

ITS RACISM WOT DUNNIT

Some Notes on Theory's Other Scene

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper was to look at some of the underlying models which informed explanations of racism widely held in the anti racist movement. I was not so much concerned with the way racism was theorised in academic circles, as with how explanations were deployed in the heat of argument in informal political debate. There is of course a link between the two spheres. The notion of academic debates as taking place within a speech community of perfectly informed and rational peers is a rather nice but impossible ideal; academic debates especially on race may be conducted within a surface etiquette of rational discourse, but are as overdetermined by personal and political animosities and allegiances as any other kind of debate. So I began by examining what academic theories and common sense understandings might have in common. And from look at the unconscious effect with racist ideology itself may exert on the discourses which take it as their object of critique and political intervention. This was moving onto the rather more dangerous ground of exploring what racist and anti racist discourse might have in common.

## TELEOLOGICAL TALES

My starting point is the fact that theoretical discourses are traversed by narrative structures which form a hidden thread running through the argument. Whereas in many cases this is only one dimension, albeit an important one, in the case of what we might call **theoretical ideology** it constitutes the main organising principle. For here a particular epistemology is subsumed within a rhetoric of special pleading for a chosen reference group (the black community, the proletariat, the intelligentsia, women, the professions). Such groups are constructed as the bearers of privileged knowledge or agency, by virtue of their social location. As such they are invested with a unique role as makers of history, or as critics of society. This is above all a narrative role, a role within a storyline which is unfolded as a teleology, that is a narrative moving towards

a preordained conclusion, which structures the logic of preceding events.

Within this framework, in other words, societies or individuals are made to develop according to certain 'laws of motion' which are inscribed in their very mode of being. It is because certain groups are held to exemplify the working of these laws that their structural positions or social attributes are held to possess a special explanatory power, or to equip them with a special 'totalising' consciousness.

Teleologies produce stable narratives in which the meaning of any conjuncture can be read off from the 'stage' it is supposed to represent in the dynamic unfolding of some ultimate and pre-defined goal. This is the diachronic, or historicist version. Alternatively the nature of any institution is read off from its underlying role in reproducing the social structure of which it is a part. This is the functionalist or synchronic version. Either form of explanation acts as an insurance policy taken out against the contingency of actions and events. Their outcome is guaranteed always and already to be inscribed in the process of their unfolding, according to certain overarching principles of causality.

How does this work in the case of theories of racism? Perhaps the dominant account still belongs to the whig interpretation of history. This is a story of continuing progress, from the barbarity of slavery to the enlightenment of the contemporary race relations industry. The onward march of reason and tolerance is led by their 'natural' standard bearers, the European intelligentsia, and its various allies, who wage an unremitting battle against the irrational prejudices of both masses and traditional elites. The emancipation of the poor and oppressed is thus made part of a civilising process, which is often seen to be conditional on

assimilating their demands to the discourses of humanism and rationalism.

This is a fairy story version of race relations and it may reflect the hubris or wishful thinking of an intelligentsia which sets up its own preferred cultural practices up as a referential model for everyone else. Increasingly been challenged by a rival account which might be called a 'teleology of the oppressed'. Here things do not get better and better, they go from bad to worse. The onward march of racism is traced through historical time and institutional space, from some presumed point of origination which defines its essential character, to a present conjuncture which is the summation of its effects. This narrative is often linked to another in which the victims of racism trace their own onward march, as an epic journey of emancipation from bondage, in which they alone carry the banner of human progress. These narratives can be read as two sides of the same story. The identity of Jews, Blacks etc is made to depend on its inscription within an unfolding logic of racial oppression, which in turn is specified in terms of its formative effects upon their experience.

At one level then racism tends to be read as a kind of horrific soap opera in which the surface incidents are ever changing, but the underlying plot remains constant, generating one episode of discrimination after another, punctuated by atrocities which have no end even though paradoxically the final, cataclysmic outcome is never in doubt: for it will be the fire next time, the Armageddon which puts an end to chronic injustice, once and for all. Past and present struggles are transformed into 'epiphanies', special moments in which the conditions of oppression are transcended and which prefigure the ultimate goal of Liberation.

Such triumphalist narratives can be empowering in the symbolic sense that they invest ethnic minorities with special powers of knowledge and action. They break the signifying chains which have so often bound the project of emancipation to a strategy of cultural assimilation. Yet this radical autonomy of means and ends is itself dependent upon a circumscribed and self confirming discourse of origins and destinies. It is like turning to the end of the story before you begin reading it, to find out if the baddies got their just deserts, or the good guys won. Or as one of my students once put it to me, ironically, when I was still preaching this gospel, 'I Know, Sir, it was racism what dunnit'.

