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# New paradigms for old? Ethnic and racial studies on the eve of the millennium

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## Abstract

This article looks back over the first twenty volumes of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* to consider the extent to which the field has changed during the last two decades and how this has been reflected in the diverse contributions to the journal. The original aim of the venture was to establish a scholarly publication for interdisciplinary and comparative studies of race and ethnic relations, viewed as a global phenomenon and open to the broadest range of intellectual traditions and perspectives. After documenting the major shifts in topics and theories from the 1970s to the 1990s, as seen in a selected sample of some of the more than five hundred articles and other contributions published over this period, attention is focused on an assessment of postmodernism as one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary social science. It is argued that the deficiencies of postmodernism are clearly exposed in any serious attempt to explain contemporary race and ethnic relations, and that 'bringing power back in' is the most promising strategy for both advancing intellectual understanding and promoting constructive public policy.

**Keywords:** Race; ethnicity; globalism; gender; postmodernism; power.

## In search of the creator

Let me start with a confession, or perhaps I had better rephrase my intentions in the fashionable language of the nineties: let me attempt to

'deconstruct a text'. Actually, what I have been asked to do is to deconstruct twenty volumes of text, to take a long hard look at the contents, approach, direction and significance of the hundreds of articles and other contributions that have appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* since its first publication in January 1978. This daunting task is made a little easier by the fact that I was the chief editor of the first eleven volumes – ably assisted for much of this time by Norman and Susan Fainstein in New York and Henri Giordan in Paris – and I have remained an avid reader of the journal during the last decade. It is made still easier by the academic temper of our times, which scorns vulgar empiricism, ridicules grand theoretical narratives, and extols identity-enhancing, storytelling as the true vocation of the 'cutting edge' intellectual. From the perspective of this storyteller being trendy has one great advantage, it requires so much less effort than traditional scholarship! But before I deconstruct, let me confess.

If you look at the inside back cover of the journal you will notice that after my name, carefully sandwiched between square brackets, is the title 'Founder Editor'. Precisely how I acquired this accolade I cannot remember, but it has always generated in me a slight twinge of guilt. For, to tell the truth (and I am sufficiently out of touch with contemporary theory to believe in such a concept), someone else has an equally authentic claim to be the founding spirit behind *ERS*. This individual, who has never to my knowledge published a single word in the journal, still less been a member of its editorial boards, deserves to be recognized as the original inspiration for the whole venture. To understand this we need to go back to the middle of the 1970s when the plans for a new international journal on race and ethnicity were first being discussed.

In the summer of 1974 I returned from America to take up a newly created fellowship in race relations at Oxford. The previous four years, spent in the department of sociology at Columbia University in the City of New York, had been an absorbing time in which I learned about the very different perspective on race and ethnicity on the other side of the Atlantic. These were the days when the Vietnam War was drawing to a close amid napalm and secret negotiations, saturation bombing and saturation lying; the Civil Rights movement had developed into a complex stew of militancy and moderation; and Richard Nixon had secured his place in history by tape-recording the evidence for his own impeachment. After the ferment in America, Oxford seemed a rather dull place and those of us wishing to find the stimulation generated by the racial and ethnic turmoil in the New World looked to London as a more promising venue.

While not on the same scale as events in America, one change was clearly taking place in an organization closely associated with our field, the Institute of Race Relations. The old guard of colonial administrators, gentlemen scholars and liberal academics was being swept aside by a

group of young Turks led by a Marxist librarian who, as you may well have guessed by now, is the real hero of my story.<sup>1</sup> After the coup, and like most revolutions it was, to paraphrase another of my heroes, Alexis de Tocqueville, 'more the imbecile reaction of the *ancien régime*, than the genius of the revolutionaries' that brought about the transformation,<sup>2</sup> several things changed. The series of excellent studies of race relations throughout the world, which remains the lasting legacy of the old Institute, ended, and the rather staid and strictly academic journal of the Institute was renamed, from *Race* to *Race and Class*. An acute observer will note that both titles were without the mandatory inverted commas that were inflicted on us by subsequent 'radical' theorists who thought their (re)discovery that race was a social construct was a novel idea.<sup>3</sup> I leave it to some future postmodern historian to muse about why the journal was not called *Class and Race*, and why there were no inverted commas.

