physical differences was being constructed alongside attempts to understand it and to elaborate with it justifications for the oppression of colonised peoples.

To say that the approaches of Rex or Banton lack a sense of history is both true and false. Clearly both are alive to historical change and Banton particularly emphasises the dangers of 'presentism' (1983: 33; 1987: xii). But it is history of a certain type. In *Evolution and social life*, as part of the general perspective he elaborates, Ingold distinguishes between two basic views of 'history'. In the first mode of historical understanding, the analyst stands outside the events of history which are then necessarily located in an abstract field of time and are seen as 'a concatenation of discrete and transitory entities or events, each unique in the particular' (1986: 74-5). The second view 'holds that history begins with consciousness'; history 'does not just happen, it is *made* through the intentional activity of conscious, purposive subjects', that is, through the 'process of social life' (1986: 75). In this mode, since consciousness (or more accurately, self-consciousness in Ingold's terms) is an intersubjective process, 'to apprehend it is to become part of that process' (1986: 95).

There is an important sense in which both Banton and Rex adhere to an objectivist stance in their historical vision. Phenotypical variation takes on the status of a timeless concept. It has always existed and different societies or epochs have simply divided it up differently according to identifiable social determinants. In this view, the analyst stands outside all these processes and grounds the analysis on a seemingly neutral, timeless baseline, conveniently situated in biology: phenotypical variation. The alternative approach to history would recognise that the analysis itself is part of the changing process of 'racial' classifications and would see in the tendency to equate phenotypical variation with what 'we' already expect to define as 'racial variation' the observer's situatedness in a tradition in which 'we' explain 'them', or 'ourselves' in our relations with 'them'. It would detect the observer's transference 'into the object the principles of his relation to the object' (Bourdieu 1977: 96). The danger here is that a historically constituted relation then appears to be within the object itself; that is, the phenotype

historically constituted as typically 'racial' appears to be self-evidently or naturally salient in the process of perception.

This has important implications for how we conceive of a field of study called 'race relations', since it questions whether the field can be objectively defined by reference to the 'neutral' criterion of phenotypical variation, or whether it is a field created within a specific European tradition shaped by its colonial history. The first view runs the risk of making race relations seem 'naturally' problematic and deep-seated because they are constructed with reference to a biological dimension. The second recognises more explicitly that the biological dimension is itself historically constituted.

An objective definition could be rejected because 'race' is acknowledged to be a social construction. Therefore 'race' relations cannot be intrinsically different from other kinds of relations: 'Research has demonstrated over and over again that problems which have been loosely called racial are economic, social, psychological and political problems' (Banton 1983: 405). As David Mason notes in his introduction to an edited volume including authors as varied as John Rex, Michael Banton, Harold Wolpe, Gideon Ben-Tovim and John Solomos, most of the contributors would disagree that a 'special theory' is needed to account for 'the phenomenon of racial and ethnic stratification and conflict' (Mason 1986: 11). A split still exists, however, between those who entirely reject what they call the sociology of 'race relations' (e.g. Phizacklea & Miles 1980; Miles 1982; see also Gilroy 1987), and those who, avowedly or reputedly, are within that sub-disciplinary field, for example, John Rex or Michael Banton. Cashmore and Troyna (1983) take the latter position when they explicitly argue that the term 'race relations' should be applied to a specific type of social relation since, whatever its real status, people believe in 'race' and this belief creates a particular race relations situation. Miles (1982) argues from a Marxist perspective that this approach simply creates a false problematic which reflects and thereby reifies the everyday world of appearances.

Whatever their specific approach, different authors still have to deal with 'race', 'racism', 'racialisation' or 'racial formation'.⁷ And there is a clear tendency to ground different perspectives on the idea of phenotypical difference, even among those who criticise or eschew the study of 'race relations'. Summarising his approach to 'racialisation' in Cashmore's dictionary, Miles refers to the 'attribution of social significance and meaning to phenotypical/genetic variation' (Cashmore 1984: 224), and in his earlier work (1982: 107) he also affirms that negative seventeenth-century English imagery of Africans can be classed as 'racism' because it is 'apparently deterministic' and it identifies 'another population by reference to a phenotypical characteristic (skin colour)'. Omi and Winant, explaining 'racial formation', never explicitly say what they mean by 'racial', but a clue lies in their comment that 'Differences in skin colour and other obvious physical characteristics supposedly provide visible clues to differences lurking underneath' (1986: 63). Gilroy (1980: 281) states that racial ideologies "'discover what other ideologies have to construct" in the natural differences they reference'. Here is precisely the idea that physical difference exists in an unmediated form, to be discovered. As Gilroy himself recognises in a later work (1987: 39; see below), physical difference is itself historically constituted.

