



The Difference that Makes a Difference 2011

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

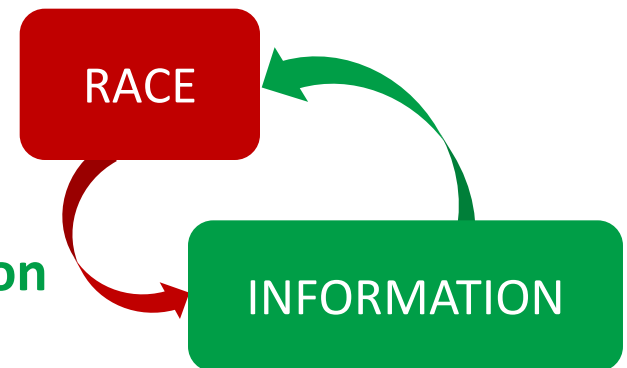
- OBJECTIVE:
 - Explore the **differences** made by – or "**effects**" that result from – **relating** the concept of **information** and the concept of **race** through their shared use of the concept of **difference**

- 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

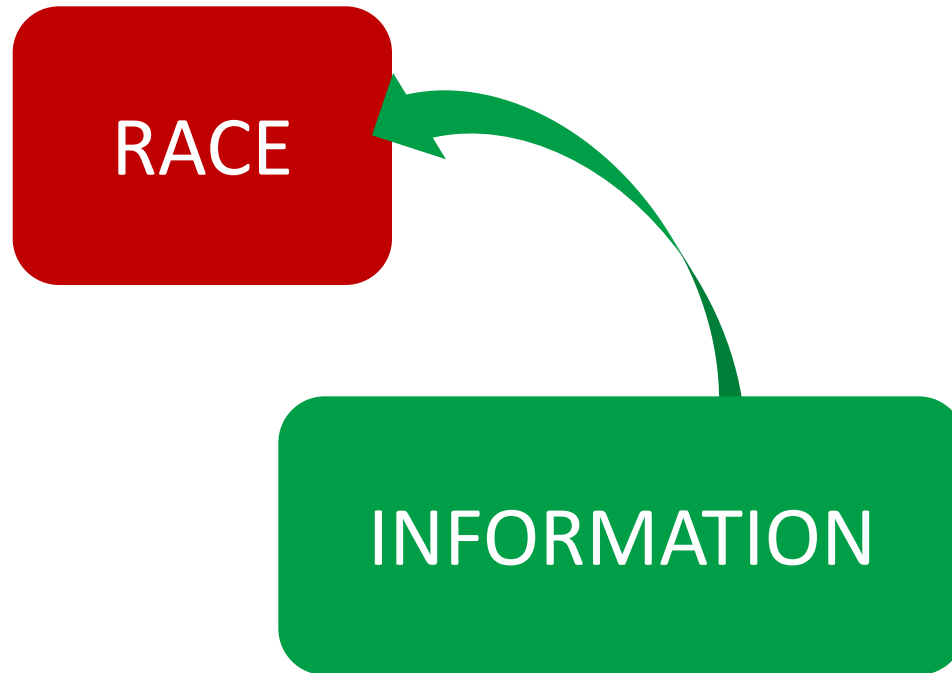
Steps to an Ecology of Mind (1972)

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

Information: The New Language of Science (2003)



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

Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (1997)

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

- Three claims:

European contractarian tradition associated with Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant

- 1. Existential**

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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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The Racial Contract – II

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/dis**information

The Racial Contract – II

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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/dis**inform-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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- To the extent that it involves a process of **in-forming** it might be argued that the “series of taxonomic and successive systems of hierarchical classification associated with the process of racial formation – or **racialisation** – constitutes an informational process

von Baeyer:

- Information as **transfer of form**
- Information as **in-formation**



RACE

INFORMATION

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



		EPISTEMOLOGY	
		A PRIORI	A POSTERIORI
ONTOLOGY	ANALYTIC	All bachelors are unmarried, all triangles have three sides	Are nonwhite human beings persons?
	SYNTHETIC	CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: All persons should be treated with respect	All bachelors are unhappy, tables exist

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]”*

Rudolph Malter, cited in Larrimore, Mark (1999) “Sublime Waste: Kant on the Destiny of the 'Races'” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Supplementary Volume 25, pp.99-100.

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)

Bateson's occidental epistemology

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 **Whose body? Which race?**
 - 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**