A New Look at the Old "Race" Language: Rethinking "Race" and Exclusion in Social Policy

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This essay is an examination of the use of the notion "race" current in American social science literature and public discourse. It argues that the current assumptions of "race" are mistaken and lead to misunderstanding and misdirected social policy. A rethinking of the notions of "race" requires making a paradigmatic shift of the old categories of "race" and "race relations" to a new language that rejects "race" as a descriptive and an analytical category. It examines the processes through which "racist" social policies are enacted against Asian immigrants in contemporary Southern California.

INTRODUCTION

The "race" language in contemporary scholarly and media discourse in the United States is most ubiquitous. Major media headlines after the Los Angeles riots included "Race and Rage" (*U.S. News and World Report*), "Rethinking Race and Crime in America" and "Beyond Black and White" (*Newsweek*), "Why Race Still Divides American and its People" (*Time*) and more recently, "Blacks vs Browns" (*Atlantic Monthly*). In the aftermath of the riots, academics and journalists analyzed the riots as though it were a matter of "race relations": first it was a problem between blacks and whites, then between blacks and Koreans, and then between blacks and Latinos, and back to blacks and whites as public attention focuses on the Reginald Denny incident as the case goes to trial.

The intent of this paper is not to attempt to grasp the meanings and the causes of the earth-shaking events in Los Angeles, but to deconstruct the worn-out vocabulary of "race" and "race relations" and the narrow framework that has dominated academic writing, official governmental practices, and discourse on social relations. To

engage in a serious discussion of "race" in America, we must begin with an examination of the mistaken assumptions of the old language of "race" and "race relations." How are these categories used, by whom, and for what purpose? If African Americans are "black" and European Americans are "white," where do the multitudes of other Americans who are neither "black" nor "white" fit in? The issue here is not a call for proportional representation for Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans as "yellow," "brown," and "red," even though this has been the mainstay of ethnic politics in the United States. At issue here is the dominant theoretical paradigm that employs the idea of "race" in the categorization of people, the structuring of social relations, and as an analytical and explanatory variable. The author argues for a rejection of the use of the terms "race" and "race relations," and to suggest that "racialization" is the more appropriate process structuring social relations.

Muddles in the "Race" Language

In everyday and academic discourse, the terms "race" and "ethnicity" are used interchangeably and add to much confusion over which is "race" and which is "ethnic" in the designation of populations. In the US tradition, the terms "race," "ethnic," and "minorities," have been employed throughout as analytical categories to describe and "explain" these groups. In academic discourse, this usage is exemplified by the works of both the ethnicity-based theorists and the race-centered writers. For example, the ethnicity-based theorists use the term "ethnic" to refer to the early European immigrants who became "American" after one or two generations, and who had the opportunity of equal participation in the social and civic life of "mainstream" population. Thus they regard Blacks, Asians, Latinos and Native Americans as "ethnic" groups based on the belief that through assimilation, these groups are able to achieve the same integration as whites.[1]

Within this debate, the term "racial" has been defined by the race-centered theorists to refer to a group of people who share certain phenotypical characteristics. "Racial" groups are assumed to have experienced a history of persistent and systematic exclusion, subordination, and discrimination in American society even after several generations. Thus, Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, like African Americans, are defined as "racial" groups, based on their history of exclusion, subordination, and discrimination.[2]

However, no sustained intellectual engagement has taken place on this debate, and no uniform consensus has been reached on the definitions of these terms. Most academic writing and printed media use one or the other or both terms, without clarity and without specificity. University courses, text book titles, and conference

panels are replete with titles such as "Race and Ethnic Studies," "Race and Ethnic Relations," "Perspectives on Race and Ethnic Issues" and the "intersection of 'Race,' 'Ethnicity,' 'Class' and 'Gender.'"