*Race and Class* was an unapologetic Marxist journal whose editorial policy was, and has remained, with admirable consistency, one that privileges economic over other variables in social and political life. Anticipating that this might not leave much room for alternative interpretations, I decided that the time had come to explore the possibility of a new journal, one that was resolutely open to conflicting viewpoints, firmly committed to comparative and theoretical perspectives, interdisciplinary in nature and global in scope. While people may argue about the extent to which these ambitious goals have been achieved, the fact that we are meeting at the London School of Economics in the late spring of 1997 to 'Rethink Ethnic and Racial Studies' suggests that the project was not entirely devoid of merit. Needless to say, the success of the journal has been a collective enterprise, the joint product of several hard-working editors, supportive editorial boards, hundreds of talented contributors and, of course, successive teams of long-suffering editorial colleagues at our publishers, Routledge.<sup>4</sup>

### **In the beginning . . .**

The first number of *ERS* provides an interesting cross-section of the issues that were salient in the middle of the 1970s. There were articles on migration, blacks and Jews, classic colonialism and internal colonialism, regionalism and tribalism, and a review article questioning whether ethnicity could be seen as a primordial social bond. Anthony Richmond, the author of the very first article, 'Migration, ethnicity and race relations' (1978, pp. 1–18) presented a complex, multivariate model linking racial and ethnic conflict to a range of factors at the individual, communal and international levels. In retrospect, one of the most interesting observations in the article was his description of the European '*Gastarbeiter*' phenomenon as a 'system of external apartheid' (1978, p. 15), a theme expanded and developed in his later collection of essays, *Global*

*Apartheid* (1995). These essays – together with an article jointly written with Janet McClellan in the October 1994 issue of the *Journal* – display a greater sympathy towards the language of postmodernity than one might have anticipated from a former, multivariate model builder. (But this is, after all, going to be a story of paradigms lost and paradigms gained.)

The second article in this inaugural issue was written by Ali Mazrui. (Have no fear, I am not going to summarize all 500 subsequent contributions – which is one of the genuine advantages of storytelling over science.) Mazrui addressed the issue of ‘Negritude, the Talmudic tradition and the intellectual performance of Blacks and Jews’. Ali, who had yet to become an internationally-acclaimed, television superstar for his engaging series ‘The Africans’, was not averse to taking on complex and controversial themes: black studies, the ‘bittersweet encounter’ between African Americans and American Jews, and the IQ debate! If you think of the names subsequently associated with these explosive matters, Leonard Jeffries, Louis Farrakhan, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, one can only marvel at Mazrui’s capacity to anticipate the shape of controversy to come. Long before the theory of ‘ice’ people and ‘sun’ people – that eccentric amalgam of meteorological and genetic determinism which created a synthesis from the worst errors of both Montesquieu and Gobineau – was being expounded as the Afro-centric canon at The City University of New York,<sup>5</sup> Mazrui was questioning Senghor’s epigram ‘Emotion is black – reason is Greek’. In a subtle analysis of the many elements that might explain group ‘achievements’, he dismissed Senghor’s position as based on a misleading and harmful dictum that, if followed, would have dire consequences for black studies.

A third contribution to our first issue, introduced yet another editor, this time the future editor of *New Community*,<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Cross, writing about the conditions that promote ethnic salience and ethnic allegiance. Using data drawn from Trinidad and Guyana, Cross demonstrated the manner in which economic, political, spatial and social forces interact with the changing colonial power structure to produce different patterns of ethnic relations (1978, pp. 37–59). It was an eclectic analysis, but one deeply influenced by Weberian insights, Shils’s distinction between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’, and the concept of ‘internal colonialism’, at that time being popularized in the writings of Michael Hechter on the Celtic Fringe and Bob Blauner on racial minorities in the United States. Elaborating on the latter situation, Jennifer Hurstfield explored white, black and Chicano self-concepts among adolescents in a Los Angeles community, providing ‘empirical support to the observations of Fanon, Memmi and others, that in a colonial society the dominant group tends to define itself in universalistic categories, whereas a subordinate racial group is more conscious of racial identity’ (1978, p. 77).

The only article that was translated from another language was the

inspiration of Henri Giordan, whose passionate concern with over-centralization in France, led him to play a key role in the regional policy of François Mitterrand's subsequent administrations. Christian Coulon's 'French political science and regional diversity' was a robust assault on the ethnic Jacobin tradition that had permeated the whole spectrum of French intellectual life, from the reactionary right to the lunatic left. Although Coulon's arguments were focused on the aspirations of the Bretons, Basques, Occitans and other regional minorities, they can perhaps be seen as an important precursor of subsequent debates about '*le droit à la différence*'. Furthermore, the concluding assertion that 'culture is anything but a cul-de-sac in the struggle for liberation' (1978, p. 97) might be seen as a harbinger of the future migration of so much of the academic left into 'cultural studies'.

The last main article in the issue, and my personal favourite, was written by Frances Svensson, like Ali Mazrui a political scientist from Michigan and another frequent visitor to Oxford. 'The final crisis of tribalism' not only addressed the need of communal societies to have what she termed 'policy space', in order to resist the harmful influences of unbridled individualism and unfettered market forces on traditional social structures, but also contained an unflattering comparison between the policy strategies of the United States and the Soviet Union. At a time when Cold War rivalries blinkered many Western eyes from the thoughtless destruction of their own social and political systems, Svensson's incisive critique was a valuable corrective. Extensive fieldwork in Siberia produced few illusions about the altruistic motives of the regimes of Stalin and Brezhnev, but equally her own experiences of the treatment of the Sioux, from whom she inherited half her ancestry, made her keenly aware of the shortcomings of United States' policies. Her conclusion that 'unless tribal peoples are seen as in some sense partners *in* development, rather than merely subject *to* development, their fate is likely to be total destruction or a neglect which may lead to the same thing' (1978, p. 117), is as true today as it was twenty years ago.<sup>7</sup>

