Who Sets the Terms of the Debate?
Heterotopic Intellectuals and the Clash of Discourses

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Introduction: Heterotopic Intellectuals

BOURDIEU AND WACQUANT'S (1999) castigation of what the authors see as the current thrust towards global imperialism of American race relations discourse contains several contentious, even bizarre, assumptions. Three stand out immediately: (a) the assumption that this global influence is something new; (b) the assumption that American sociology of ethnic and race relations is American in the same way, say, that French sociology might be French; and (c) that American hegemony in this field still persists today. One ironic twist is the overwhelming influence of French thinkers in current Anglo discourse; the second that multiculturalism first emerged to defend French language and culture. The authors' disquiet in the face of what they see as American discursive domination is, however, understandable once we recognize the threat that a sociology of ethnic and race relations poses, in France, to historically dominant French republican notions of universal citizenship. The obvious question in this regard is: why has this French discourse been 'invaded' by alien concepts at the present historical conjuncture?

Against essentialist notions of an authentic American imperialist discourse, what stands out most about the great American scholars of race and ethnicity, from W.E.B. Du Bois to members of the Chicago School, is

  [0263-2764(200002)17:1;147–156;011539]
their heterotopic origins, cosmopolitan education and footloose tendencies. American classics such as An American Dilemma (1944), Gunnar Myrdal’s monumental study of black–white relations in the United States, attest to their authors’ foreign origins. Then, as indeed now, it is the descendants of slaves, immigrants and exiles who dominate the field of ethnic and racial studies. Few start their lives or careers in the same place where they end them. Their experience is one of diverse places and often incompatible social environments. And among the giant intellectuals who have dominated the debate, few were only and exclusively scholars. Many were called upon to fulfil public, activist roles, and their writings inevitably mix empirical analysis with political criticism.

It is equally important to recognize, however, that what made America hegemonic in the first half of the 20th century was not simply its intellectual giants or global domination of theory, but the massive production of texts by newly arrived immigrants and their descendants, by African Americans and by policy makers. The dominant truths of American society were migration and slavery, emancipation and civil rights, social mobility and exclusion, and this was reflected in America’s attempts to understand itself through the work of a hidden army of minor scholars and invisible intellectuals. The public prominence of the leading intellectuals who dominated the field is only explicable in the context of this buried intelligentsia, intensely committed to questions of identity and difference in American society, which authorized their fame.

There were, at the time, other developing loci of theory, of course, in particular ones fostered by scholars situated in, and reflecting upon, Empire. Most of this early generation of colonial scholars ended up in the metropolitan centres of Empire. They were the forerunners of the current cohort of postcolonial academics, exiles of Empire, who have shifted both the locus of theory and its geographical centre of gravity from the United States to Britain and France.

This does not mean that American scholars of racism and ethnicity have ceased to be influential. Yet matters have also clearly changed since the heyday of American hegemony in the 1950s. In the aftermath of colonialism, the theoretical debate has come since the 1960s to be dominated by French- and British-educated postcolonial scholars, inspired by neo-Marxist and more recently, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theorists: Gramsci, Lacan, Foucault, Fanon, Derrida. These Third World intellectuals, now dislocated to the metropolitan centres of the West, have energized debates on ethnicity and racism and vested them with a new sensibility to the effects of power as constituted in representations of cultural and racial difference. Stuart Hall reflects in his exemplary and highly influential intellectual career the movement from Marx to Freud and Foucault, from class and hegemony to identity and discourse. Hall was one of the founders of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Bourdieu and Wacquant are dismissive of that ‘mongrel’ [sic!] discipline, cultural studies, yet its foundations in European, not American (not even Anglo-Saxon),
thought, are undeniable. The current conceptual invasion of France by English terms such as race, ethnicity, the underclass or multiculturalism is thus a reflection not of America’s globalizing hegemony but of the heterotopic background of this new generation of postcolonial intellectuals, with their roots in the French and British empires.