This muddle in the academic language is also reflected in official governmental practices. The 1980 Census, for example, listed fifteen groups in the "race" item in the questionnaire: White, Black, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian, and Other. Even though the Census Bureau claimed that the concept "race" as used did not denote any clear cut scientific definition of biological stock,[3] by categorizing groups as "races," the Census Bureau was in fact suggesting that *each of the listed groups including "whites" were "races"* (my emphasis). The classification of peoples of Mexico, Central America and Latin America is even more complicated. Because the Census uses a "white" and "black" category, Latinos were moved back and forth from a "white" or "ethnic" ("persons of Spanish mother tongue") category in the 1930 Census to a "black" or "racial" ("other nonwhite") category in the 1940 Census. In the 1950 and 1960 Censuses, the ambiguous category of "white persons of Spanish surname" was used. In 1970, the classification was changed to "white persons of Spanish surname and Spanish mother tongue." Then in 1980, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, along with other Central and Latin Americans with diverse national origin, came to be classified as "non-white Hispanic."[4]

In the 1990 Census, populations in the United States were again categorized by "race." The four major "races" were white, black, American Indian (including Eskimo or Aleut), and Asian or Pacific Islander. Data on the Hispanic origin population were based on a separate question, and thus "Hispanic persons may be of any race."[5]

In media discourse on social relations, "race" was again the major framework. A special *Los Angeles Times* report on the riots was entitled "Separate Lives: Dealing with Race in L.A." The problem in Los Angeles was one of "race relations." And a poll on residents' impressions of Los Angeles and the spring's event was framed in terms of,

> "How would you rate race relations in Los Angeles?"
> "Do you think race relations in Los Angeles are getting better or worse?" "Would you approve or disapprove if someone in your family married a person of a different racial or ethnic background?"[6]

This dominant framework employed in academic debate and public discourse on social relations has been identified as the "race relations" paradigm by Robert Miles in R*acism and Migrant Labour: A Critical Text,* (1982).[7] His critique of the "race relations" paradigm together with a significant number of other British and European

writers, have further advanced the theoretical shift away from this paradigm. Yet, this literature is largely unknown to American writers. It is in response to the need to move beyond the old "race" language that Miles's argument against the use of "race" and "race relations" will be described in substantial detail here. Multiple strands of the scholarship in the post-"race relations" paradigm are not the object of this paper. What follows is Miles's discussion of the sociological construction of the notion of "race," its theoretical extension to "race relations," and its reproduction in scholarly analysis.

"Race" as a Sociological Construct

Central to Miles's work is the notion of the generation and the reproduction of the idea of "race" as a social and ideological construct. Miles noted that the meaning of the term "race" has changed over time. It used to mean lineage or common descent when it first entered the English language in the sixteenth century.[8] With European colonial expansion and colonization, contacts with non-Europeans increased. This contact was structured by competition for land, introduction of private property, demand for labor, and the perceived obligation of conversion to Christianity. Miles posited that European ideas of the foreigners were based on the representation of the Others generated in the context of a stronger European economic and military force. During the eighteenth century, with the scientific assertion of the existence of different biologically constituted races, the term "race" came to mean discrete categories of human beings, based on phenotypical differences, and ranked with psychological and social capacities. This idea of "race" as discrete and fixed subdivisions of the human species, each with variable cultural characteristics and capacities for civilization, was later refuted with the emergence of the science of genetics. However, this scientific discourse on "race" did not replace earlier conception of the Other: the idea of "races" as biological types persisted even though proven false by the weight of scientific evidence. Why isn't the scientific reconception of "race" not reflected in everyday discourse? Miles maintained that an understanding of the continuing reference to phenotypcial features suggested that "factors other than the development of biological sciences were fundamental to the formulation of the notion of 'race' and its continuing reproduction." This use of "race" to refer to phenotypical variation, which is given social recognition, which in turn structured social interaction, is what Miles referred to as the "social construction of race."