Reference to 'physical characteristics' or some similar notion thus seems to have replaced 'race' as an, often implicit, way of circumscribing or identifying a particular phenomenon. This may be a convenient shorthand, but the underlying question is whether in making this reference, authors manage to highlight the work of history in privileging certain phenotypical traits as markers, that is, 'the ideological work which has to be done [on "racial" signifiers] to turn them into signifiers in the first place' (Gilroy 1987: 39). Miles, for example, recognises that 'Certain facets of physical variation have been attributed with particular significance and meaning' (1982: 32), but goes no further along this track.⁸ When it is explicitly recognised that 'appearance' or 'phenotype' are themselves highly constructed within perspectives on 'race', then the study of 'race relations' or 'racialisation' or 'racial formation' is pushed towards becoming an analysis more explicitly situated in Western European history. Of course, these authors all emphasize that 'race' is a social construction. Omi and Winant see 'race as an unstable and "decentred" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle' (1986: 68); and Gilroy insists that 'race' is a 'political category that can accommodate various different meanings which are in turn determined by struggle' (1987: 38). The role given to political struggle here highlights the constructedness and contestability of 'racial' meanings. The point is that implicit or explicit reference to 'phenotype' as a supposedly neutral feature which identifies 'racial' phenomena simply goes against this current.

If, despite differences, there forms a tacit agreement that study centres on how and why meanings are constructed onto 'phenotypical variation' and the consequences of this, and that struggle centres on what meanings are attached, by whom and for what purposes, and on how best to understand these processes, then there appears to be an objectively definable field of study, call it what you will. If 'phenotypical difference' itself is seen as historically constructed, that agreement and definability are problematised once more, the contest re-opened on where the boundaries of 'racial' phenomena lie, and the field of study seen again as the product of a specifically Western historical discourse in which the study of 'race' is not the study of an identifiable set of objects, but of certain phenomena which for powerful reasons have attracted 'our' attention and which only in retrospect appear to have certain characteristics (such as reference to phenotype) which define them uniquely.

This does not mean that the study of phenomena commonly known as 'racial' has to be jettisoned or permanently placed within politically paralysing parentheses. The point is to recognise what is implied by the unselfconscious use of 'phenotypical variation' as a natural resource. The less that resource is recognised as socially constituted, the more 'race' itself is reproduced as a category which, for all its social construction, is based on some fixed signifier: 'race' is reproduced as a naturally unyielding and obdurate category because apparently people 'so readily' perceive physical difference. Phenotypical variation is presented as an undifferentiated continuum which becomes socially constructed, but the focus on what are already 'known' to be 'racial' aspects of phenotype, implicitly presents people as predisposed to perceive and attach significance to those particular aspects. Such an academic position echoes all too easily more popular conceptions of race. As an isolated example, I recently came across the following

comments in *The Independent Magazine's* 'Heroes and Villains' section: 'Racial fear lies deep in our souls, and it's one of the most formidable obstacles to civilisation. We're naturally suspicious of people who look different. Suspicion can quickly turn to fear and fear turns to hatred in no time at all'.⁹ This easy move from physical appearance as a general category ('look different') to racialised phenotypes ('racial fear') naturalises the perception of physical difference as the perception of 'racial' difference. This is embedded further into 'nature' by opposing both the perception and racial fear to 'civilisation', in an implicit process by which the latter gradually masters and overcomes the former.

It is of course vital to recognise that the presence of historically constituted signifiers which are bodily features can have important consequences in terms of ease of identification in processes of discrimination and perhaps the ease of naturalising a discourse of inferiority. But terrible discriminations and discourses can also be constructed which do not use the typical physical differences that have come to be known as racial. The potency of 'race' lies not so much in the fact that it involves physical features as in the particular history of European colonial encounters that have focused on certain features and given them such powerful and deeply rooted meanings. It is not a question of belittling the oppression of, say, blacks in the United States or South Africa, but of stressing that such an oppression stems from particular colonial histories rather than from the fact that 'phenotypical variation' itself is involved.

