Module 5 Social Issues

Lecture 24 Race and Ethnicity

Race

Race is one of the most complex concepts in sociology, not least because of the contradiction between its everyday usage and its scientific basis (or absence thereof). Many people today believe, mistakenly, that humans can be readily separated into biologically different races. This is not surprising considering the numerous attempts by scholars to establish racial categorizations of the peoples of the world.

Scientific theories of race arose in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. They were used to justify the emerging social order as England and other European nations became imperial powers ruling over subject territories and populations. Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), who is sometimes called the father of modern racism, proposed the existence of three races: white (Caucasian), black (Negroid) and yellow (Mongoloid). According to de Gobineau, the white race possesses superior intelligence, morality and will-power; these inherited qualities underlie the spread of Western influence across the world. The blacks, by contrast, are the least capable, marked by an animal nature, a lack of morality and emotional instability. The ideas of de Gobineau and fellow proponents of scientific racism later influenced Adolf Hitler, who transformed them into the ideology of the Nazi party, and other white supremacist groups such as the Ku-Klux-Klan in the United States and the architects of apartheid in South Africa.

In the years following World War II, ‘race science’ has been thoroughly discredited. In biological terms there are no clear-cut ‘races’, only a range of physical variations in human beings. Differences in physical type between groups of human beings arise from population inbreeding, which varies according to the degree of contact between different social or cultural groups. Human population groups are a continuum. The genetic diversity within populations that share visible physical traits is as great as the diversity between them. In virtue of these facts, the scientific community has virtually abandoned the concept of race. Many social scientists concur, arguing that race is nothing more than an ideological construct whose use in academic circles only perpetuates that commonly held belief that it has a biological grounding (Miles 1993). Other social scientists disagree, claiming that race as a concept has meaning to many people, even if its biological basis has been discredited. For sociological analysis, they argue, race remains a vital, if highly contested concept.

What is race, then, if it does not refer to biological categories? There are clear physical differences between human beings and some of these differences are inherited. But the questions of why some differences and not others become matters for social discrimination and prejudice has nothing to do with biology. Racial differences, therefore, should be understood as physical variations singled out by the members of a community or society as socially significant. Differences in skin colour, for example, are treated as significant, whereas differences in colour of hair are not. Race can be understood as a set of
social relationships which allow individuals and groups to be located, and various attributes or competencies assigned, on the basis of biologically grounded features. Racial distinctions are more than ways of describing human differences – they are also important factors in the reproduction of patterns of power and inequality within society.

The process by which understandings of race are used to classify individuals or groups of people is called racialization. Historically, racialization meant that certain groups of people came to be labelled as constituting distinct biological groups on the basis of naturally occurring physical features (as in the ideas set forth by de Gobineau). During the period of history from the 15th century onwards, as Europeans came into increased contact with people from different regions of the world, attempts were made to systematize knowledge by categorizing and explaining both natural and social phenomena. Non-European populations were ‘racialized’ in opposition to the European ‘white race’. In some instances this racialization took on ‘codified’ institutional forms, as in the case of slavery in the American colonies and apartheid in South Africa. More commonly, however, everyday social institutions became racialized in a de facto manner. Within a racialized system, aspects of individuals’ daily lives – including employment, personal relations, housing, healthcare, education and legal representation – are shaped and constrained by their own racialized positions within that system.

Ethnicity

While the idea of race mistakenly implies something fixed and biological, ‘ethnicity’ is a concept that is purely social in meaning. Ethnicity refers to the cultural practices and outlooks of a given community of people that set them apart from others. Members of ethnic groups see themselves as culturally distinct from other groups in a society, and are seen by those other groups to be so in return. Different characteristics may serve to distinguish ethnic groups from one another, but the most usual are language, history or ancestry (real or imagined), religion and styles of dress or adornment. Ethnic differences are wholly learnt, a point that seems self-evident until we remember how often some groups have been regarded as ‘born to rule’ or ‘shiftless’, ‘unintelligent’, and so forth. In fact, there is nothing innate about ethnicity; it is a purely social phenomenon that is produced and reproduced over time. Through socialization, young people assimilate the lifestyles, norms and beliefs of their communities.