Therefore, based on this historical understanding of the concept of "race," Miles argues that "race" cannot be used descriptively to classify people in society nor can it be used for either analytical or explanatory purposes; "race" itself is an ideological category that requires explanation. Thus, Miles has carefully avoided the ambiva-

lent employment of the term "race" except when he refers to its use by other writers. Following Miles, several British writers have also carefully placed the term "race" within inverted commas.[9]

From "Race" to "Race Relations": A Conceptual Transition

In extending his argument against the use of "race," Miles argues that the conceptual transition from the social category of "race" to "race relations" is based on the legitimation given to the belief that "human species consists of several distinct 'races.'" This "race relation" is then objectified as an area of study. Thus, he stated,

> the very term "race relations" can only mean that "races" have social relations, one with another. So, for relations to occur, "race" must exist. Indeed, they "exist" in the sense that human agents believe them to exist, but uncritically to reproduce and accord analytical status to these beliefs is nevertheless to legitimate that process by giving it "scientific" status.[10]

Conceptual Conflation: The Use of "Race" as Analytical and Explanatory Categories

Miles's unequivocal rejection of the category "race" as having any descriptive and analytical value allowed us to ask a number of questions pertaining to its use in the United States: First, what descriptive purpose might the classification of people as "Asian," "Hispanic Non-white," "Black" and "white" "races" serve? Second, what purpose might a classification of populations by "races" serve? Third, how was the notion of "race" employed in social analysis?

To ascertain the descriptive value of a group of people classified as "Asian/Pacific," I will first examine the composition of the population labeled as such, as is the practice in the Census. Asian/Pacific American in fact comprises the multitudes of people whose ancestral countries span half the globe between Longitude 60° east in the western reaches of Pakistan, to Longitude 120° west in the eastern reaches of Polynesia. This region comprises a most diverse human population. The population classified as Asian/Pacific American includes at least fourteen distinct groups: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai, Cambodian, Hmong, Pakistani, Indonesian, Hawaiian, and people from the Pacific Islands of Micronesia and Polynesia. Each of these groups is further divided along linguistic, dialectal, religious, class and generational differences. The latter refers to the number of generations a population has been in the United States. Finally, a group of Asian/Pacific Americans, the Hawaiians, are not even foreigners at all, but are native to the United States. Yet, these divergent groups are enshrined in the US Census as one single "racial" group: Asian/

Pacific Americans. If geographical contiguity is the criteria for categorizing Asian/Pacific Americans, absent from this category are the European Australians, New Zealanders and white Russian immigrants in this country. Obviously, criteria other than geographical boundary within Asia plays a part in the categorization.

The use of racial characteristics, either real or imagined, as grounds for inclusion and exclusion of immigrants to the United States is well-known to ethnic studies scholars. The federal law of 1790, for instance, had reserved naturalized citizenship to "whites" only. It provided the basis for excluding Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian and Korean immigrants from citizenship. When confronted with contradictions in the "whites only" provision, "racial" justifications were invented to preserve "white" hegemony. The denial of Asian Indian immigrants from naturalized citizenship serves to illustrate the point. Earlier this century, Asian Indian immigrants in the United States were recognized by students of ethnology of that period as Caucasians, the same "racial" stock as whites, but the Indians were "not white," and were therefore denied naturalized citizenship. The argument put forth by the Asiatic Exclusion League was that "the people of the United States were 'cousins,' far removed from the Hindus of the northwest provinces." The "forefathers" of white Americans "pressed to the west, in the everlasting march of conquest, progress and civilization," while "the forefathers of the Hindus went east and became enslaved, effeminate, caste-ridden and degraded." The Western Aryans became the "Lord of Creation," while the Eastern Aryans became the "slaves of Creation." [11]

The use of "color logic" to exclude "non-whites" was clearly to "confer the privilege of citizenship upon a class of persons."[12] In this and other instances, the resistance and the challenges arising from the subjugated populations' protests against unjust laws and practices came to be referred to as "race relations." For most sociological writings in "racial and ethnic studies", the effort was to identify the violence against immigrant and minority populations, the historical and social structures in which "race relations" predominate, and the assimilability of immigrant and minority populations. Thus, it is not surprising that colonial situations are the locations where "race relations" are to be found.[13] In the multiethnic urban situations of today, it is again the "race relations" between whites and blacks, blacks and Koreans, Cambodians, and Latinos, and so on, that came to dominate social discourse, and not the underlying protest against problems of exclusion by one group on the other.