Why are 'teleological tales' so central to the common sense of anti-racism? I suspect that part at least of the explanation lies in the pressures which structures of racism exert on the forms of resistance to it. I am thinking here of two distinct but linked operations which constitute racism as a discursive practice.

The first is a totalising strategy which dissolves every distinction into the all inclusive distinction of race :for example you are always and already defined as Jewish irrespective of age, class, gender, culture, or any other feature which might place you in a category with non-Jews. The other is a strategy of discrimination which magnifies and exploits every kind of social distinction( of wealth, culture status, etc) to be found within a designated subject population and gives it a racist connotation as signifying certain 'exclusive traits'.

Used together these two strategies comprise that peculiar language game known as a double bind. Thus if you are Jewish and working class, your Jewishness is used to disqualify you from membership of labour organisations; but equally if you are Jewish and poor, your poverty is made to signify the essentially parasitic nature of your 'race' on the host

community. How has the power of this system of classification been dealt with by those who have been victims of its perverse games of inclusion and exclusion?

Perhaps the main defence has been to construct an imagined community of resistance which cuts across all internal divisions by emphasising the levelling effects of racist oppression. In this way diaspora communities are able to subsume all their disparate histories within a single meta-narrative which irons out all the 'wrinkles'. This may take the form of a genealogy which enables the present generation to see its own experience prefigured in the struggles of its ancestors, or to trace an unbroken line of descent to certain common codes and practices which define its 'roots'. Alternatively it may provide a means of translating atrocity stories, from simple acts of individual testimony, into public iconographies, monuments in the living museum of collective memory. In either case another chapter is added to a 'founding text', a text which both authorises its own dissemination, and gives everything which is recounted in it the imprimatur of a special truth: this is the word of a chosen people.

Here we can see the influence of religious ideologies in furnishing common sense explanations of racial intolerance and persecution. What often begins with a vision of racism as a global force of evil often becomes focussed down into a conspiracy directed against a chosen people in a way which invests their suffering and sacrifices with a special redemptive meaning. The principle of salvation may be theological, as in the case of religious fundamentalism; or it may be purely secular, as with ethnic nationalism; or it may involve some combination of the two. But in every case the populist element is reinforced by a particular practice of reading and writing the founding text which stresses the prescriptive or predictive value of an elective destiny.

This religious dimension is conserved as a subtext in many political ideologies, where it furnishes particular articles of faith in the self emancipation of ethnic minorities, or in their special role as makers of their own history. In this context Marxism furnishes its own distinctive teleology of the oppressed, which can easily be transposed from class to nation or 'race'. Here the myth of the founding text is most clearly articulated to that of the founding fathers, whose word lays down the laws of a history in which women and children do not count.

These narratives do not work only to unite across space and time. They play a vital role in glossing over discontinuities in the here and now. Where a minority within an ethnic minority successfully pursues a strategy of contest mobility, and rises to positions of relative power and affluence, the teleologies of roots radicalism can reassert the organic links binding those who are moving onwards and upwards to those still in the ghetto. The racial success story turns those who have made it into narrative role models for the next generation, who are pledged to follow in their footsteps 'one day'. The elision between the onward march of the struggle against racism and the upward mobility of those who lead it, with its easy equation between individual success and collective emancipation has proved one of the more effective seductions offered by western democracies. It enables those who enter the professional middle class to avoid the worst traps of assimilation while disavowing the material advantages which now separate them from their erstwhile peers.

In such ways teleological tales of race and racism reinforce the imagined community of resistance at those points where divisions of class, gender or ethnicity threaten to break through. They ease the pain of lived contradictions, furnishing missing links between origins and destinies, stitching together scattered histories into a singular

totalising consciousness of what it means to be Black or Muslim, Palestinian or Jew.

The story lines which are woven together in this way are often spellbinding. Their telling and retelling relay important principles of hope rooted in political and moral certainties about the outcome of struggle. But do they really cauterise the wounds of historical separation and loss? Or do they merely invite us to count and compare our scars? Do these theoretical ideologies provide a strategic grasp of racism, or do they raise expectations which they cannot fulfill?

