PSYCHOANALYSIS AND RACISM

Book review
Clarke, S (2003) **Social theory, psychoanalysis and racism.** Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 0-333-96118-8 pbk. Pages ix + 198.

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It is always nice, in these classless times, to use an allusion to Marx to get us going! Surprisingly it is *not* the spectre of communism that it is haunting our time, but the spectre of racism. This seems true whether one is talking about the developed world of "civilised" Europe, or the new democracy of post-apartheid South Africa. Racism presents itself as a problem to be explained by social and psychological theory, as well as an urgent political issue to be tackled by both governments and ordinary citizens. Sadly, racism structures too much of our social worlds, and infects the inner recesses of our psyches. And the ubiquity of racism finds expression in Simon Clarke's (2003) rather bleak conclusion "that we are all inherently racist, and that only sustained and critical self-reflection can move us on from this position" (p170).

This is a somewhat unusual stance for a sociologist to take, and he admits as much when he says that many of his colleagues will probably "scream biological reductionism" in relation to this remark. I don't think it is biological reductionism that is at stake, and given the general psychoanalytic trajectory of his argument throughout this book, it seems more a case of psychological reductionism. Either way, I would want to argue that it is *social life* that is deeply embedded in the racist practices that are part of our socio-historic relations, the institutions of the economy, and the everyday practices of social reproduction. The simple point that I would want to start from is that society precedes us as individuals, and hence it is how social life and social institutions form us as "racist beings" that needs to be explained.

In some ways this is how Clarke starts his book: "There are two central themes in this book which I want to explore and map out for the reader. First, the relationship between sociological thought and psychoanalytic theory, and second, how we may use these ideas to gain a better understanding of racism and ethnic hatred." (p1). The opening chapters take us through the many debates about the differing understandings of a complex of terms: "race", racism, ethnicity, culture, and difference. Clarke concludes chapter 3 ("New racism(s) for old") with what he calls his preferred definition of racism, following Joel Kovel who "describes racism as the maltreatment of people because of their 'otherness'" (p39). More precisely, Clarke (2003:41) writes: "I have defined racism

as both the *physical* and *psychological* maltreatment of people because of their otherness, and hinted at certain psychological mechanisms such as *containment* and *projection* which may give us a better understanding of racism and exclusion."

"Race" is most often a marker for physical differences among people – people of different colour, for instance – and it is the otherness and fear of these differences that are "contained" in projections that make up racist exclusion and ethnic hatred. As Adams (1996:12) rather pertinently notes: "... it is cultural categories, not natural categories like color – ethnic, not 'racial' categories – that provide abundant evidence of significant psychical differences. Counterintuitively, it is the low informational value of a category like color that enables racists to endow it with such high projective value." An investigation of the *history* of these "racial encounters", where difference is (was) judged negatively as inferior and worthy of our hatred and resentment, would seem to be the turning point where the "potentially neutral" psychological acknowledgement of difference becomes (became) associated with a political project of domination. Clarke in part deals with this in his interesting discussion of racism and modernity (chapter 4). Relying on Zygmunt Bauman's (1989) seminal text on the Jewish holocaust, **Modernity and the holocaust**, Clarke implicates the persistence and sophistication of racist practices in our time as *integrally* a modern project. As both Bauman and Clarke point out this is not to say that modernity "causes" racism, but rather that modernity "was a necessary condition in that it provided *the administrative and technological tools and the ethos* of scientific progress" (Clarke, 2003:47 – emphases added). For example, the long duration and "success" of apartheid racism would have been unimaginable without the administrative, technological and ideological advances of modernity.

However, as evocative as Bauman's ideas are, and especially Clarke's important discussion of Bauman's notion of "the stranger" (neither friend nor foe) as a useful metaphor for thinking about racism, I would have welcomed a more detailed discussion of the *social history* of racism and modernity. Modernity is not a neutral concept, and I am not suggesting that Clarke thinks it is, but there is very little discussion about colonialism, and the political history of European economic exploitation and expansionism. Given the rather brutal histories of colonial dispossession, and the consequent racist oppression, modernity strikes me as a rather anodyne term for the capitalist exploitation that was Europe's "civilising" and economic mission! In short, the history of social relations contributory to racism is much longer than can be adequately captured by a discussion of modernity.

The history of racism seems central in linking social theoretical accounts of racism with psychological and psychoanalytic accounts. The way I understand the persistence and maintenance of racist practices is through explaining how our psychological and emotional life "so easily" *becomes* attached to (pre-existing) negative social judgements of otherness and difference. The ordinary developmental position from psychoanalysis is that children (from infancy) have both positive and negative experiences to cope, and hence "classify" these as "good" and "bad". In the Kleinian idiom that Clarke emphasises in his psychoanalytic discussion of racism, we are talking about good breast and bad breast experiences, or internalisations and introjections. The child's (infant's) internal world is constituted by good (nurturing) and bad (attacking) internal object relations. Depending on which Kleinian theorist one follows this unconscious *splitting* is both (or rather simultaneously) a response to the child's internal and external

world. And one of the unconscious psychological mechanisms of dealing with bad internal objects is through *projection* and *projective identification*. Clarke gives a very thorough, albeit quite complex, account of the processes of, and differences between projection and projective identification (chapter 9), and opts for the concept of *projective identification* as the preferred analytic tool to tool to take us further in understanding the unconscious dimensions of racism. On these two complex and important psychoanalytic terms Clarke (2003:146-147) distinguishes their sense as follows: "Whereas projection is a relatively straightforward process in which we attribute our own affective states to others, for example we may feel depressed and view our colleagues in the workplace as being miserable, or blame others for our mistakes. Projective identification involves a deep split, a ridding of unpalatable parts of the self *into* rather than *onto*, someone else. Projection *per se* may not be damaging, as the recipient of paranoid thoughts may be blissfully unaware as such. Projective identification, however, involves forcing of such feelings into the recipient and is therefore interactional and communicative."

This is well and good, and thus far tells us about "normal" intrapsychic and psychological development. What needs far more explanation is the shift from projecting, or even projectively identifying, my bad bits, not *into* my little brother, or mother for that matter, but instead *onto* and *into* the *dirty* Jewish boy next door, or the *smelly* black girl down the street, or those *noisy* Indians (coolies) who live on the corner! This seems to be the challenge for social theory, and that is, how do we link, what are the *mediating* mechanisms, the processes of *socialisation*, that "allow" or facilitate the "patterning" (for want of a better word) of our *ordinarily* constituted inner worlds, *onto* and *into* the (already) *negatively* positioned others of our social worlds? In short, what I am suggesting is that there seemed to be a jump, a leap, between the psychoanalytic theories being explained by Clarke, and *how precisely* they integrate as part of the *social theory* of racism.

I suppose this is the work that has to be done – both theoretically and in the empirical analyses of racism and racist practices – by all of us concerned to undermine the ubiquity of racism in our society. I would of course differ with Clarke that we are all inherently racist, and rather re-phrase this as our *social world* is *inherently*, or more accurately *historically*, racist. This re-phrasing gives more hope to the possibilities of changing the structuring of our social worlds in less racist ways. Simon Clarke's interesting and engaging book at least gives us enough to work with in plotting the importance of psychoanalytic ideas in understanding the persistence and destructiveness of racism.

REFERENCE.

Adams, M V (1996) **The multicultural imagination: "Race", color, and the unconscious.** London & New York: Routledge.