I refer to these postcolonial academics as intellectuals, an obviously tendentious claim. Edward Said, himself an exemplar of the new postcolonial scholar, educated in high-cultural Arabic, French and English, defines the intellectual in his Reith lectures in dichotomous terms (Said, 1994); on the one hand are Gramsci’s organic intellectuals,

...a chorus that echoes the prevailing policy view, hastening it along into more corporate thinking, and into a gradually more and more irrational sense that ‘we’ are being threatened by ‘them’. (Said, 1994: 24)

Against such collaborators in the game of power and collective passion is Julien Benda’s figure of the lone heroic intellectual, the detached disserter who courageously speaks truth to power, and speaks it in elegant, persuasive prose (Said, 1994: xv). The distinction echoes, of course, the biblical and Weberian contrast between charismatic prophet and priestly routinizer, yet it reverses Gramsci’s own vision of a future workers’ organic intellectual elite still to emerge (Simon, 1991: 97) marked, not by its eloquence, as Said would have it, but by its critical self-consciousness and ‘active participation in practical life’ (1991: 97); in other words, by its leadership and organizational skills. Few academics are in this sense true intellectuals, although some early American scholars such as Robert Park came close to filling this role.

In any case, in an era of postmodern mass cultural overproduction the notion of the lone intellectual seems outdated and utopian. Without political support no voice is publicly credible, however enlightened and eloquent, and lone voices rarely command an audience. The need is to shift from such elitist notions to theorizations of the interplay between dissenting voices in which the eloquent scholar and grassroots activist echo and complement each other in a single social movement. This is in my view what is happening in France today, as French intellectuals respond to a groundswell of immigrant sentiment defending the right to be ‘different’. Such intellectual dissent is, of course, from Said’s point of view, always flawed, too implicated in political and power struggles and in the moral bonds of group loyalty and commitment to collective causes to allow for critical detachment. But it may explain the present ‘American’ imperialist expansion into France of concepts such as ethnicity, racism or multiculturalism.

French Vocabularies

Most commentators on France are agreed that, given its republican ideals of individual equality in a culturally homogeneous public sphere, a shift to more culturally pluralist concepts of national integration has been deeply
fraught for French intellectuals. So too has been the idea that racial (i.e. biological) essentialisms have historically been significant factors of national exclusion. In a comparison between immigration policies in France, Germany, Italy and the UK, Umberto Melotti, for example, reflects on the deep crisis affecting the French historical project of ‘ethnocentric assimilation’ (Melotti, 1997: 75). While this policy was for over a century, Melotti notes, extremely successful in assimilating Catholic European immigrants into the French polity, this assimilationist project has now collapsed in the face of the more obvious ethnic distinctiveness, significant numbers and organization of the present cohort of incoming migrants. The latter insist on claiming their own cultural identity and continue to preserve their links with their countries of origin (1997: 76–7). But equally, Melotti argues:

... the assimilationist project has begun to appear inherently less and less legitimate, as the old idea of France’s civilising mission fades away and the value of respect for cultural differences increases, together with the moral unfairness of making the granting of many important rights conditional on the acquisition of citizenship – all the more so in a context where this implies renouncing one’s own cultural identity, the preservation of which is more and more regarded as an inalienable personal human right. (1997: 77)

This has led to intense public debate in France on the relation between liberal universalism and cultural particularism or differentialism, in which some progressive intellectuals on the left accuse anti-racists supporting multicultural ‘difference’ of promoting a new form of differential racism (Melotti, 1997: 77; Wieviorka, 1997: 140). For many Europeans, it should be remembered, the very notion of ‘race’ remains a tabooed concept, still suffused with ideas and meanings associated with Nazism and fascism (Miles, 1994: 192). Its more promiscuous deployment in Anglo-Saxon discourse is thus anathema to many and, indeed, its recent adoption into public debates has been fraught with contradictions. Hence Wieviorka reports that the very word ‘racism’ is in France currently bandied about by so many different groups claiming discrimination that even the police, avowed racists, speak of anti-police racism (1997: 141).

Other familiar words in the English lexicon are also marked out by French scholars as of English or American provenance. Thus Olivier Roy wonders whether the perception of second-generation Maghrebian immigrants as ‘Arabs’, even when they are French citizens, implies ‘the emergence in France of an American-type manifestation of ethnicity’ (1994: 56, emphasis added). Despite the fact that they have abandoned any vestiges of Islamic faith or North African culture and developed a distinctively French urban subculture, he says, this is ‘perceived as an American [sic!] form of ethnic experience’ (1994: 65). Nadia Rachidi, a Maghrebian scholar in Paris, argues that:
the denial of the term ‘ethnic’ in French sociology shows the degree to which sociological thought, for all its pretensions to objectiveness, remains bound to a sense of nationhood among sociologists. If Durkheim like Mauss disallowed the concept of ethnicity, the reason is that it designates a reality opposed to the principle of citizenship – an abstract body of rights and duties, far removed from distinctive identities. . . . ‘Society’, in Durkheim’s view, that is to say the French nation, does not acknowledge the existence of ethnic groups in the public arena. (Rachedi, 1994: 68)

Despite the very successful assimilation of Maghrebian elites into French society, Rachedi found that during the Gulf War many members of this elite revised their self-identifications in the light of French anti-Muslim rhetoric. This renewed ethnic consciousness came along with a demand for public visibility and respect.

