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RACISM

As many philosophers of race and critical race theorists have observed, racism, as well as the notion of race itself, is a notoriously complex and difficult concept. Although hostility toward foreigners, religious groups, and other collective identities has presumably existed since the beginning of human history, racism based on a biological, (pseudo)scientific notion of race is a recent phenomenon. As Ali Rattansi explains in his 2007 work on the topic, the term *racism* emerged in the early twentieth century as a response to the Nazi project to rid Germany of the Jewish people, whom the Nazis believed were a distinct and inferior race.

The concept of racism continues to shift in focus, oscillating between a biological and (pseudo)scientific concept and a cultural, sociohistorical, and behavioral one. Nonetheless, a central component of racism is the belief that some alleged races are superior to others. Once such a hierarchy is established, it is often the case that those races deemed superior attempt to dominate, exploit, or otherwise violate, harm, and mistreat those races deemed inferior. The tragedy of the Holocaust is one clear example of the power of racist discourse to influence and infect a society. The Nazi “Final Solution” was conceived, nurtured, and executed on the basis of the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race and the fear that Jews were a decadent, impure race posing a threat to the purity of the former.

Another historical example of racism and the social construction of race can be seen by examining how “blackness” as a racial category has been defined in American history. The “one-drop” rule, embraced for many years by most southern states, proclaimed that a person having any African ancestry was officially and legally classified as black. The enforcement of the one-

drop rule created a number of complicated sociopolitical practices and scenarios, many of which were incomprehensible to observers living outside the United States. For example, a person with only one great-grandparent of African ancestry typically would not exhibit phenotypic characteristics—skin color, hair texture, and so forth—associated with “blackness” in the United States. Nonetheless, given the one-drop rule, such a person might pass as white but was, legally speaking, judged black. With such a classification, of course, came significant sociopolitical disadvantages such as denied access to education, employment, housing, and other goods essential to human flourishing.

The above examples highlight the intimate connection between racism and race understood as a biobehavioral essence. This (pseudo)scientific view of race as a natural or biological kind was in full force by the nineteenth century and is referred to in critical race theory as racial essentialism, biobehavioral essentialism, or bioracial essentialism. As philosopher Ron Mallon explains in a 2006 article, advocates of biobehavioral essentialism held that races shared a common underlying natural essence or biological (or perhaps genetic) properties. These biological properties were said to be heritable, shared by all and only members of the alleged race, and they supposedly explained the behavioral, ethical, intellectual, cultural, and other proclivities and capabilities of purported racial groups and the individuals constituting those groups.

In light of findings in genetic studies of the twentieth century, the vast majority of scholars working in the natural sciences and the humanities have rejected biobehavioral essentialism. Most critical race theorists, sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers of race embrace the notion of race as a social construction. On this view, race is not a natural, biological kind; yet it

does constitute a social reality and thus has sociopolitical significance. For example, race is important for group identity and maintenance; moreover, racial discourse and language must be retained so that past and present racially related social injustices might be corrected and addressed.

Racism and Catholic Social Teaching. Regrettably, the Catholic Church has participated implicitly and explicitly in racist practices and discourses—for which the Church has repented publicly. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Church took many concrete steps to actively and publicly speak out against the sin of racism (see Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 1965, 27, 60; Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* 1967, 63). For example, in his Christmas Eve message of 1942, Pope Pius XII expressed his deep concern for the thousands of persons consigned to death or a slow demise “only because of nationality or race” (*solo per ragione di nazionalità o di stirpe: Acta apostolicae sedis* 35 [1943], 23). Beginning in the late 1950s, the Catholic Church produced numerous written statements denouncing racism as a moral evil and a grave sin that divides the human family and denies human persons their dignity and God-given rights as his image-bearers. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, made it clear that “any theory or form of racism and racial discrimination is morally unacceptable” (433). Quite significantly, Catholic social teaching of the early twenty-first century recognized the distinction between individual, overt acts of racism and systemic or structural racism.