The use of "race" as an analytical and explanatory category is most extensive in social analysis. Ubiquitous sociological statements in the newspapers such as "Crime: 1 of 4 Young Blacks in Jail or in Court Control,"[14] and "Blacks Can Face a Host of Trying Conditions in Getting Mortgages,"[15] are examples of the use of "race" as analyti-

cal and explanatory categories. It is not surprising also to see comparisons between "Asians" and "Latinos" on high school test scores, "Asians and whites" on college admissions, "blacks" and "Latinos" on employment opportunities, and so on. Each of these "racial" groups is then given determinate value in affecting the outcome of the sociological finding. To elaborate with another example from the newspaper, a special report in the *Orange County Register,* entitled "The Color of Justice," made the following claims: "A white, black, and a Hispanic are accused of the same crime. In California, the white person is more likely to get a light sentence or get off scot-free" and "race plays a bigger part than money (in an accused's ability to win plea-bargaining)."[16] In this formulation, "race" is conceived as an active agent, or a subject that in itself affects the criminal's court outcome. It is, however, not "race" that affects court decisions, for there is not such a real phenomenon. What affects court outcome is a decision by the judge, the jury, and the public defendant to plea-bargain or not to plea-bargain with the criminal defendant, on the basis of a belief about the supposed social correlates of a certain complex of physical attributes. It is that belief of the judge, the jury, and the public defendant or private attorney about their criminal defendants that warrants analysis as an instance of racism.

"Race Relations" or Racialization

The employment of the idea of "race" in structuring social relations should be more appropriately termed "racialisation." Writing in *Racism*, Miles refers to this alternative concept as

> Those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities. . . . The concept therefore refers to a process of categorisation, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically.[17]

Three characteristics are attached to the notion of racialization. First, "racialisation entails a dialectical process of signification. Ascribing a real or alleged biological characteristic with meaning to define the Other necessarily entails defining Self by the same criterion." Thus, "the African's 'blackness' reflected the European's 'whiteness'; these opposites were therefore bound together, each giving meaning to the other in a totality of signification." Second, the concept of racialization should take into account "the emergence of the idea of 'race' and its subsequent reproduction and application." Third, "the racialisation of human beings entails the racialization of the processes in which they participate and the structures and institutions that result." That is, in racialized societies, institutions

11

and political processes, both formal and informal, are necessarily also racialized. An example of a racialized society would include a political process where demands are made that certain "racial" groups be represented in position of power or be given special privileged status.[18] In the United States, this process is commonly known as the politics of entitlement, fought at city halls, and schools boards, and other offices for "equal representation" of the "races."

Racialization and Social Policy

The notion of "racialization" set forth in Miles's writing—the representation and definition of the Others based on the significa-tion of human biological characteristics—is particularly useful in understanding European American discourse on the non-European immigrants and natives alike. Until recently, discourse on Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans was largely dependent upon phenotypical representation and evalua-tion. Both color and physical appearance were given social signifi-cance. By reason of their color and physical features, these popula-tions were perceived as bearers of diseases, as endangering European American morals and "racial" purity. This discourse based on "race" provided the ideological context, in part, for the enactment of past restrictive immigration laws and discriminatory policies. Social policies towards Asians, for example, were codified as laws: the federal law of 1790 limited naturalized citizenship to "whites" only, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act singled out Chinese on a "racial" basis, the National Origins Act of 1924 totally prohibited Japanese immigration, while permitting an annual entry of 17,853 from Ireland, 5,802 from Italy, and 6,524 from Poland.[19]

Even though fewer phenotypical characteristics are employed in contemporary discourse of immigrant groups in formal legislative policies, the racialization process continues to inform many group practices and individual actions. I would include as instances of racialization in California the "hate crime" against minorities, the vandalism, "racial" slurs, and hateful mail directed at immigrant institutions, churches and individuals, and racialized code words such as "welfare queen," "Willie Horton," "immigrant," "illegal alien," "model minority," *inter alia*.