This matters in terms of political projects too. It might be argued that politically the important thing is to reduce racial discrimination and to institute legal instruments to achieve this. Thus Banton argues that the law in Britain now defines 'key terms' in the race relations field with greater precision than social scientists, and that the law is now stigmatising 'false ideas' about 'race' and changing the everyday world (1991: 129). It may be that the Race Relations Act 1976 has had some success in challenging racial discrimination, but its definition of 'race' is vague in the extreme. While 'ethnic group' has been quite precisely defined by the so-called *Mandla* conditions,¹⁰ 'race' as one of the various defining criteria of a 'racial group' remains vague, and while technically distinct from 'colour', refers broadly to physical characteristics (Banton 1991). Of course, the important goal is to reduce racial discrimination, but concepts and terms are obviously germane to this enterprise, not an irrelevance to it. Banton recommends that social science follow legal usage which in turn avowedly interprets words such as race, colour, and ethnic origins 'in terms of their meaning to the general public' (Banton 1991: 125). But in the intense reflexivity of modern social life, the general public gets some ideas on these matters from social science itself, not to mention the law courts (Giddens 1990). So the way social science uses concepts and terms is important, and my argument is that current usage of ideas about phenotype and physical difference tends to naturalise 'racial' categories and render them more obdurate. Our goal is not only to reduce racial discrimination, but to destabilise meanings.

If the study of 'race relations' derives at some level from a narrative about how the West came to constitute its Selves in relation to colonised Others, i.e. from an us-them distinction, then grounding that distinction in taken-for-granted phenotypical difference not only mystifies and misrecognises it, but makes it

more inevitable and to be taken for granted: after all, it was only 'natural' that 'people' should have wondered about differences in 'skin colour'. And if political projects based on an us-them distinction – whether mounted by 'us' or 'them', so to speak – already encounter problems of reversed ethnocentrism, and of representing the interests of, and speaking for the destiny of, a homogeneous Other, then mystifying and misrecognising that distinction can only increase such pitfalls. Recognising the work of heterogeneous histories of Western us-them encounters in constituting racialised phenotypes does not solve the problem of these pitfalls, but by locating the production of knowledge about 'race relations' in the context of these histories, it can help to avoid simply *reproducing* (e.g. by just inverting) us-them oppositions, and instead play a role in *destabilising* them. We should contest strongly any tendency to see cultural categories of 'race' as particularly deep-seated and therefore problematic just because the realm of 'nature' has been referenced in the process of their construction. The realm of nature is not a neutral given, but is itself in a relationship of mutual constitution with the cultural categories that take it as a resource. This leads us to question not only the racist idea that 'blacks are bad' or that 'whites are stupid', but to question also the very selection of the criterion of 'skin colour', and the implication that this is naturally salient and perceived in an unmediated way.

'Race' in Latin America and the USA

In this section, I give a different example of destabilisation which questions another opposition: that between the USA's and Latin America's 'systems of race relations'. Again I detect oppositions based metaphorically on a taken-for-granted understanding of the nature/culture divide. I find 'race', this time USA-type 'race', being subtly presented as 'real race' because it refers to a 'deep' level of biology. In comparisons of 'race' in these two regions, the productionist logic of a nature/culture divide underlies ideas about the different impacts of using 'appearance' as opposed to 'ancestry' or 'descent' as criteria of social classification.

Contrasts drawn in academic study between the USA and Latin America with respect to the 'race question' have commonly been deeply implicated in wider social issues. Gilberto Freyre's rather rose-tinted account of Brazilian slavery and its paternalism was produced as part of a general vision of Brazilian society at a time when Latin American political and intellectual elites were still trying to define their nations' identities *vis-à-vis* other Latin American countries and especially with respect to Europe and the United States. The issue of slavery and 'race' was an important one here in that by the standards of early twentieth-century positivism, the blacks and indians who made up much of the 'mixed-blood' population of Latin American countries could be and often were seen as deleterious influences. On the other hand, they were also a possible basis for an assertion of uniqueness: in various countries, the indian (at least in the past tense) was glorified, and a cult made of the *mestizo* (Graham 1990; Wright 1990; Wade in press). In Brazil, Freyre also gave credibility to the notion of 'mixture' as one element in a 'tropical' society, and his characterisation of paternalistic race relations as a corollary of mixture was implicitly opposed to the USA's vigorous discrimination against blacks and the strict maintenance of social boundaries. In this sense, then, contrasts between the USA and Latin America were made in the

context of concerns about national identity, and the attempt to give a favourable aspect to the history of mixture between Africans, Amerindians and Europeans.¹¹