### **Go forth and multiply . . .**

During the next decade, *ERS* continued to address a wide range of issues and theories that preoccupied the period leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. My stint as editor ended with the April 1989 number and I was succeeded by a new editorial team based at the LSE under the leadership of Anthony Smith.<sup>8</sup> To have one of the world's foremost scholars of nationalism in charge at precisely the time when the collapse of the Soviet Union had spawned an unprecedented resurgence in ethnonationalism could be seen either as remarkable anticipation or, at the very least, a happy coincidence. In fact, so great was the explosion of interest and scholarly writing on the subject

that by 1995 a new journal, *Nations and Nationalism*, had been started, under Smith's direction, and Martin Bulmer took over as the chief editor of *ERS*.<sup>9</sup>

The first eleven volumes of *ERS* were essentially variations on the initial themes. But what variations, and what a diversity of perspectives! There were pioneering articles on the theory of genocide and the prevention of genocide by Leo Kuper (1981, pp. 320–33; 1989, pp. 157–73) – a topic of such importance that its systematic neglect in almost all courses and textbooks on race and ethnic relations, before the present decade, was truly astounding. Among the special issues was one devoted to 'Internal colonialism' (Stone and Hechter (eds) 1979, vol. 2, no. 3), examining the general application of Hechter and Levi's ideas to a broad range of societies and regions. Another was entitled, 'Rational choice revisited' (Chivers (ed.) 1985, vol. 8, no. 2), subjecting Michael Banton's *Racial and Ethnic Competition* to critical scrutiny. Another looked to the future of 'Ethnicity and race in the USA' (Alba (ed.) 1985, vol. 8, no. 1) which was subsequently published as a book edited by Richard Alba; and yet another reflected on the legacy of the past, a Festschrift for Kenneth Kirkwood, examining 'Ethnicity, empire and race relations' (Stone and Kirk-Greene (eds) 1986, vol. 9, no. 3).

Several articles rapidly became classics: Walker Connor's 'A nation is a nation' (1978, pp. 377–400) and Herbert Gans's 'Symbolic ethnicity' (1979, pp. 1–20) leaping up the citation indexes shortly after publication and remaining an anchor for much subsequent discussion. There were major theoretical essays from sociologists and political scientists like John Rex, Milton Yinger, Cynthia Enloe and Ivan Light; anthropologists like Mike Smith, Katherine Verdery, Abner and Gaynor Cohen; social geographers like Hans van Amersfoort, Ceri Peach and Susan Smith; and historians like Robert Rotberg, Sheila Patterson and Roger Louis. Pierre van den Berghe and Vernon Reynolds debated the problems and merits of sociobiology, with – in an interesting inversion of 'common-sense' reasoning<sup>10</sup> – the sociologist urging that we should 'bring the beasts back in' and the physical anthropologist warning that we should think twice before taking such a drastic step. Hints of the future role of ethnicity in the Soviet Union could be seen in the contributions of Victor Kozlov (1980, pp. 123–39) and Rasma Karklins (1987, pp. 27–47); and of the national tensions in Yugoslavia in the divergent interpretations and vigorous exchanges between N.L. Karlovic (1982, pp. 276–99) and Branislav Vukovic (1987, pp. 96–109). Long before Samuel Huntington's dubious notion of 'the clash of civilisations', Bona Malwal was considering 'Islam, nationalism and communism' (1980, pp. 104–6) and Caroline Ramazanoglu was exploring 'Gender, Islam and the politics of Muslim feminism' (1986, pp. 158–63).

There were a number of articles by Bob Miles arguing for his own ingenious brand of Marxism – expressed in a pre-metric jargon which

focused on 'the struggles of the racialised fraction of the working class and of the racialised fraction of the reserve army of labour' (1984, p. 233). (Sadly, I missed my fifteen minutes of dialectical fame by failing to develop the concept of 'racialized decimals' which would have allowed even greater precision to such materialist calculations.) In sharp contrast to this approach, was a contribution by Thomas Sowell attacking the notion that 'racial discrimination' can be defined by socio-economic disadvantage (1986, p. 537).<sup>11</sup> Thus, on the one hand, racial discrimination has no meaning other than socio-economic disadvantage, while, on the other hand, it has no conceptual connection with it at all! It is hard to imagine two thinkers at further ends of the ideological spectrum than Miles and Sowell, which suggests, if nothing else, that the journal was taking its commitment to diverse viewpoints seriously.