To illustrate, an individual may condemn racial stereotypes, decry racially motivated hate-crimes, and harbor no conscious racist thoughts toward African Americans, Latinos, Jews, Asians, or other minority groups. Yet the same person can and often does participate in and further racist and racially biased practices engrained in sociopolitical customs and codified in legislation. Some sociologists, for example, believe there is a false association of black males with criminality because of the large numbers of blacks in U.S. prisons. This impression, they maintain, leads to certain behavior patterns such as white females clutching their purses and crossing to the other side of the street when they see a black male approaching them. These same sociologists also point to racially based stereotypes. For example, black females who receive government assistance for food, housing, and childcare are sometimes viewed as immoral, lazy “welfare queens,” who purposely take advantage of diligent, hardworking (white) citizens. Some sociologists likewise maintain that African Americans receive differential treatment in department stores and are significantly more likely to be followed by security guards than whites. Programs such as affirmative

action are viewed by some as taking jobs from deserving whites, thus implying that blacks are not qualified for the job and unjustly receive it.

Structural racism, which the U.S. Catholic bishops discuss at length in their 1979 “Pastoral Letter on Racism,” is a subtle expression of racism. This form of racism is often more dangerous than overt, easily recognizable race-crimes and racist propaganda promoted by extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or the Aryan Nations. Structural or systemic racism, given its more embedded and socially accepted character, makes its appearance in everyday practices and activities taken for granted by those in the dominant privileged group. Thus we find racist or racially biased structures and accompanying socially accepted practices occurring regularly in the housing industry, institutions of higher learning, secondary schools, the justice system, the labor force, and myriad other forms of relevant social and cultural capital.

As Rattansi observes, well into the twentieth century unemployment rates for black males were nearly twice as high as those for white males, African American neighborhoods continue to be the most segregated neighborhoods in the United States (this is in part owing to the phenomenon that whites tend not to choose to live in neighborhoods that have a black population of more than 20%), and infant mortality rates for blacks are twice those of whites. In addition, even though the percentage of murders committed by blacks and whites is roughly the same, blacks receive the death penalty at staggeringly disproportionate rates. Lastly, the history of asset discrimination against African Americans continues to negatively impact blacks today, even after race-based legislation has been overturned.

Some argue that black poverty is due to complex socioeconomic factors that cannot be reduced merely to racism. James P. Bailey, however, maintains—in his 2010 study of the history of asset discrimination against African Americans in the United States—that the legacies of former public policies such as segregation legalized by the Federal Housing Administration, racially restrictive covenants, and “black codes” are all too often shaped by racist beliefs and prejudices, which then negatively affect minority groups and hinder their economic well-being and ability to flourish. Although after *Shelley v. Kraemer* (334 U.S. 1, 1948), race-based restrictive covenants could no longer be legally enforced, some of those involved in the real estate community continued the practice of racial segregation, offering substandard housing to black families and denying them access to all white or largely white neighborhoods. Since property in white neighborhoods was more likely to retain its value or appreciate in value (whereas property in black neighborhoods was more likely to depreciate),

white homeowners could more easily improve their economic status and pass on their assets to their children. These socially acceptable practices in the real estate community denied blacks equal opportunities to purchase homes and property that would retain their value so that they might transfer their assets to their children. Such discriminatory, yet legal practices exacerbate the wealth gap between whites and blacks at every income level, as they create unequal asset distributions that harm the life prospects of African Americans. As Bailey notes, the effects of these systemic injustices must be taken into consideration when evaluating the economic and other disparities between whites and blacks.

Aware of these structural injustices rooted at some level in racist beliefs, the U.S. bishops urge the faithful and all people of goodwill to identify, expose, and work toward eradicating these structural injustices permeating all spheres of society. Speaking in a similar but more explicitly theological vein, Archbishop Flynn reminds us in his 2003 pastoral letter that our assumptions about racial superiority and inferiority go beyond our own individual acts and personal sins and bring us into the realm of social or societal sins. Thus they constitute social injustices affecting all persons in society. Given our solidarity in the human condition, they are injustices for which we are all responsible.

SEE ALSO CAGOTS; HOLOCAUST.

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RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

Radical philosophy is a leftist philosophical movement arising out of the 1968 European student protests and CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY, especially CRITICAL THEORY and MARXISM. According to the movement's manifesto published in the first issue of *Radical Philosophy* in January of 1972, the movement stemmed from dissatisfaction with the state of British philosophical practice at the time. The first organizers explained that philosophy's "academic practitioners have all but abandoned the attempt to understand the world, let alone to change it. The Radical Philosophy Group has been set up to challenge this situation." The movement