#### LANGUAGE GAMES

I shall try to uncover some of the theoretical assumptions and rhetorical devices at work in 'common sense' explanations of racism. The following examples are typical of the sort of comments which were made. All the speakers, were active in antiracist campaigns.

STATEMENT A : Racism as Institutionalised False  
Consciousness

**:Britain is an intrinsically racist society...its institutionalised...it runs right through everything like letters in a stick of rock. You've only got to look at history...slavery which led into colonialism which developed into full blown imperialism, right on up to the present day immigration policies. And now Mrs Thatcher comes along and tells us we've got to return to Victorian values. As if they've ever been left behind as regards the treatment of black people! Obviously a lot of this racism has seeped down from the top; for example the police are part of a racist legal system so you've got to expect them to hold those views. Its the only way they can go around harassing and criminalising black kids and think they're doing a good job. They're complaining because blacks are fighting back - that's all. As for the white kids on the estate, they experience the immediate effects- unemployment, bad housing, but they're in no position to understand or tackle the actual underlying causes. Society tells them they're rubbish, because they cant find jobs, but it also tells them that they are better than the blacks. So its not surprising**

they draw the racist conclusions- the blacks are getting jobs, housing etc at their expense; and so they become fodder for the National Front.

STATEMENT B : Racism as Irrational Prejudice

:Racism poisons a lot of childrens minds- they grow up in an environment with all these images around them, in comics, newspapers,TV, films,plus everything they hear from the family or friends - they just cannot help taking it in. So they grow up just assuming that whites are the goodies and blacks are the baddies and pass the same stereotypes onto their children.Its not their fault, they just don't know any better.As a teacher I try to do what I can, but in a lot of cases you come up against a brick wall with a lot of racist graffitti on it !The boys are the worst, especially if they're in gangs like the ones here. They seem to think that they've got to prove how manly they are .As for the police, they seem to think and behave in much the same way. I should imagine that the police force attracts people who have got particular hang ups about race.They're hardly likely to have the most tolerant or liberal attitudes are they ! We've got to hope that something will happen to make these people change their minds,but do leopards ever change their spots?

STATEMENT C :Racism as White Power

:From a black perspective you're up against a white power structure and it doesn't really matter whether you're being beaten up or abused by the police or by a group of kids on the street, it all comes down to the same thing - racism.If you go for a job,or a place to live and they send you away, its racism.Discrimination can be institutionalised and done procedurally as a matter of course behind the scenes or it can be out in the open with insults to your face but the result is the same.It's so many stabs in the back... Its the whole system which is fucking us up.That's why its only black people who will put an end to racism;our whole experience tells us that.

STATEMENT D :Racism as Class Rule

Racism just boils down to ruling class propaganda; you've only got to look at the popular tory press, churning it out day after day,all owned and controlled by capitalists who've got a direct interest in setting white workers against black and undermining the unity of the working class.The same papers are read by those kids and by the coppers who nick them, and basically they've both swallowed the same lies.

## STATEMENT E: Racism as Rational Self Interest

I think that's absolute nonsense. They're not as stupid as you make out. They're much more likely to be acting out of self interest. If you know that employers are using immigrants as cheap labour, and that they're being used to undercut your rates of pay, you're going to be against that. If you think that you're more likely to keep the price of your house high by keeping blacks out, then you'd be likely to go for that. And if you're a policeman on the beat, with an eye on promotion, what easier way to keep your arrest rate up than to go out and pull in some black kids off the street. Put it the other way round, what incentives have the police or the white working class got not to be racist?

These views do not, of course, exhaust the range of possible anti-racist positions. They all bear on actual realities, and contain elements of genuine insight. They may be deployed in a variety of circumstances to greater or lesser effect. For example the argument about institutionalised racism in Statement A can be used to counter denials about the existence and effects of racial inequalities. The denunciation of white racism in C is often used to make white people feel guilty about their structural or historical implication in the oppression of black people, and to force them to concede the legitimacy of black demands. In contrast the explanations of racism in terms of prejudice (B) or self interest (E) offer 'get out clauses' for whites and pinpoint specific types of motive or intent which may yield tactical priorities in anti-racist work. The identification of racism as a capitalist ploy (D) draws on a particular kind of political rhetoric which under some conditions may mobilise sections of the Left or labour movement in defence of the black community.

When they are cited in the context of discussion or debate, arguments about irrationality and its cultural transmission (B) are frequently used as a strategy of professional empowerment on the part of teachers, who define racism in such a way to privilege their own role, as guardians of

reason and enlightenment, in combatting it. Equally the enunciation of statements C and D may enable certain individuals to dominate the group in the name of an 'imagined community' of race or class which they either claim or are made by others to represent.