From the 1950s a large number of studies concentrated on Brazil and the question of a 'racial democracy'. This was initially sponsored by UNESCO, the social science director of which at the time was Arthur Ramos, a Brazilian and a specialist in Afro-Brazilian topics. The aim was, in the wake of Nazism, to discover what made Brazil a racial democracy and how it worked. The studies generally countered the over-optimistic vision of Freyre or Tannenbaum, showing that Brazil was not a racial democracy, that black people tended to be poor and badly educated, and that prejudice and discrimination did exist.¹² But important contrasts were still drawn between Brazil and the USA, in which the latter was seen to have a very different racial order and a much more severe 'racial problem': not surprisingly, some of these studies were published against the background of the black Civil Rights movement.¹³ Despite this revisionist stance, then, the opposition between the USA and Brazil (and more generally Latin America) was retained, with the frequent implication that race in Brazil was not a 'real' issue.

The presence in Latin American societies of socially recognised processes of 'race' mixture has undermined earlier colonial attempts to maintain social distance between 'blacks', 'whites' and 'indians', giving rise to a large number of 'mestizos' with ambiguous and manipulable 'racial' identities. By contrast in the USA, while some have argued for the 'declining significance of race' in determining life chances (Wilson 1978; see also Sowell 1975), there is a basic clarity in the distinction between 'blacks' and 'whites'. A corollary of different histories of 'race' mixture is the distinction often made in terms of the modes of classification employed in each region and this is what interests me here, since it is in this context that the nature/culture divide makes an appearance.

The general tenor of the difference (again commonly established between Brazil and the USA) is that between classification by appearance and classification by some reckoning of descent or ancestry. This in itself is a confusing distinction, since for most cases in both countries appearance is the primary referent: it is just that in the USA any visible evidence of black (i.e. ultimately African) ancestry leads to the ascription of the 'black' label (and this can be reinforced in equivocal cases by knowledge of invisible ancestry), whereas in Latin America appearance is less interrogated for clues to ancestry. In the literature, however, the distinction between appearance and ancestry is often left unclarified and made to parallel a distinction between the insignificance and the significance of 'race'. Let us look at some concrete examples.

Marvin Harris, writing in 1964, assumes that biological races do exist at a population level, although not at an individual level 'where all racial identity is ambiguous scientifically speaking' (1974: 55). Here then 'race' is clearly equated with genotype. In the USA, racial classification is by means of a biologically illogical invention, 'the rule of hypo-descent', a social device foisted onto biological facts in order to assign an unambiguous 'racial' identity to every individual in terms of the supposed presence or absence of 'black' heritage. In Brazil, however, the system is 'much more befitting the actual complexity of heredity processes' (1974: 57), although this is really accidental, since in Brazil 'a descent

rule' is absent and classifications are made on the basis of an 'interplay between a variety of achieved and ascribed statuses' (1974: 59), using appearance as the locus for a set of cues, though 'appearance may be a poor guide to genetic endowment' (1974: 55). On one side, then, a system that uses a biological discourse of reckoning but departs from the biological reality in achieving unambiguous categories; on the other, a system that uses a reckoning based on appearance, understood both as phenotype and as a cue to socially achieved status (education, wealth), which nevertheless fits much better the biological facts of individual 'racial identity' in recognising a multiplicity of 'racial' types. The upshot for Harris is the relative insignificance of 'race' in Brazil.

Degler, although trying to argue for the importance of racism and racial discrimination in Brazil, takes much the same line. He refers to the 'Brazilian emphasis on appearance rather than upon genetic or racial background' (1971: 103), and to a 'society in which distinctions are made among a variety of colours, rather than by race as in the United States' (1971: 224). Again the 'Brazilians are more logical' biologically speaking, whereas there is no 'inherent [i.e. biological] logic' in the US system (1971: 102).