By the middle of the 1980s, the increasing impact of feminist thought was beginning to be felt. Abena Busia analysed 'Sexuality and power in the colonial novel' (1986, pp. 36–72); Vaneeta-Maria D'Andrea documented the lack of concern with women in the more than 1000 pages of the supposedly 'comprehensive' *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1986, pp. 235–46); and Heidi Mirza pointed to the absence of focus on black girls in the 'authoritative', 800-page Swann Report (1986, pp. 247–49) which examined the education of minority children in Britain. Heribert Adam was writing perceptively about the later years of the apartheid era in South Africa (1984, pp. 269–82) and Kogila Moodley was dissecting the intricacies of multiculturalism in Canada (1983, pp. 320–31). Sammy Smooha explored Palestinian-Israeli divisions in the Middle East (1987, pp. 1–26); John Whyte wrote about the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland (1986, pp. 219–34). There were several essays from Anthony Smith not only outlining his well-known thesis on the ethnic origin of nations (1989, pp. 340–67), but also exploring war and ethnicity (1981, pp. 375–97), and the dilemmas of loyalty in Western democracies (1986, pp. 43–65). Martin Bulmer (1981, pp. 289–306; 1993, pp. 345–57) and Barbara Lal (1983, pp. 154–73) revisited the thinkers of the Chicago School and other classical contributions; while Chris Husbands (1991a, pp. 170–98; 1991b, pp. 382–416) and John Solomos (1992, pp. 327–51) examined different aspects of black politics and racial extremism in Britain and Europe.

### **Old and New Testaments**

A broad comparison between the contents of the first and second decades of *ERS*, reveals both theoretical and empirical continuity and change, as well as some quite dramatic transformations. It is true that Tony Richmond's analysis of global migration represents a development of previous interests in post-industrialism (1984, pp. 4–18). Pierre van den Berghe's surprising leap from conflict-functionalism towards

sociobiology was well underway by the late 1970s; and Cynthia Enloe's earlier focus on ethnic conflict, development and separatism shifted, via studies of ethnic soldiers, towards the interface between gender and ethnicity.

The Hechter of internal colonialism becomes a leading theorist of rational choice, attempting to explain nationalism according to general principles of group solidarity (1987, pp. 415–26). Thus a perspective often associated with the left has been subtly shifted into a theory largely conceived as arising from the legacy of Adam Smith, the icon of the radical right. Methodological collectivism is increasingly replaced by methodological individualism in what some might see as a reflection of wider currents of political thought, and the growing impact of conservatism during the Reagan-Thatcher decade. Others, like Michael Banton, who also shared Hechter's fascination with rational choice, would view it in a different light, an important intellectual advance that bridges the famous micro-macro division in sociological theory, and thereby helps to fill in some vital missing links in a theory of ethnic relations (Banton 1987; Banton 1994, pp. 2–5).<sup>12</sup>

One major theorist whose ideas have displayed an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary change in emphasis has been John Rex. In 1981 Rex outlined his 'Working paradigm for race relations research' (1981, pp. 1–25). This was, in part, a sharp rebuttal of the accusations – emanating from some members of the Institute of Race Relations and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – that by succeeding Banton as Director of the SSRC Research Unit on Ethnic Relations, he had become the 'house intellectual of the state', overseeing government-funded research designed to 'control minorities'. Having delivered a strong Weberian lecture on the limitations of vulgar Marxism, Rex then outlined a typology of structures and processes within a broad framework of the social relations of colonial empires. Sixteen years later, in last year's *ERS* lecture, Rex (1997, pp. 455–73) returned to the theme, this time suggesting that theories of nationalism as well as those pertaining to immigrant ethnic minorities could be synthesized within a 'master concept of empires and multi-national states'. This interesting proposal follows in the tradition of earlier scholars, like Coupland and Person who, having studied ethnicity for many years in the colonies, began to appreciate its continuing importance in the metropole.

This connection between empires and nationalism can be seen in many long-standing conflicts that rise and fall in salience from decade to decade but so often evade permanent resolution. Thus, Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry re-examined twenty-five years of ethnic warfare in Northern Ireland, reflected on the 'cold peace', as they perceptively labelled it, and listed what they considered to be the 'liabilities of liberalism' in trying to understand the nature of an essentially ethnonational struggle (1995, pp. 837–61). Parallel tensions in Scotland and Wales, in Corsica

(Kofman 1982, pp. 300–12), Catalonia (Llobera 1983, pp. 332–50), the Basque country (Conversi 1990, pp. 50–70) and many other regions of Western Europe continue despite the move towards European Union. Unlike the negotiated revolution in South Africa (Adam 1995, pp. 457–75; Marx 1997, pp. 474–96) or even the tentative groping towards peace in the Middle East, these ethno-regional conflicts have proved to be remarkably resistant to resolution in the post-Cold War era. And what is happening in Europe, is mirrored on other continents: in Sri Lanka (Sumanadasa 1986, pp. 264–69; Roberts 1993, pp. 133–66); the Philippines (Rood 1991, pp. 516–44); Bangladesh (Cooper 1992, pp. 85–102); and Fiji (Lawson 1992, pp. 61–84).