The pragmatics of all these statements- the ways they are used to produce certain effects on the people to whom they are addressed- are thus tied to their propaganda value for particular campaigns or positions, or to their instrumental value in furthering the personal or political objectives of particular individuals or groups. But however effective these arguments may be in political debate that does not make them necessarily adequate as theoretical explanations of racism.

I would argue that the persuasive force of these statements owes a great deal to their teleological format. In statement A the history of racism is rigidly determined by specific laws of development. Each phase is the outcome of the one before, whilst bearing the chronic imprint of an interior design. Equally when the argument goes synchronic it locates racism in the structure of society, as key to the way the whole functions. Statement C starts from the same premise, but is an even more explicit version of a teleology of the oppressed. Every instance of racism is explicable as the effect of a white power structure whose overthrow is the historical mission of black people. Rhetorically its strategy of reiteration attempts to unify different groups into a one political bloc by appealing to single unique source of oppression which they all share. Statements D and E offer alternative views of racism as goal directed behaviour on the part of groups who are held to have an intrinsic interest in pursuing these ends. Statement B seems to admit the greatest amount of contingency into the determination of outcomes, but nevertheless still falls back on a tendential law to explain how racism is reproduced.

The problem with all these formulations is that they are reductionist, that is they claim that complex and multi-faceted phenomena can be explained by a single, simple cause. These explanations are therefore limited, they tell only part of the story, and leave out any elements which do not fit into their chosen line of argument.

I would identify two main types of reduction in these examples. Statements A and C operate according to the procedures of radical holism. They explain the actions or attitudes of particular individuals or groups, and the meaning of particular events as the expression of an over-determining social totality - 'capitalist society', 'patriarchy', or 'the white power structure'- which supervenes in every case to determine the form of all social eventualities. The method therefore consists in extrapolating from concrete relations those properties which can be directly subsumed under these higher order abstractions; other features of the phenomena which cannot be treated in this way are ignored or denied any narrative or causal significance. Thus for example an account of some episode of social conflict is constructed in which the discrete personalities of the protagonists are regarded as irrelevant to the outcome, and they are treated simply as the bearers or supports of certain political ideologies or economic forces. In practice the effect is to dissolve the psychic into the social, and reify the social, turning it into an inert structural process. This tendency is present in most theories of 'institutionalised racism'.

The reductionism at work in the other three statements moves in exactly the opposite direction. This mode of explanation has been called methodological individualism. For it seeks to disaggregate all larger institutional and historical entities into the practices and relations of the individuals or groups who compose or inhabit them. Structural processes are rendered down into social or psychological properties,

which are then erected into totalising principles of explanation. All macro-level features which cannot be made intelligible in this way are regarded as being of secondary importance to the outcome of the story. For example B, D and E all assume that the outcomes of 'race relations' are explicable at a micro level, in terms of the intrinsic propensities of particular individuals or groups : working class children or parents (B), capitalists (D) or white residents or policemen (E). From this standpoint racism appears to be a matter of individual prejudice, which even when institutionalised is ultimately sustained by the attitudes and actions of racists. Propositions generated by this type of reduction do not necessarily agree about the conditions under which racist positions or practices are adopted , as witness the dispute between D and E.

The two types of explanation appear to have rather different political implications. Holistic theories suggest that racism cannot be eliminated without the radical transformation of state, economy and civil society - whether this entails the dismantling of key institutions or the overthrow of the power structure as a whole. Whether or not methodological individualists subscribe to such views, for them, the important point is that the levers of power are to be found in the hands of strategically placed individuals or groups. This does not make their account any less deterministic. Attitudes are still read off from attributes. What differs is that holists derive attributes from structural location, and individualists from relational properties. In one case what counts is the 'objective position' which 'white people' as such occupy within the 'racist power structure'; in the second it is their socialisation, or cultural traditions which racialises their relationships to blacks.

In practice then these explanatory models can be either antagonistic or complementary. Elements from both can be combined at the level of common sense argument. For

example, in the heat of debate it is not unusual to hear radically holistic denunciations of 'capitalism', or 'the racist power structure', which imply the need for their wholesale destruction followed, in the next breath, by appeals to specific individuals or groups to 'change the system' by virtue of their special predisposition to do so. There is a good example of this in Statement C's juxtaposition of 'the whole system' with the specific appeal to black people to put an end to racism.