Banton is more careful in his approach, eschewing direct reference to genetics as the 'reality' behind race. As examples of how social classifications vary across a common New World history of mixture between Amerindians, Africans and Europeans, he uses Wagley's (1959) distinction between classification by appearance, socio-cultural status and ancestry and he refers to Brazil, continental Spanish America (e.g. Mexico, Peru) and North America as examples of each (Banton 1983: ch. 2). The use of ancestry as a criterion can give rise to different sets of social categories as in the Southern USA, the Netherlands Indies and South Africa, but results in a number of common features, such as 'a small number of categories', ascription by the dominant group of 'a status as difficult to alter as assignment to the male or female gender', and the formation of social groups on the basis of these clear-cut classifications (1983: 30). The use of appearance, by contrast, results in variable categories, gives little basis for the formation of social groups and acts as 'one component in an appraisal of status on an individual rather than a group basis' (1983: 30). Whereas in Harris, 'appearance' seems to refer ambiguously to both phenotype and such items as clothing and jewellery, Banton (1983: 29) uses it to refer only to phenotype, although of course phenotype is also alterable: the straightening of hair and lightening of skin are two common examples in this context.

Underlying these characterisations can be detected ideas not dissimilar from those of Harris or Degler. Why does the ancestry criterion have these effects? Harris rightly points out that the 'facts' of ancestry are highly complex, as the Spanish in America discovered when they tried to use ancestry as one basis for social classification, giving rise to an unwieldy, multiple and ultimately unmanageable system (Mörner 1967; Martinez-Alier 1974: 73-5). Why then should ancestry tend to give rise to a small number of categories? This is a purely 'social determination', to use Banton's own phrase (1983: 17): highly segregationist systems are hard to run with more than a small number of categories. In addition, the analogy with gender categories is both misleading and telling. In South Africa, for example, under the rule of the 1951 Registration of Population Act,

people could have their racial category re-assessed and re-assigned by tribunal; hardly similar to gender classifications. The analogy is revealing, however, in that it draws together ideas about sexuality, reproduction, heredity, biology and the fixity of identity. Why does Banton use gender to epitomise the fixedness of identity? I suspect it is because, although he doubtless sees gender as culturally constituted, its fixedness appears to lie in its reference to biologically-defined cues. There is an implicit opposition between phenotype, superficial, single-generational, changeable (added to, in Harris's case, by the equivocation between appearance as phenotype and as extra-somatic appurtenances), and genotype, deep, trans-generational, fixed: the reality as it were, behind the surfaces, which, if masked, may be revealed in its transmission to the next generation.

From an individual point of view, of course, genotype is fixed compared to phenotype, since the latter evidently changes, for example in the transition from embryo to adult.¹⁴ But what is at issue here is the reproduction of societies, i.e. the maintenance of categories and inequalities over time and the intergenerational transmission of essences and appearances, and in this sense genotype is no less changeable than phenotype. Sexual reproduction recombines genetic complements and, as anyone in Latin America knows, there are no guarantees about how the genes transmitted to the child of different coloured parents will recombine and express themselves phenotypically. In a general sense, then, genotype is no closer to the bedrock of 'biology' than is phenotype, although impressions to the contrary may stem from the former's comparative invisibility, its role as the 'raw material' of phenotype (and perhaps also the recency of its discovery, on the grounds that deeply hidden structures take longer to be unearthed). Nevertheless, a powerful opposition is established between reference to phenotype and genotype as modes of classification and this is, of course, then neatly paralleled in the vague, ambiguous, changeable nature of racial identity in Brazil versus the clear, definite and fixed racial identities of the USA.

Thus, as with Harris and Degler, the implication is that ancestry refers ultimately to a deep level of biology and in this lies the solid basis on which rise stark categorisations and the formation of social groups: the deep biology of essences is appropriated by, and leaves its mark on, a society with deeply embedded 'racial identities' and equally rooted 'racial problems'. In contrast, phenotype – although, of course, it is in fact no less 'biological' than genotype – gives rise to vaguer, more flexible and ambiguous systems: the superficial biology of appearance, itself culturally manipulable, is appropriated by a society where 'race' is not so socially significant. In fact, as I mentioned above, *both* systems rely primarily on appearance (meaning, of course, appearances made relevant in a history of European/African encounters¹⁵). The difference lies in what those appearances are held to signify: the use of phenotype versus ancestry as criteria for classification has little relevance compared to the social order in which they are embedded.¹⁶ In short, in a typical deconstruction, it is not the original, 'natural' distinction between genotype and phenotype from which derives the supplementary, 'cultural' distinction between the significance and the insignificance of race, but precisely the latter which makes possible the former.