Increasing concern with the changing patterns of global population movements, noted in several earlier studies (for example, van Amersfoort *et al.* 1984, pp. 238–68), was reflected in special issues on migration in France and the new Europe (Miles and Singer-Kérel (eds) 1991; Miles (ed.) 1993). At the beginning of the decade, Wendy Bracewell compiled an issue examining national identity in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (1991, vol. 14, no. 1); five years later, Tamara Dragadze was the guest editor of a special section where the focus was on ‘Self-determination and the politics of exclusion’ in the same region (1996, vol. 19, no. 2). Rogers Brubaker tried to set the collapse of the Soviet empire into an historical context by pointing to the related ethnic consequences that flowed from the demise of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. (Brubaker 1995, pp. 189–218).

More attention was given to refugees (Tarzi 1991, pp. 441–52) and to the role of the United Nations (Ryan 1990, pp. 25–49; Banton 1991, pp. 545–56). The long-term impact of policies like affirmative action was assessed in situations far removed from the circumstances prevailing in North America, like Malaysia (Lim 1985, pp. 250–76) and India – the latter society having the longest experience of preference policies used as a deliberate tool to reduce ethnic inequality in the modern world. As Rita Jalali argued (1993, pp. 95–120), the Indian example revealed rather different consequences from those usually attributed to such programmes by either its proponents or its critics in the United States.

Recognition of the re-emerging strength of China, which will undoubtedly be the pivot of the forthcoming ‘Asian’ century, can be seen in attempts to understand the idea of ‘race’ in the period before the communist era (Dikötter 1990, pp. 420–32). To some extent, China’s high degree of internal ethnic homogeneity is offset by a huge overall population that includes very significant absolute numbers of minorities, most of whom live in the strategically-sensitive border regions of the state.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the attitude of the Japanese to ‘race’ and nation is inextricably connected to a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century history of industrialization and imperialism (Weiner 1995, pp. 433–56). There can be little doubt that the societies bordering the Pacific Rim will continue to

play a critical role in the development of race and ethnic relations commensurate with their economic and political importance in a post-Cold War world.

While resurgent Islam may be viewed, quite literally, as a divine replacement for the 'evil empire' by Pentagon and NATO planners, the growing numbers of Muslim minorities in Western Europe (Peach and Glebe 1995, pp. 26–45) testify to continuing global trends towards religious and cultural diversity. Is the horrific 'ethnic cleansing' of Muslims in Bosnia, as Akbar Ahmed so pointedly asked in his *ERS/LSE* Lecture, a 'metaphor for our time?' (1995, pp. 1–25). Without doubt, it is in part a reflection of the irrationality that places so many collective acts of ethnic violence 'beyond reason', to use Walker Connor's apt title for his exploration of the nature of the ethnonational bond (1993, pp. 373–89).

This brief synopsis of some salient changes in the contents of *ERS* over the past two decades inevitably leaves much unmentioned. Many fascinating articles have analysed the continuously dynamic racial and ethnic scene in the United States. Canada, Australia and New Zealand have been strongly represented and while coverage of South Africa has dominated the rest of the African continent this may be attributed to the special case of apartheid, and the remarkable 'negotiated revolution' that brought about its end. Somewhat less attention has been paid to the societies of South and Central America, whose unique experiences of racial and ethnic mixing raise complex questions about the meaning of identity, justice and equality in the contemporary world.

### **The prophets of difference**

A trinity of forces has shaped the preoccupations of the 1990s: gender, genocide and globalism. Largely in response to the last of these developments, postmodernism has emerged and raised high hopes of providing a new intellectual framework, a paradigm for a non-ideological age. And yet, too often, it has turned out to be intellectually vacuous and morally corrupt. Not only has postmodernism rather strange roots for a perspective claiming to present a radical critique of existing social arrangements – Nietzsche, Heidegger and Lyotard being improbable members of some progressive Hall of Fame – but its extreme subjectivism, while allowing for the celebration of difference, precludes virtually anything else. In the name of cultural self-determination, it actually generates an endless regress into intellectual banana republics, a form of ethical apartheid where practices like female circumcision can only be seen as just another lifestyle choice – lest white women be accused of trying to 'save' brown women from brown men.<sup>14</sup> The practical outcome of this theoretical posture is best captured by one novelist who has not misused his skills in literary criticism to outdo the worst excesses of jargon found in the social sciences prior to the inappropriately named 'linguistic turn'. Thus, the

hero of *Doctor Criminale*, Malcolm Bradbury's satire of the postmodern conference circuit, describes his initiation into the mysteries of the approach as follows:

I was an undergraduate at the University of Sussex, the Sixties-by-the-Sea. Here I was smart as a button, and here I acquired my literary education. It was the Age of Deconstruction, and how, there on the green Sussex chalk downs, we deconstructed. Junior interrogators, literary commissars, we deconstructed everything: author, text, reader, language, life itself. No task was too small, no piece of writing below suspicion. We demythologized, we demystified. We dehegemonized, we decanonized. We dephallicized, we depatriarchalized; we decoded, we decanted, we de-famed, we de-manned. When the course reached its end, I went to my tutor – a young but sad, bedraggled late-Marxist figure, drained of nearly all life by the academic dismantlings of the Thatcher Age – and said I had made my choice of career. Was it, he asked ironically, banking, accountancy, the law, a Harvard MBA, a course in creative writing at some even more distinguished new university? No, I said, like several of my friends, I wanted to join the army. After all, there would be no war, and I thought that nothing could be more amusing than spending the rest of my days sitting drinking beer in Bavaria (Bradbury 1992, pp. 8–9).