For many people ethnicity is central to individual and group identity. It can provide an important thread of continuity with the past and is often kept alive through the practice of cultural traditions. Sociologists often favour the term ‘ethnicity’ because it is a concept that is completely social in meaning. However, references to ethnicity and ethnic differences can be problematic, especially if they suggest contrast with a ‘non-ethnic’ norm. The broader term ‘ethnic’ is applied to realms as diverse as cuisine, clothing, music and neighbourhoods to designate practise that are ‘non-indigenous’. Using ethnic labels in this collective manner risks producing divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, where certain parts of the population are seen as ‘ethnic’ and others are not. In fact, ethnicity is an attribute possessed by all members of a population, not merely certain segments of it. Yet, as we shall discuss, in practice ethnicity is most often associated with minority groups within a population.
Minority Groups

The notion of minority groups (often ethnic minorities) is widely used in sociology and is more than a merely numerical distinction. In sociology, members of a minority group are disadvantaged as compared with the majority population and have some sense of group solidarity, of belonging together. The experience of being the subject of prejudice and discrimination usually heightens feelings of common loyalty and interests.

Thus, sociologists frequently use the term ‘minority’ in a non-literal way to refer to a group’s subordinate position within society, rather than its numerical representation. There are many cases in which a ‘minority’ is in fact in the majority! In some geographical areas such as inner cities, ethnic minority groups may make up the majority of the population, but are nonetheless referred to as ‘minorities’. This is because the term ‘minority’ captures their disadvantaged positions. Women are sometimes described as a minority group, while in many countries of the world they form the numerical majority. Yet women tend to be disadvantaged in comparison with men (the ‘majority’), the term is applied to them as well.

Members of minority groups often tend to see themselves as a people apart from the majority. They are usually physically and socially isolated from the larger community. They tend to be concentrated in certain neighbourhoods, cities or regions of a country. There is little intermarriage between those in the majority and members of the minority group, or between minority groups. People within the minority sometimes actively promote endogamy (marriage within the group) in order to keep alive their cultural distinctiveness.

Some scholars have favoured speaking of ‘minorities’ to refer collectively to groups that have experienced prejudice at the hands of the ‘majority’ society. The term ‘minorities’ draws attention to the pervasiveness of discrimination by highlighting the commonalities between experiences of various subordinate groups within society. For example, different minority groups share many features in common and reveal how oppression against different groups can take similar forms. At the same time, however, speaking collectively of ‘minorities’ can result in generalizations about discrimination and oppression that do not accurately reflect the experiences of individual groups.

Many minorities may be both ethnically and physically distinct from the rest of the population. Indeed, ethnic distinctions are rarely neutral, but are commonly associated with inequalities of wealth and power, as well as with antagonisms between groups.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice refers to opinions or attitudes held by members of one group towards another. A prejudiced person’s preconceived views are often based on hearsay rather than on direct evidence, and are resistant to change even in the face of new information. People may harbour favourable prejudices about groups with which they identify and negative prejudices against others. Someone who is prejudiced against a particular group will refuse to give it a fair hearing.
Prejudices are often grounded in stereotypes, fixed and inflexible characterizations of a group of people. Stereotypes are often applied to ethnic minority groups, such as the notion that all whites are intellectually superior to the blacks; men are intellectually superior to women, and so on. We all know that racial superiority is a myth. Some stereotypes are highly over-exaggerated; others are simply a mechanism of displacement, in which feelings of hostility or anger are directed against objects that are not the real origin of those feelings. Stereotypes become embedded in cultural understandings and are difficult to erode, even when they are gross distortions of reality. The belief that unemployed youth are dependent on welfare and refuse to work is an example of a persistent stereotype that lacks basis in fact. A great number of unemployed youth prefer to work hard but have no access to gainful employment opportunities in countries such as India.

If prejudice describes attitudes and opinions, discrimination refers to actual behaviour towards another group or individual. Discrimination can be seen in activities that disqualify members of one group from opportunities open to others. Although prejudice is often the basis of discrimination, the two may exist separately. People may have prejudiced attitudes that they do not act on. Equally important, discrimination does not necessarily derive directly from prejudice. Prejudiced attitudes influence discrimination.