Conclusion

I started with an idea from Haraway that biology, or more widely nature, is subject to discursive construction. Appeals made to it as an unmediated level of experience need to be deconstructed. I complemented this with the idea, drawn from Ingold, but also from Haraway, that knowledge is a social process and thus that knowledge of nature cannot simply be separated from the cultural categories of the knowers. This then led first to an examination of the use in social science of phenotype as a criterion for distinguishing 'racial' classifications; and second, to an analysis of the distinction between reference to genotype and reference to phenotype as one aspect of a distinction between regions where 'race' really matters and where it is said to be a relatively minor affair.

Underlying both the first and the second subjects is the 'productionist logic' of the nature/culture binarism. In the first case, there is the idea that culture ('racial classifications') appropriates nature ('phenotypical variation') and from it builds its own categories which nevertheless in some form bear the mark of the raw material. Not, here, in the sense that physical characteristics are said directly to determine action or thought, but in the sense that phenotypical variation is assumed to be neutral and yet also to have certain salient features which are especially liable to acquire the meanings of 'racial' difference, or to be subject to perception by people predisposed to privilege phenotypical features of a typically 'racial' character. In the second case, there is the notion that when culture appropriates the 'deepest' levels of 'nature' – e.g. that encompassed in the realm of sexual reproduction – it constructs harder, more solid and more socially significant categories.

Deconstructing this binarism and its side-effects consists in seeing that this 'nature' is also a cultural construction in which scholars are embedded and which they reproduce: 'phenotype', as used in the 'race' literature, is not a neutral base-line, but has been discursively pre-constructed into 'phenotype of a racial nature'; genotype (or ancestry) is not inherently 'deeper' or more fixed inter-generationally, but it can be easily constructed as such by the very nature/culture binarism it relies on.

This is not to deny the differences between Latin America and the USA. There are clearly major differences and the work of people like Degler and Harris, among other writers, has been important in exploring these. The point is that these differences should be recognised as *equally constructed* and not reinforced by metaphorical reference to particular assumptions about the way culture is thought to appropriate nature, assumptions which remain masked and yet continue to operate even while the 'biological reality' of 'race' has been dismissed into the realms of 'the bad old days'. It is all too easy to concentrate on Latin America as the locus of racial identities, the manipulatability of which displays their constructedness. Identities in the USA, or elsewhere, are equally constructed. This is not the same as Harris's idea that the US system of classification is a fantastic 'invention', a huge fraud perpetrated on the 'facts' of biology: this is the standard statement that 'race' is a social construction. My point is to show that the act of highlighting the US reference to the biology of descent, albeit recognising the distortions of that reference, is itself constructed on the idea of descent as more 'real', more socially potent than 'appearance'. This kind of tacit

appeal to 'real' versus 'insignificant' examples of 'race' merely perpetuates myths which rely on biologising and naturalising 'race'.

Nor is it my aim to accuse Banton or Rex of a straightforward biologism in their writings about 'race'. Banton especially has done much to demystify the term, and give it historical depth. Yet some elements of this particular nature/culture logic are clearly present in their writings and those of others, and this is not surprising given the power and pervasiveness of that logic. Recognising the mutually constitutive character of the two sides of the binary opposition is a step towards seeing 'race' as socially constituted to its very core, including the avowedly non-determinant 'nature' with reference to which many scholars argue its specificity.

My aim is to emphasize the situatedness of analysis in the social process which it tries to take as the object of its scrutiny. The analysis of 'race' is not reducible to an objectivist vision undertaken by neutral observers, but takes place from, and can be deconstructed from, a body of knowledge situated in a specifically Western history. It is also a step in the continuing struggle against a tendency to naturalise 'race' which, as I hope I have shown, is not yet absent even from academic writings about the subject.