This process of racialization not only depended on defining others based on their skin color and other phenotypical characteristics, but also increasingly, cultural attributes. Six ethnographic examples from Los Angeles and Orange Counties in Southern California will serve to illustrate this racialization process taking place. This will form the basis for a discussion that is grounded in the multiple processes of racialization, declining economic position of the United

States, the indigenous populations' attempt at defining the local imagined community, and the formulation of social policies on immigrants today.

The first example occurred early in the spring of 1989. When a group of South Vietnamese military veterans from the city of Westminster in Orange County applied for a permit to hold a parade, the parade permit was denied. Justification given by the City Council was that the closing of a major street to traffic at the heels of another major festival would result in complaints from motorists. However, it was the remark of Councilman Frank Fry accompanying the denial that caused an outcry from the Vietnamese community. Councilman Fry told the military veterans, "If you want to be South Vietnamese, go back to South Vietnam!"[20]

Westminster, home to "Little Saigon" has the largest number of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Chinese businesses. There have been many incidents of resentment and opposition to the Vietnamese presence. Letters were received by the City Council opposing the granting of licenses to Asian businesses and freeway signs directing motorists to "Little Saigon" have been repeatedly defaced.[21] Vietnamese Chinese real estate developers from Westminster were barred from an adjacent city for fear that they might change the character of the downtown landscape.[22]

The second anti-immigrant incident selected here involved the beating of a college-bound Chinese American youth by a group of "skinheads" in Fullerton in Orange County. In the summer of 1991, while the youth was talking with his white friends at a park, they were questioned about their views on race and then beaten; the Chinese American youth was badly bludgeoned and his friends suffered bruises. The "skinheads" were later arrested and prosecuted. While the case was going to court, members of the Fullerton Chinese American Cultural Association wrote their political representatives to ask for a speedy trial. The response from their congressional representative, former Congressman Dannemeyer, was that the attack was the result of the Chinese American's refusal to "adopt local custom, language and culture." It was the group's promotion of its cultural identity—the "hyphenated Americans" (Chinese Americans, African Americans, and the like)—that brought on the attack.[23]

In another anti-immigrant instance, a Japanese American Community Center in Norwalk, Los Angeles County, was vandalized and spray-painted with "Japs Go Home" and other hateful writings on the walls in November 1991. The center had been in existence for sixty years and was used for language classes and cultural activities.[24]

In the next example, a Chinese family living in an apartment in Alhambra in Los Angeles County was told to remove Chinese New

Year decorations over the family doorway that the family had put up for their Chinese New Year celebration. The Housing Board's argument was that the paper banner violated the housing code.

In another anti-immigrant gesture, the County Fire Departments of Hacienda Heights in San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles County and Garden Grove in Orange County repeatedly threatened two Buddhist temples with closure and fines because of "fire hazard," "parking code" and other violations as a result of complaints from neighbors. These two temples, one grand and one modest, were both serving the growing Asian populations in the region; the Hacienda Heights temple serving Chinese Buddhists, and the Garden Grove temple serving Vietnamese Buddhists.[25]

The final example selected is the banning of vendors from the streets of Los Angeles, and Anaheim and Santa Ana, in Orange County. The street vendors, mostly of Mexican and Central American origin, sell anything from oranges to flowers to stuffed animals. Los Angeles has an existing ordinance banning street vending, whereas Anaheim and Santa Ana are adopting new ordinances to ban street vending. Complaints and charges against street vending claimed that the vendors create a "disgusting" look of a "Third World" city.[26]

To understand current antipathy towards certain social groups, I would argue that it is the result of categorization of immigrants and foreigners based on their physical features (skin color, primarily) and cultural characteristics. Past signification of immigrants, by ascribing them with real or alleged biological or cultural characteristics, are available as part of American culture for reinterpretation, given the existence of certain stimulus. Thus, the targeting of a Chinese American youth for attack is an instance where the youth's physical difference was signified by the group of "skinheads." As in all instances of "racial hate crime," the victims are targeted solely for their phenotypical difference. Indeed, this signification based on what Takaki labeled "racial uniform" pre-dated the Chinese presence in America.[27]

