Race:
The Difference That Makes a Difference

Syed Mustafa Ali
The Open University (UK)
Outline

I. Information and race: a critical hermeneutic framework
II. Concepts of information
III. Race from an information-theoretical perspective
IV. Information from a race-theoretical perspective
V. Future work
Information and Race: A Critical Hermeneutic Framework

• OBJECTIVE:
  – Explore 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

• METHOD:
  Critically examine the concept of race from an information-theoretical perspective while critically examining the concept of information from a race-theoretical perspective
Concepts of Information – I

• **Information**, or rather, the **elementary unit** of information is “a difference that makes a difference”

• 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**”

  Gregory Bateson  
  *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972)
Concepts of Information – II

• Information must be understood as both inform-ation and as 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)

• “The meaning of a message arises out of the relationship of the individual symbols that make it up”

Hans Christian von Baeyer

RACE FROM AN INFORMATION-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE
What is Race?

• Race as social construct
• Race as based on physical characteristics
• Race as genealogically-related to racism
• Racism as prejudice and power
• Racism as individualistic
  – Moral, attitudinal, intentional, volitional (Garcia 1996)
  – Cognitive (Shelby 2002)
Critique of Individualist Approach

• Racism can exist in a purely structural (or pattern-based) capacity, that is, in terms of differentially-embedded power relations that are at least not explicitly intentional.

• 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 basis of a global socio-political system – white supremacy.
Racism as system – I

• Racism – or global white supremacy – is a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties

Racism as system – II

• Three claims:

1. **Existential**
   White supremacy, both local and global, exists and has existed for many years

2. **Conceptual**
   White supremacy should be thought of as a political system

3. **Methodological**
   White supremacy can be theorised as a “contract” between whites – a Racial Contract
Racism as system – II

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3. **Methodological**
   White supremacy can be theorised as a “contract” between whites – a Racial Contract
The Racial Contract – I

- That set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) “racial” (phenotypical, genealogical, cultural) criteria as “white”, and coextensive with the class of full persons, to categorise the remaining subset of humans as “nonwhite” and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities the whites either already inhabit or establish or in transactions as aliens with these polities, and the moral and juridical rules normally regulating the behaviour of whites in their dealing with one another either do not apply at all in dealings with nonwhites or apply only in a qualified form (depending in part on changing historical circumstances and what particular variety of nonwhite is involved), but in any case the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are beneficiaries of the Contract, though some whites are not signatories.
The Racial Contract – I

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At the time of “signing” the Racial Contract a “very limited number” of (racial) differences were intentionally selected by those responsible for establishing the modern racial world system.
The Racial Contract is

• Political
• Moral

• Epistemological
  – Prescribes norms for **cognition**
  – Motivates **selection** of **facts**
  – Determines what counts as **information**...
    ... but also what counts as **mis/disinformation**
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  ... but also what counts as mis/disinformation

Bateson:
- There are an infinite number of differences associated with a thing
- Information refers to a “very limited number” of such differences selected from this infinite set
The Racial Contract – III

• To the extent that information is concerned with “differences that make a difference” and involves a process of *inform-ing* – that is, transmission of meaning – which can, in fact, turn out to be a process of *mis/disinform-ing* – it might be argued that the establishment and maintenance of the Racial Contract constitute informational processes
The Racial Contract – III

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von Baeyer:
- Information as *transmission of meaning*
- Information as *inform-ation*
Racism as process – I

• Changing **definitions** of race – religious, scientific, cultural (Blaut 1992)
  – Race as a “**floating** signifier” (Hall 2002)
• Changing composition of racial groups
• **Changing** definitions of **racial difference**
• Race as a **series** of taxonomies (Hesse 2007)

Bateson:

“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.”
Racism as process – II

• Racial formation is an ongoing and ever-changing process

• To the extent that information is concerned with “differences that make a difference” and involves a process of in-forming it might be argued that the “series of taxonomies” or successive systems of hierarchical classification associated with the process of racial formation – or racialisation – constitutes an informational process
Racism as process – II

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von Baeyer:
- Information as transfer of form
- Information as in-formation
INFORMATION FROM A RACE-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE
Concepts of Information – III

• Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*)
  – An infinite number of *differences* associated with a thing
  – Information 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

• **Kant** (*Critique of Judgement*)
  – The most elementary aesthetic act is the *selection* of a fact
  – An infinite number of potential *facts* associated with a thing
Kant’s Four Types of Proposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ONTOLOGY</th>
<th>EPISTEMOLOGY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANALYTIC</td>
<td>A PRIORI</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All bachelors are unmarried, all triangles have three sides</td>
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<td>SYNTHETIC</td>
<td>A POSTERIORI</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All persons should be treated with respect</td>
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<td>All bachelors are unhappy, tables exist</td>
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Are nonwhite human beings persons?
Kant, Racism and Epistemology

• **CLAIM**: Kant’s writings on anthropology and physical geography are separate from, and irrelevant to, his writings in ethics and political philosophy and metaphysics (epistemology)

• **FACT**: Kant made internal differentiations in the category of human beings (Mills 2005)
  – being *human* does not necessarily entail being a *person* (that is, being rational and autonomous)

• **FACT**: Kant lectured more on anthropology and physical geography than on moral philosophy, and he was responsible for introducing these subjects into German universities, based on his own research (Eze 1997)
The Kant (Race) Wars

Kant’s philosophy is racist

• Emmanuel Eze
  – Transcendental (and central?)
  – A priori
• Robert Bernasconi
• Charles Mills

Kant’s philosophy is not racist

• Bernard Boxill
  – Empirical and peripheral
  – A posteriori
• Pauline Kleingeld
• Robert Louden

“The equality of all individuals of the human race is for Kant knowable by pure reason, (and) it is further certain in a hypothetical though secure way through reflection starting with the body... [emphasis added]”

Critical Epistemology
The Epistemology of Ignorance

• Construction of dysfunctional “colour-blind” cognitive categories and classifications following the “signing” of the Racial Contract

• A particular pattern of localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)

• White misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race

Charles Mills, White Ignorance (2007)
Implications for Information – I

• Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*)
  – An infinite number of differences associated with a thing
  – Information refers to a “very limited number” of such differences *selected* from this infinite set

Society → Interests → Concepts → Percepts

Power relations, Structures of domination and subordination

Categories, Classifications
Implications for Information – II

• Bodies as raced
• Epistemology as “colour-blind” or “de-raced”
  ⇒ Epistemology as disembodied
• Information as epistemological
  ⇒ Information as disembodied (Hayles 1999)
• Epistemology as embodied and social
  – Embodied cognition
  – Embedded (or situated) cognition
  ⇒ Information as embodied and social

Embedding of whose intentionality in informational substrates?
Biometrics and the “rewriting” of the Racial Contract (Pugliese 2005)
Future Work

• Further critical hermeneutic enquiry into the relation between race and information
  – Semiotics and somatics

• **Application** of framework
  – (Racial) Economy of (In)attention
  – ICT4D
  – Digital politics

• Critical hermeneutic enquiry into the relation between race and **cybernetics**