I experienced the academic equivalent of drinking beer in Bavaria, when I attended the inaugural lecture series for a new PhD programme in Cultural Studies at my own University in Northern Virginia during the autumn of 1994. After an opening lecture by Larry Levine, which was a perfectly intelligible interpretation of American immigrant history, the theoretical heavyweights made their appearance. First came Jacques Derrida, expounding on the mysteries of a new disease, no not AIDS – which after Foucault's classic diagnosis as a 'discursive phenomenon' perhaps *does* require some further conceptualization – but a strange new ailment called 'archive sickness', the significance of which, despite two hours of elaboration by the master, completely escapes me. This was followed by another impressive performance by Gayatri Spivak, a leading post-colonial theorist and articulator of subaltern speech, not, of course, ebonics from the streets of Harlem,<sup>15</sup> but a distinctly higher form of communication found in the lecture halls and seminar rooms of Columbia University. Professor Spivak's other claim to fame is as 'translator' of the untranslatable Jacques Derrida, and the lecture was a fascinating parody of postmodern discourse. It comprised a self-confessed, amateur interpretation of the Ghost Dance, followed by a series of stereotyped anecdotes about her Japanese au pair, and culminated with a recital of poems by Goethe and Heine in the original German. While much of the audience did not understand German, I am willing to bet that this was the most comprehensible part of the proceedings.

Ernest Gellner was surely right when he castigated the pernicious effects of postmodernism on contemporary social thought. As a result:

a social anthropological study degenerates from having been a study of a society into a study of the reaction of the anthropologist to his own reactions to his observations of the society, assuming that he ever got as far as to have made any (Gellner 1992, pp. 23).

Hopefully, he was also right when he dismissed postmodernism as ‘a highly ephemeral phenomenon, destined for oblivion when the next fad arrives’ (ibid, p. 48). In sociology, we have already experienced an earlier wave of relativism *ad absurdum* with the emergence of ethnomethodology in the sixties and early seventies. It too made extravagant claims about representing a ‘paradigm shift’ in social theory, cloaked itself in a cloud of jargon – Garfinkese – and, in retrospect, was a rather sterile exercise which contributed little or nothing to the field of race and ethnic relations.<sup>16</sup>

The postmodern entrenchment across several disciplines in the academic world, and sadly reflected in publishers’ lists and the proliferation of new journals, will not be dislodged without an effort. One exasperated colleague, an anthropologist whose field research was concerned with the important, if distressing, topic of death among young children, once asked me, when faced with a deluge of pomo-gibberish, ‘What can we do about this curse?’ My immediate response was to recommend that we should simply laugh at it, although it is hard to satirize writings that often appear to be self-parodies.

Appeals to reason are unlikely to counter its logical limitations or its linguistic liberties, as the incident known as the ‘Sokal affair’ so clearly demonstrates. Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, sent an article with the deliberately hip title, ‘Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity’, to the leading North American journal of cultural studies, *Social Text*. Although a transparent and hilarious spoof containing whole paragraphs ‘liberally salted with nonsense’ (1996a, p. 62), nevertheless, in the author’s words, it ‘sounded good, and flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions’. Sure enough, it was accepted and published in the journal. In a parallel article (1996b) published in *Lingua Franca*, and appearing at the same time as the *Social Text* piece, Sokal revealed his ‘experiment’, provoking a furious response from the editors who, all of a sudden, became crusaders for ‘professional ethics’ and ‘truth’, two concepts they had previously scorned as ideological rubbish. What can one say?: Deconstructionist deconstruct thyself! For the editors of *Social Text*, what made matters worse, was that Sokal was no right-wing ideologue, in fact he has impeccable radical credentials. In concluding his exposé, he was at pains to point out:

I say this not in glee but in sadness. After all, I'm a leftist too (under the Sandanista government I taught mathematics at the National University of Nicaragua). On nearly all practical political issues –including many concerning science and technology –I'm on the same side as the *Social Text* editors. But I'm a leftist (and a feminist) *because* of evidence and logic, not in spite of it. Why should the right wing be allowed to monopolize the intellectual high ground? And why should self-indulgent nonsense – whatever its professed political orientation – be lauded as the height of scholarly achievement? (Sokal 1996b, p. 64).