While on the surface the British and American ‘Race Relations paradigm’ with its protective legislative umbrella seems to reify racial and ethnic divisions, the interpretation of the law in Britain has, in fact, as Michael Banton shows, been highly flexible and open (Banton, 1991). Yet the vocabulary of race relations does recognize the existence of racial or cultural differences as realities to be addressed by public policy. In France, Silverman and Yuval-Davis report:

According to French commentators of all political persuasions, this model – founded on the institutional recognition of the category ‘race’ for the definition and classification of social groups, and the recognition of the rights of communities rather than simply individuals – leads to the legitimization of pseudo-scientific theories (‘race’) . . . the separation of people according to (spurious) ‘racial’ categories . . . [hence] the fragmentation of social and national unity . . . and the consequent creation of ethnic ghettos, even ‘soft forms of apartheid’ (Rocard 1989). Hence, in formal terms, the French ‘model’ simply does not recognize ‘race’ as a valid conceptual or institutional category. (Silverman and Yuval-Davis, 1999: 29)

Silverman and Yuval-Davis go on to comment that the naïve faith of the French in formal equality makes them appear ‘antediluvian’ from a British or American perspective (1999: 30). In Britain citizenship is increasingly seen as a status mediated by social positioning (see Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999).

Clearly, then, we are witnessing here more than just a linguistic struggle in which the battle lines drawn are between English and French. Words can either disguise or reveal social processes. By outlawing concepts such as ethnicity, race or multiculturalism, the keepers of French public language may be concealing the existence of real social processes and historical conflicts which grassroots French ethnic movements, supported by (some) French intellectuals, are increasingly determined to make visible. In the absence of an historically legitimate indigenous vocabulary, these activists naturally borrow English terms.
Thus Silverman and Yuval-Davis argue that the French model 'obscures a far more problematic reality':

The Negritude movement in the 1930s and 1940s was an assault on the 'colour-neutral' ethnocentric and frequently racist nature of French universalism. Theorists like Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi took these ideas further when viewed in the colonial context. . . . More recently, research on the history of immigration in France has shown how immigration policy has frequently been infused with a discourse on desirable and undesirable immigrants according to racialised criteria. (1999: 30–1)

Finally, quite apart from the rise of Le Pen's Front National, France has yet to come to terms with its anti-Semitic past and pervasive collaboration with the Nazis during the Vichy era. Until fairly recently, 'anti-semitism was the major paradigm for the understanding and analysis of racism in France' (1999: 35). This meant a focus on differential racism which often glossed over its naturalized, biologized dimensions, and thus excluded other forms of racism such as those based on colour, and ignored the fact that they too were constructed through negative cultural stereotyping.

Converging Terminologies
But how different, in reality, are French and British approaches to racism and ethnicity, universalism and difference? The comparative work of Cathie Lloyd is particularly valuable here (Lloyd, 1991, 1994). Lloyd argues that with all the differences highlighted above, terminological oppositions disguise complex situations which in many respects converge (Lloyd, 1991; see also Miles, 1994). Ultimately, both British and American policies privilege universal citizenship rights and accord multicultural policies a relatively minor public role, both financially and administratively. There is no corporate multiculturalism granting autonomy to ethnic or religious communities in either the UK or the US. In France since 1981 the rights of foreigners to form associations have been belatedly legalized, and ethnic associations are now supported in a minor way, much as in the UK, by statutory grants (Yalçın-Heckman, 1997). Although France has no equivalent institution to the UK Commission for Racial Equality, it has instituted, since 1972, equivalent anti-racist legislation. Both countries lay stress on immigration controls as a means towards integration.

Key differences do remain, however, especially with regard to the willingness of Britain and the US to keep ethnic statistics as a basis for affirmative action, and the general tone of public debate, which in Britain and the US views visible cultural difference as far less of a threat to citizenship and national unity (and thus mostly ignores such differences as irrelevant).

When it comes to anti-racism, Lloyd argues (1994), there is a similar convergence: in particular, both in France and Britain anti-racist movements of the left have been in crisis, partly due to their fragmentation over
definitions and agendas, while grassroots activists in both countries share a good deal in common (see also Wieviorka, 1997).