**Racism**

The concept of race is fundamental to the existence of racism – prejudice based on socially significant physical distinctions. A racist is someone who believes that some individuals are superior or inferior to others on the basis of racialized differences. Racism is commonly thought of as behaviour or attitudes held by certain individuals or groups. An individual may profess racist beliefs or may join in with a group, such as a Hindutva supremacist organization, which promotes a racist agenda. Yet many have argued that racism is more than simply the ideas held by a small number of bigoted individuals. Rather, racism is embedded in the very structure and operation of society. The idea of institutional racism suggests that racism pervades all of society’s structures in a systematic manner. According to this view, institutions such as the police, the health service and the educational system all promote policies that favour certain groups while discriminating against others.

*From ‘Old Racism’ to ‘New Racism’*

Just as the concept of biological race has been discredited, old style ‘biological’ racism based on differences in physical traits is rarely openly expressed in society today. The end to legalized segregation in the United States and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa were important turning points in the rejection of ‘biological racism’. In both of these cases racist attitudes were proclaimed by directly associating physical traits with biological inferiority. Such blatantly racist ideas are rarely heard today, except in the cases of violent hate crimes or the platforms of certain extremist groups. But this is not to say that racist attitudes have disappeared from modern societies. Rather, as some scholars argue, they have been replaced by a more sophisticated new racism (or cultural racism) which uses the idea of cultural differences to exclude certain groups (Barker 1981).
Those who argue that a ‘new racism’ has emerged claim that cultural arguments are now deployed instead of biological ones in order to discriminate against certain segments of the population. According to this view, hierarchies and superiority and inferiority are constructed according to the values of the majority culture. Those groups that stand apart from the majority can become marginalized or vilified for their refusal to assimilate. It is alleged that ‘new racism’ has a clear political dimension. The fact that racism is increasingly exercised on cultural rather than biological grounds has led some scholars to suggest that we live in an age of ‘multiple racisms’, where discrimination is experienced differently across segments of the population (Modood, et al. 1997).

Explaining Racism and Ethnic Discrimination

Psychological Interpretations

Psychological theories can help us understand the nature of prejudiced attitudes and also why ethnic differences matter so much to people. Two psychological approaches are useful in this regard. The first begins with the fact that prejudice operates mainly through the use of stereotypes and vents their antagonism against ‘scapegoats’, people blamed for things that are not their fault. Scapegoating is common when two or more deprived ethnic groups come into competition with one another for economic rewards.

The second approach suggests that there may be some types of people, as a result of early socialization, who are particularly prone to stereotypical thinking and projection – the unconscious attribution to others of one’s own desires or angers. Theodor Adorno and his associates in the 1940s diagnosed a character type they termed the authorititarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950). The researchers developed several measurement scales for assessing levels of prejudice. On one scale, for instance, people were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements expressing strongly anti-Semitic views. Those who were diagnosed as prejudiced against Dalits also tended to express negative attitudes towards other minority groups. People with an authoritarian personality, the investigators concluded, tend to be rigidly conformist, submissive to their superiors and dismissive towards inferiors. Such people are also highly intolerant in their religious and sexual attitudes (Giddens 2010).

The characteristics of an authoritarian personality result from a pattern of upbringing in which parents are unable to express direct love for their children and are aloof and disciplinarian. As adults, these individuals suffer from anxieties that can be controlled only by the adoption of a rigid outlook. They are unable to cope with ambiguous situations, and they ignore inconsistencies, tending to think in a stereotypical way.

Adorno’s research was subjected to a barrage of criticism. Some have doubted the value of the measurement scales used. Others have argued that authoritarianism is not a characteristic of personality, but reflects the values and norms of particular subcultures within the wider society. The investigation may be more valuable as a contribution to understanding authoritarian patterns of thought in general, rather than distinguishing a particular personality type. Finally, such approaches presume that racism is a set of beliefs held by a small number of individuals who display particular psychological traits. Many sociological interpretations,
by contrast, seek to locate the causes of racism and prejudice in the culture or structures of society itself.