What Sokal demonstrated by his 'hoax' was the utility of unorthodox methods to expose bias in selection processes. It exactly parallels the approach used in the research undertaken to reveal the extent of racial discrimination in areas like housing and employment. By sending out actors of different racial and ethnic backgrounds – a technique pioneered in Britain by the influential PEP/PSI surveys<sup>17</sup> – to apply for jobs or accommodation, some incontrovertible evidence about the levels of discrimination can be shown. This knowledge has played an important role in changing public attitudes and shaping public policy. It is a sad reflection on the current practice of large segments of the humanities and social sciences that such techniques have become necessary to expose the fact that something is indeed 'rotten in the state of cultural studies'.<sup>18</sup>

There are, however, signs that the tide may be turning. In the summer before the Sokal affair was running its course in America, I happened to be in England for a brief visit. While travelling by train to Yorkshire, I picked up a copy of *New Society and Statesman* (14 July 1995) at Kings Cross station to read on the journey. By chance I noticed an article with the catchy title, '*La trahison des clercs*', which turned out to be a full-frontal assault on both racism and postmodern intellectuals. It was an angry piece whose style seemed vaguely familiar but whose message was clear enough. Intellectuals have considerable leverage in the 'Information Society' because they 'are the best placed to unmask governments, counter disinformation, invigilate the communication conglomerates and, in the process, rekindle the drive for a just and equal society' (1995, p. 21). However, postmodernists, 'the intellectual playboys of the western world' to use the writer's colourful, if gender-biased description, blame modernity for having failed to abolish 'poverty, ignorance, prejudice and the absence of enjoyment' and so decided to abolish modernity instead:

And to justify their betrayal, the postmodernists have created a whole new language of their own, which allows them to appropriate struggle without engaging in it and, while appearing radical, further their own interests. . . .

Hence we have discourse sans analysis: information that never becomes knowledge – theory that never becomes practice. Deconstruction without construction: you disassemble dominant value systems, but have none to replace them – and that vacuum is a virtue (Sivanandan 1995, p. 21).

At last, it appeared I had found a true intellectual comrade who shared my distaste for the poverty of postmodernism. And when I looked to see the name of the author, it was, to my surprise and delight, none other than the Director of the Institute of Race Relations, the editor of *Race and Class*, and my doppelgänger as founder editor of *Ethnic & Racial Studies*.

### **After Armageddon: bringing power back in**

So, if the postmodern ‘turn’ is a turn in the wrong direction, what should we be looking for in a new paradigm for the twenty-first century? I very much doubt that we need any new paradigms at the moment as we have more than enough to choose from. For those genuinely seeking better understanding, and a means to reduce the destructive aspects of racial, ethnic and national allegiances, simply inventing new jargon, to be recited like a mantra by the next cohort of post-something groupies, is unlikely to be of much assistance.

Most contemporary theories share one common thread, but a thread that is quickly twisted or forgotten as the argument is elaborated. If there is a single dictum that has the greatest claim to universality – if you will excuse a pre-postmodern term – it is that associated with Lord Acton: ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. It is an insight that has remarkable cross-cultural and historical validity. Bringing ‘power’ back in may not seem an especially radical suggestion – it has certainly been a major focus of many important studies in the field of race and ethnic relations and been the theme of several articles in this journal<sup>19</sup> – until we recognize the extent to which so many current formulations manage to relegate power to a side issue or replace it with inadequate proxy variables.

Thus, vulgar Marxists tend to collapse power into narrow materialist channels; neo-Marxists into narrow ideological ones. Postmodernists reduce power differences to a one-dimensional symbolic domination. Rational choice theorists try to capture power by transforming it into a marketplace imagery of preferences and scarcity. Followers of Foucault talk endlessly about ‘knowledge/power’ while developing such a diffuse formulation of it that it defies any corrective response, a deficiency noted by feminist and other critics.<sup>20</sup> Disciples of Habermas try to insulate reason from the distortions of power by creating a vacuum in which ‘communicative rationality’ can reign, but little else. And even some

feminists, who certainly cannot be faulted for their focus on patriarchal power, often underestimate the divisiveness of the matriarchal variant.

But however we try to define power, undoubtedly one of the most complex and elusive concepts in all the social sciences,<sup>21</sup> the moment the reality of power slips from centre stage, we start to lose clarity of vision and too often arrive at distinctly dubious policy conclusions. Or, worse still, we may find no guide to action at all. Do not misunderstand me, I am not proposing a neo-realist theory to replace all the others. I am suggesting that the first task ahead is to cast aside the 'meta-twaddle'<sup>22</sup> that plagues our current field, and focus our energy on understanding those powerful forces that underlie the formation and perpetuation of racial and ethnic injustice in a complex and changing world. If *Ethnic and Racial Studies* continues to foster robust debate about these fundamental issues, giving voice to many different perspectives, it will have served a useful purpose and perhaps, towards the end of the second decade of the next millennium, we shall meet again at the LSE to celebrate the publication of Volume 40 of the Journal.