Discursive convergence has also resulted from EU funding policies which have encouraged comparative studies of ethnicity, racism and immigration policies across Europe. A multitude of conferences funded by the EU bring together European scholars. EuroSpeak words such as integration and exclusion, evidently inspired by French public discourse, have entered the British social science lexicon, but so too, clearly, have Anglicisms such as (biological) racism, ethnicity and multiculturalism. A European-funded conference which produced two edited volumes (Werbner and Modood, 1997; Modood and Werbner, 1997) was held within the framework of the COST A2 Programme on Multiculturalism, Democracy and European Integration. Articles and special journal issues are devoted to comparative analyses of racial violence in Europe (e.g. New Community 21(4); Banton, 1999) or with the US (Body-Gendrot, 1995).

Where does this leave the role of the intellectual? To my mind, such encounters challenge settled discourses and open up new spaces for debate. Rather than American discursive imperialism, the dialectic between unlike languages has led to a refinement of the analysis of racism and culture. Against the view put forward by Bourdieu and Wacquant, it seems to me that the subtlety with which Wieviorka, for example, has analysed the ‘space’ of racism in the face of French critical debates only adds to our comparative understanding of racism as a complex global phenomenon (Wieviorka, 1995, 1997). But even more than that: the terms of the debate on racism and ethnicity have always been driven by heterotopic intellectuals, from Zygmunt Bauman to Jacques Derrida. Such intellectuals rarely hesitate to cross national frontiers of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is equally true that the public resonance that authorizes such scholars’ views is not of their own making; ultimately it rests on the prior existence of local struggles for recognition, and in France these are beginning to be waged by immigrants from North or West Africa who refuse to give up either their Islamic or ethnic identities (see Diop, 1997).

At times the voices raised by immigrant settlers seem to be Islamist or ‘neo-fundamentalist’ (Roy, 1994). But this is to misunderstand the complex role religious revival currently plays in the context of global migration. In Britain, I have argued (e.g. Werbner, 1994), self-appointed British Pakistani orators and preachers raise dissenting voices against Western international injustices and Western support for Israel or illegitimate Arab regimes, while calling for full citizenship rights in the UK. Such hybridized discourses are not simply culturalist or fundamentalist; they reflect an attempt to engage with problems of universal equality, justice and difference, no less than those eloquently argued by cosmopolitan intellectuals. The language deployed by this buried intelligentsia has its own globalizing resonances in which local predicaments are couched. Immigrant intellectuals who lose touch with this grassroots sentiment, as happened tragically in the Satanic Verses affair, are publicly exposed as beyond the pale.
(Friedman, 1997; van der Veer, 1997; Werbner, 1996). Ethnic intellectuals, in other words, must bear the ‘burden of representation’ as a trust.

This brings me to my final point which is about multiculturalism. Multiculturalism as a travelling theory (Said, 1983) disguises very different and fluid struggles in different countries, and even in different cities and localities. This is because multiculturalism is always mediated by pre-existing structures and policies already in place (Samad, 1997). In the US it refers to arguments over the ‘canon’, a peculiar institution of American elite universities, and to debates over the status of Spanish. In Canada, it concerns the right to federal autonomy of Canadian Indians and French Québécois. In Britain it mainly centres upon school curricula, local authority funding of the ethnic media, popular culture or community projects, and the granting of voluntary-aided status to religious Muslim and other denominational schools. In France it is about the right to be visible and different in the public sphere. In Australia, it refers to struggles over Aboriginal land rights, and respect for recent immigrant groups, especially from Asia.

Multiculturalism is thus not, at least in the countries listed here, a top-down government-driven policy, as many scholars assume, but a response to grassroots demand for change, the product of local or national activism. Multiculturalism, both the concept and the process, thus cannot be legislated out of existence. Critical multiculturalism – unlike corporate multiculturalism which exists in some European countries – is a mode of dissent adopted by excluded or marginalized minorities to attack old paradigms and desanctify tabooed discourses and sacred cows (Werbner, 1997). Rather than reifying culture, then, multiculturalism is a way for ethnic groups to claim a place and a voice in the public sphere. Often they do so through hybrid artistic expressions, or a multitude of heterogeneous and competing associations. If public intellectuals and scholars of racism and ethnicity adopt new or borrowed vocabularies to reflect this struggle, they can only do so effectively if these are inspired and legitimated by broader, less visible social movements.

References


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