Sociological Interpretations

The psychological mechanisms outlined above are found among members of all societies, and help us explain why ethnic antagonism is such a common element in different cultures. However, they tell us little about the social processes involved in discrimination. To study such processes, we must draw on sociological ideas.

Ethnocentrism, Group Closure and Allocation of Resources

Sociological concepts relevant to ethnic conflicts on a general level are those of ethnocentrism, ethnic group closure and resource allocation. **Ethnocentrism** refers to a suspicion of outsiders combined with a tendency to evaluate the culture of others in terms of one’s own culture. Virtually all cultures have been ethnocentric to some degree, and it is easy to see how ethnocentrism combines with stereotypical thought. Outsiders are thought of as aliens, barbarians or morally and mentally inferior. This was how most civilizations viewed the members of smaller cultures, for example, and the attitude has fuelled innumerable ethnic clashes in history.

Ethnocentrism and group closure frequently go together. **Closure** refers to the process whereby groups maintain boundaries separating themselves from others. These boundaries are formed by means of exclusion devices, which sharpen the divisions between one ethnic group and another. Such devices include limiting or prohibiting intermarriage between the groups, restrictions on social contact or economic relationships like trading, and the physical separation of groups (as in the case of ethnic ghettos).

Sometimes groups of equal power mutually enforce lines of closure: their members keep separate from each other, but neither group dominates the other. More commonly, however, one ethnic group occupies position of power over another. In these circumstances, group closure coincides with **resource allocation**, instituting inequalities in the distribution of wealth and material goods.

Some of the fiercest conflicts between ethnic groups centre on the lines of closure between them precisely because these lines signal inequalities in wealth, power or social standing. The concept of ethnic group closure helps us understand both the dramatic and the more insidious differences that separate communities of people from one another – not just why the members of some groups get shot, lynched, beaten up or harassed, but also why they do not get good jobs, a good education or a desirable place to live. Wealth, power and social status are scarce resources – some groups have more of them than others. To hold on to their distinctive positions, privileged groups sometimes undertake extreme acts of violence against others. Similarly, members of underprivileged groups may also turn to violence as a means of trying to improve their own situation.
Conflict Theories

Some scholars have attempted to locate racism within the general culture of society, arguing that it is a type of natural conservatism which emerges in times of change and instability. Cultural explanations have seen racism as a type of defence against the introduction of new customs, languages and lifestyles that threaten the existing order (Cashmore 1987). Yet such arguments are somewhat unsatisfactory, because they fail to explain how racism relates to structures and forces at the level of society, rather than that of the individual.

Conflict theories, by contrast, are concerned with the links between racism and prejudice on the one hand, and relationships of power and inequality on the other. Early conflict approaches to racism were heavily influenced by Marxist ideas which saw the economic system as the determining factor for all other aspects of society. Some Marxist theorists held that racism was a product of the capitalist system, arguing that the ruling class used slavery, colonization and racism as tools for exploiting labour (Cox 1959).

Later neo-Marxist scholars saw these early formulations as too rigid and simplistic and suggested that racism was not the product of economic forces alone. A set of articles published in 1982 by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back*, takes a broader view of the rise of racism. While agreeing that the capitalist exploitation of labour is one factor, John Solomos, Paul Gilroy and others point to a variety of historical and political influences which led to the emergence of a specific brand of racism in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. They argue that racism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon involving the interplay of ethnic minority and working-class identities and beliefs. In their eyes, racism is much more than simply a set of oppressive ideas enacted against the non-white population by powerful elites (Hall et al. 1982).

References


**Questions**

1. What is meant by race?
2. ‘The questions of why some differences and not others become matters for social discrimination and prejudice has nothing to do with biology’- explain.
3. What is meant by ethnicity and minority groups?
4. Explain how prejudice leads to racial and ethnic discrimination.
5. Bring to light the transition from ‘Old Racism’ to ‘New Racism’.
6. What is meant by psychological interpretations on ethnic discrimination?