## Notes

1. An account of these events, from one particular perspective, can be found in Chris Mullard's 1986 book. For another interpretation, see Stone (1986).
2. The full range of Tocqueville's insight into nineteenth-century race and ethnic relations is rarely appreciated (see Stone and Mennell 1980, pp. 163–242).
3. One of several twentieth-century roots of the social constructivist perspective can be traced to the 'Thomas theorem' first promulgated in 1928. For a detailed discussion of this and related matters, see Robert K. Merton (1995, pp. 379–424).
4. The initial success of the journal owes much to the support of Pamela Ridgewell, the Commissioning editor, and Norman Franklin, the managing director of Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1978.
5. Cf. James Traub, 'Annal of education: the heart and minds of City College', *The New Yorker*, vol. LXIX, 16, 7 June 1993.
6. The recent proposal to rename *New Community* the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* – or some such title – only goes to confirm the adage 'plagiarism is the highest form of flattery'!
7. Svensson, in concluding, also mentioned the plight of the Yanomano in the Amazon rainforests of Brazil. Their survival continues to hang in the balance as miners and other agents of 'development' try to subvert the fragile attempts by the central government to provide a measure of 'policy space'.
8. At this time, Guida Crowley, who had worked closely with Sheila Patterson on *New Community*, joined the *Ethnic and Racial Studies* editorial team on a part-time basis. Thus began an increasingly important involvement in the development of the journal, culminating in her appointment as Managing Editor in April 1992.
9. For those interested in colour coding it might be worth noting that the aesthetic transformation of the journal's cover, from ecological green to revolutionary red, had to await the advent of the nineties. Was this, perhaps, a symbolic stand against the tide of history? A plot by someone in the graphics department at Routledge, nostalgic for the certainties of an age of ideology? A quixotic protest against social movements theory and identity politics? Or simply a mundane, cost-benefit calculation based on the market price

for red and green pigments? This is clearly a marvellous dissertation topic for a PhD student in a cultural studies programme

10. An excellent discussion of the limitations of the 'commonsense' knowledge critique of sociology can be found in Thomas Pettigrew (1996, pp. 1–19).
11. This is not to imply agreement with Sowell's neo-conservatism any more than with Miles's Marxism (see Stone 1994).
12. The debate about rational choice continues in several fields and much of it is critical: e.g. Goode (1994); Green and Shapiro (1994); Kincaid (1996); Smelser (1997).
13. Outbreaks of ethnic violence in Xinjiang province during the month of Ramadan in 1997 resulted in significant loss of life and many arrests. This is the home of the Uighur Muslim minority many of whom regard the Han Chinese as conquerors (see Steven Mufson, 'Ethnic turmoil roils Western China', *Washington Post*, 23 February 1997).
14. On the issue of female genital mutilation, Temma Caplan notes the struggle of grassroots women's groups from Southern Africa to 'view mistreatment of women in universal terms that makes [it] unacceptable whatever the religious, cultural and traditional justifications ... these women challenge the notions that cultural context determines women's needs for bodily integrity ... and attempt collectively to supplant cultural differences with universal ethical human standards applicable to all women' (1997, pp. 11–12.); see also, John Lancaster, 'Egyptian court overturns decree that banned female circumcision', *Washington Post*, 25 June 1997.
15. The debate about ebonics, otherwise known as black-American English, has been short-lived. See 'The ebonics virus' in *The Economist*, 4 January 1997, p. 26.
16. For an earlier discussion concerning the significance of research on 'the first five seconds of telephone conversations' or the 'temporal parameters of accountable glances', see Herminio Martins (1974, p. 251); also, John Goldthorpe (1973, pp. 449–62).
17. See Stone (1985, p. 126) and for the recent use of such techniques by the Fair Housing Council of Greater Washington, *Washington Post*, 19 February 1997, and the immediate political response, *Washington Post*, 21 February 1997.
18. T.J. Jackson Lears has criticized the obsessive focus on popular culture in the following manner: 'Cultural studies began as a salutary effort to enliven disembodied academicism, but it has turned into a ludicrously anti-intellectual enterprise. In a display of "cultural slumming" scholars refuse to make distinctions, engaging in pseudopopulist celebration of corporate sponsored entertainment as an expression of popular taste ... Clearly it is time to blow the whistle on this nonsense', *Intellectual History Newsletter*, February, 1997.
19. Influential contributions by Lieberman (1961), Kuper (1974) and Blalock (1989) immediately come to mind. In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, articles by Baker (1978, pp. 316–35), Mason (1982, pp. 419–39) and Jenkins (1994, pp. 197–223) have particularly stressed the importance of power relations in understanding the dynamics of race and ethnic relations (see also Stone 1992, pp. 89–106).
20. As Nancy Hartsock noted, 'Thus I contend in broad terms, that postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt' in Nicholson (ed.)1990, pp. 158–60. For the challenge to feminism posed by identity politics and the proliferation of interest groups, see Tobias (1997).
21. Some of the most perceptive analyses of this complex concept can be found in Wrong (1979); Lukes (1986); Mann (1986; 1993).
22. To borrow Gellner's delightful phrase (1992, p. 41).

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