NOTES

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¹ Of course, those 'audiences' are not clearly defined. Arthur Jensen's 1969 article on IQ and scholastic achievement argued that hereditary factors shaped intelligence and raised 'highly volatile questions about racial equality itself' (Omi & Winant 1986: 59). More recently, the *Financial Times* reported that US social scientist Charles Murray was working on the causes of IQ with psychologist Richard Herrnstein who was already under attack for arguing that IQ was heritable: the implications for arguments about racial equality are obvious (*Financial Times*, 2nd April 1990, p. 28). And in an article on 'America's wasted blacks', *The Economist* notes that 'Deep in their minds some whites have begun to think what their ancestors thought, that blacks are genetically inferior in the traits that count for economic success, and that this is proven by the fact that blacks have lost ground as discrimination has retreated' (*The Economist*, 30th March 1991, p. 13).

² See, for example, Miles (1982), Gilroy (1987), Jackson (1987).

³ Haraway is not new in this contention. She refers (1989: 229) to Strathern (1980) who in turn cites ideas in a similar vein by Sahlins (1976) and Goody (1977).

⁴ In a recent introductory textbook on physical anthropology, for example, it is stated that, 'At the biological level human variation exists, but human races don't'; and also that 'Race is a set of cultural categories' (Feder & Park 1989: 364).

⁵ Although see note 1.

⁶ This does not mean that racism originated with colonialism, or capitalism. Miles (1982: 102) argues convincingly that a search for the origins of racism may be impractical and that we should concentrate on the conditions under which it is generated and reproduced. Louis Ruchames contends that racial thought – the explanation of differences 'in terms of durable and hereditary group characteristics, physical or mental' – is 'as old as civilised man' (1969: 1), although he notes that words for 'race' only started appearing in European languages from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (1969: 4).

⁷ The latter term is used by Omi and Winant (1986); see also Gilroy (1987: 38) for 'race formation'.

⁸ Gilroy (1987: 40) is probably one of the only commentators to put 'skin colour' in inverted commas in the context of his comment quoted above.

⁹ The writer, Ken Follet, was attacking the political consultant Roger Ailes for his exploitation of racism in President Bush's election campaign (*The Independent Magazine*, 16 November 1991, p. 94).

¹⁰ These are the conditions enunciated by the Law Lords in the case of *Mandla and Mandla v Dowell Lee and Park Grove Private School Limited* (see Banton 1991: 119).

¹¹ See Skidmore (1990). Freyre was not the only one to make this contrast. Frank Tannenbaum (1946) writing in the 1940s also drew major contrasts between the USA and Latin America in terms of slavery regimes and race relations: Latin America was portrayed as being relatively benevolent on both fronts.

¹² See Bastide (1957) for a summary of and references to much of this work. See also Graham (1970), and Banton (1967).

¹³ See Harris (1974), Degler (1971), Soláun & Kronus (1973), Toplin (1981), Wade (1985) for a number of different statements and challenges. Some authors, although they too made the contrast, also detected a certain convergence between the USA and Brazil in terms of 'race relations' (Toplin 1981; Degler 1971).

¹⁴ Although, in fact, individual genotype is not fixed either, since mutation occurs all the time within an individual body. 'Each of us accumulates millions of new mutations in our body cells during our lives. This means that everyone is an individual evolving system' (Dr Steve Jones, second Reith Lecture, reproduced in an edited version in *The Independent*, 21 November 1991, p. 14).

¹⁵ In Latin America the encounter with Amerindians has been arguably more significant than in the USA in terms of constructing racialised phenotypes. Thus categories like *pelo de indio* (indian hair) can be used in Latin America to identify traits in people not necessarily labelled 'indian'. This topic would need more comparative investigation.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that under 1950 South African legislation, although descent was an important criterion for racial classification, appearance and social acceptance were too: a white person, for example, was someone who 'in appearance is obviously white' and in deciding whether a person was in appearance obviously white 'his habits, education and speech and deportment and demeanour in general shall be taken into account' (Population Registration Act, cited in Dudgard 1978: 61).

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'Race', nature et culture

Résumé

Cet article considère la façon dont le concept de 'race' a été défini par rapport à l'opposition 'nature'-'culture'. Il est montré que ces définitions, qui acceptent de manière acritique les 'variations phénotypiques', tendent à perpétuer le concept de 'race' de manière problématique. Ce point est illustré par un ré-examen de l'opposition classique entre la situation raciale aux Etats-Unis et en Amérique Latine. On conclut que, là aussi, les catégories 'nature' et 'culture', basées sur des préjugés, faussent la comparaison.