

Race: The Difference That Makes a Difference

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According to Bateson (1972), information, or rather, the elementary *unit* of information is "a difference that makes a difference" (p.321). On his view, a difference "is certainly not a thing or an event"; rather, it is an "abstract matter", and in the world of communication and organisation, this "abstract matter", whose essence can be shown to lie in form and pattern, can bring about "effects". In framing his concept of the basic unit of information, Bateson makes reference to Kant's assertions, in the *Critique of Judgement*, that the most elementary aesthetic act is the selection of a fact, and that there are an infinite number of potential facts associated with a thing. On this basis, Bateson is led to maintain that there are an infinite number of differences associated with a thing, and that information for someone (or something) refers to a "very limited number" of such differences selected from this infinite set. The differences that are selected make a difference for someone (or something) in that they are regarded as significant in some context; thus, Bateson's concept of information is fundamentally contextual in nature – a fact that has widespread and profound implications for its application in the social world.

The aim of this paper is to contribute toward the construction of a critical theoretical framework for exploring the differences made by – or "effects" that result from – relating the concept of information and the concept of race through their shared use of the concept of difference. The concept of race will be examined from an information-theoretical perspective, while the concept of information will be examined from a race-theoretical perspective, resulting in a hermeneutic (or interpretative) circle.

von Bayer (2003) maintains that information must be understood as both *inform*-ation and *in*-formation, that is, as involving both the transmission of meaning and the transfer of form (arrangement, configuration, order, organisation, pattern, shape, structure and relationship). On his view, "the meaning of a message arises out of the relationship of the individual symbols that make it up." (p.19) To the extent that certain types of patterns (forms, structures) can exist and certain transformations of patterns by other patterns can occur independently of consciousness, it follows that certain types of information are independent of consciousness. This is significant because some patterns in the human world – for example, patterns of discrimination (prejudice) and/or domination (power) associated with racial difference – are understood to be socially-constructed and causal (that is, they "make a difference" or have "effects"), yet it is unclear whether such patterns exist independently of consciousness. Some philosophers of race, such as Garcia (1996), have argued that racism should be understood in individualistic terms and as fundamentally moral, attitudinal, intentional and volitional in nature; others, such as Shelby (2002), maintain that racism is essentially cognitive in nature, and that racist beliefs provide necessary and sufficient conditions for racism. All such accounts, however, irrespective of whether they involve the "heart" (morality) or the "head" (beliefs), assume that consciousness is a necessary condition for racism.

While sympathetic to cognitive accounts of racism, Mills (1997, 1998, 2003, 2007) argues that patterns of discrimination and/or domination associated with racial difference should not be understood as the exceptional behaviour of individuals deviating from a social norm, but rather, as providing the "contractual" basis of a global socio-political system, viz. white supremacy. Crucially, on this account, racism can – and *does* – exist in a purely structural (or pattern-based) capacity, that is,

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in terms of differentially-embedded (material) power relations that are at least not explicitly intentional, that is, dependent on consciousness for their existence. Mills maintains that consciousness was necessary at the time of "signing" what he calls the "Racial Contract" in that, to paraphrase Bateson, a "very limited number" of (racial) differences were intentionally selected by those responsible for establishing the modern racial world system; however, subsequent to its establishment, the system has been maintained by what Mills refers to as an "inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)" and which involves "white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race." (pp.18-19) To the extent that information is concerned with "differences that make a difference" and involves a process of *inform-ing* – that is, transference of meaning – which can, in fact, turn out to be a process of *misinform-ing* – it might be argued that the establishment and maintenance of the "Racial Contract" constitute informational processes.

According to Hesse (2007), critical race theoretical perspectives, such as the contractualist position articulated by Mills, tend to involve "a residual empiricist reliance on the reduction of race in analysis to visible, corporeal difference" (p.645), that is, physical characteristics or "markers" such as colour located on the human body. On his view, "racialisation [is] embodied in a series of onto-colonial taxonomies of land, climate, history, bodies, customs, language, all of which became sedimented metonymically, metaphorically, and normatively, as the assembled attributions of race." (pp. 658-659) In short, while embodiment, in the broad sense of materiality (or physicality), is a necessary condition for race, such embodiment can assume – and, historically, has assumed – different forms (Blaut 1992); to paraphrase Stuart Hall (2002), "race is a [shape-]shifting signifier". To the extent that information is concerned with "differences that make a difference" and involves a process of *forming* – that is, implanting of form or, alternatively, allowing form to become sedimented – it might be argued that the "series" of "taxonomies" (or systems of hierarchical classification) associated with the process of racialisation constitutes an informational process. This position derives additional support from Bateson's (1972) assertion that "there are differences between differences. Every effective difference denotes a demarcation, a line of classification, and all classification is hierarchic. In other words, differences are themselves to be differentiated and classified." (p.324)

As stated previously, Kant's epistemology – more specifically, his views on how facts are selected – informs Bateson's concept of information. This is significant because in addition to being one of the most important metaphysical, moral and political philosophers of the modern period, Kant, as lecturer in anthropology and physical geography, is also responsible for originating the modern concept of race (Eze 1987). On this basis, it becomes legitimate, perhaps even necessary, to investigate the extent to which Kantian epistemology is racialised and, as a corollary, to what extent the concept of information, at least as formulated by Bateson, is racialised from a critical theory perspective. (Bateson frequently refers to what he calls "Occidental Epistemology"; however, the connections between Kant, epistemology, race and information are not explored.) For example, Mills' historically-informed hypothesis about a shift to an "epistemology of ignorance" involving the construction of dysfunctional "colour-blind" cognitive categories and classifications following the "signing" of the "Racial Contract" is relevant for understanding how – and, more importantly, why – information became disembodied (Hayles 1999). Conversely, the significance of moves to re-embody information – for example, in theories of embodied cognition, at least some of which have Kantian foundations – for a "re-writing" of the "Racial Contract" needs to be considered since the body invoked in such theories is tacitly assumed to be race-less, much in the same way that social contract

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theory assumes a de-raced person. The importance of race for thinking about the relation between information and embodiment, and the relevance of this for the "Racial Contract", also re-surfaces in the context of debates about the socio-political issues associated with biometric technologies (Pugliese 2005, 2007) (Browne 2009).

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