Former congressman Dannemeyer's conservative response to the Chinese American Cultural Association represented his failure to see the action of the "skinheads" as violence against signified and racialized groups. Instead, he perceived the Chinese Americans as promoting cultural separatism, and he believed it was this "hyphenated-American" identity that was causing divisions within American society. The attack on expressions of "cultural" practices noted earlier—the prohibition of a Chinese family from using Chinese New Year decorations, the Vietnamese veterans from holding a parade and the Mexican vendors from selling in the streets of Los Angeles, Anaheim and Santa Ana—are attacks on those who are perceived as

different. The presence of the immigrants and their cultural activities are regarded as leading to the balkanization of American society.

In the contemporary US, the "stimulus" that leads to the "renewed" attack on Asian immigrants can, in part, be attributed to the decline of the United States as an economic power, particularly its economic position vis-a-vis Japan. Much of the political debate on "What's wrong with the economy?" focuses on Japan's unfair trade practices and acquisition of American companies and landmarks. Negative imagery of Japan in the form of "Japan bashing" is articulated by both the indigenous population and the politicians, and often reproduced through political legitimation.

Violence against racialized populations can also be seen as attempts to define the character of the local imagined community. The vandalism of the Japanese American Community Center is an instance of defining Japanese Americans as not part of the local Norwalk community. The representation that Buddhist temples are "problems," and that city streets with Mexican street vendors are creating a "Third World" appearance are indeed local attempts at checking the erosion of a perceived American imagined community.[28]

An examination of the social policy towards immigrants and other minorities suggests that they are in the form of pronouncements and ordinances made at city council meetings, decisions and enforcements made by housing boards, fire marshals, and those who have power over the daily routines of minorities, based on the complaints of the local populations. The sentiments expressed in these pronouncements and formulations are widely and broadly shared by a cross-section of the population, including politicians in high politics. The creation and the sustaining of antipathy towards minorities is an attempt by politicians to win credit from their constituencies. They must "constantly appeal to, or create, a public 'common sense' which supports their legislative program, including policies that sustains inequality."[29] For instance, in a campaign ploy of the 1988 presidential campaign, the image of a black criminal walking out of prison was used to decry the political opponent's leniency towards prisoners, and the images of a black hand taking away a white hand's paycheck was deployed in a conservative Republican's bid to reverse affirmative action practices. This signification of African Americans as the "problem" in American social and political discourse is articulated by politicians in high office, and is reproduced to reinforce a common sense notion of the representation of African Americans. Antiracist social policy contextualized with an understanding of these interconnections demands vastly different strategies from those calling for multicultural celebration.

CONCLUSION

To engage in a serious discussion of "race," we must reject the employment of "race" as an analytical and explanatory category, and the notion of social relations between groups as "race relations." Instead, drawing on a recent trend in British scholarship, I argue for a paradigmatic shift to examining racialization as the process structuring social relation. The significance of employing this theoretical approach is its application in examining racialization within and between groups: for instance, the racialization of recent Southeast Asian immigrants by more established Asian Americans, the racialization of Central and Latin Americans by Mexican Americans, and the racialization of one ethnic group by another ethnic group, regardless of "color." The paradigmatic shift would also broaden the scope of analysis to include the changing political economy, immigration, nation formation, and the rights and responsibilities of participants in this "community of fate."

Analysis of racialization also exposes the mechanisms by which instances of racism are created and reproduced. This will redirect antiracist social policy from cultural celebrations to mutual representation and signification.

NOTES

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[17]Miles, 1989, 75.

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[23]Letter from the Office of Congressman Dannameyer to the Chinese American Cultural Association, 5 November 1991.

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[25]"New Buddhist Complex Fails to Find Serenity in the Suburbs," *Los Angeles Times* 5 March 1989; "Garden Grove, Buddhist Monk Go Eye-to-Eye," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1989.

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[27]Takaki, 1989, 13; Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

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