Such switches between the two forms of reductionism have several payoffs. They get the argument out of a tight corner, and make for a less fatalistic scenario. This particular example (C) may conceivably make it easier for community activists to occupy positions of influence within existing power structures without being accused of 'selling out'. Above all, however it makes it possible to yoke together a generic model of racism as a global ideological form with a highly differentiated notion of its relational properties, in a way which makes its enactment or sufferance the monopoly of specific individuals or groups. Everything in a given society is made to explain its racism, and this racism, in turn is made to explain everything about a particular ethnic minority within it.

This practice of stitching together the two kinds of reduction into a single statement, which combines sweeping generalisation with particularistic reference is central to the discursive strategies which the Burnage Report criticised as 'moral, symbolic and doctrinaire' anti-racism. The double reduction formula is explicitly stated in the equation  $\text{Racism} = \text{Power} + \text{Prejudice}$  which was widely adopted within the movement during the 1980's.

It would be unfair to make too many demands of the statements I have quoted. They are examples of people thinking on their feet, trying to rationalise their responses to texts which 'hit below the belt'. The aim was

often to convince fellow students of the force of their own political perspective. My point is not to criticise the theoretical deficiencies of these statements. On the contrary I would argue that the embedded narratives I have identified here can also be found in more elaborated academic discourses.

#### THE GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE (OR THEORY'S OTHER SCENE)

In all the common sense explanations we have been looking at a certain relation to the object of knowledge and struggle is implied. It is often represented by the images and metaphors which are used to define racism by analogy. For example in the first of our sample statements, the persistence of racism is compared to a stick of lettered rock. What does this image signify in this context? A break which establishes a principle of continuity; a perpetual renewal of something which never goes away, a principle of compulsive repetition inscribed in a medium (writing) which is constitutive of difference. In all these ways the image turns racism into a perpetual seduction of the senses; anything which would interrupt this 'pleasure principle' or which would introduce a principle of discontinuity is rigorously excluded. This is a phantasy in which the graphic trace of a quite different object relation has been mapped onto the description of racism itself.

Just how difficult it is to be weaned away from this kind of primary process thinking can be seen from statement B. Here the principle of continuity is rooted directly in the process of generational transmission; racism is a poison which children take in, if not from their mother's breast, then at least from its mechanical substitutes. It is a dangerous substance which, once internalised, enters 'into the system' and attacks its defences. In many statements of this sort racism is likened to a contagious disease, which people catch off each other, or a cancer in the body politic, something which can only be stopped by either

eliminating its carriers, or protecting others, especially children, from contact with its 'breeding grounds'. Short of such drastic screening processes the 'germs of racism' will go on spreading.

In the third statement the power of racism operates everywhere, working now openly, now secretly to stab ethnic minorities in the back. The idea of a white conspiracy, between police, unemployed youth, employers, and the mass media all ganging up against black people relies on the premise that equivalent effects in disparate contexts must be produced by the same omnipresent agency or cause. From a psychoanalytic standpoint such paralogical constructions are modelled on an unconscious phantasy of a destructive phallus which 'penetrates everywhere', and is bent on 'fucking people up'. A rather similar phantasy informs the divide and rule thesis except that here the phallus wears a 'human' face: it is the ruling class whose power is both all pervasive, and works to sow the seeds of rivalry amongst those 'brothers and sisters' subjected to its tyrannical will.

The irruption of such primary process thinking has nothing to do with any 'psychopathology' or 'regression' on the part of those who engage in it. On the contrary its conditions of possibility are created by the way in which racism functions as an objective correlate of certain subject positions, which originate in, but are not confined to, the most fundamental ways of phantasising the Other. For example the conspiracy theory of racism makes sense of a particular social reality; it is because the police force which is supposed uphold justice and protect ethnic minorities from racist attacks, is itself responsible for so much of the violence and injustice suffered by black communities, that it is experienced as being part of the same oppressive system as the gang of white unemployed youth who are beating up people on the street. It is this kind of objective correspondence which makes it possible for the

experience of racism to become unconsciously connected to a paranoid phantasy of the phallus as an omnipresent power of destruction.

These are some of the ghosts in the machinery of cogitation, the inhabitants of Theory's 'other scene'. In analysing their effect, I have already stressed the way teleologies of the oppressed tie a kind of umbilical chord between where racism is felt to be coming from, and where those who are struggling against it are at. Such a linkage is all the more seductive because of the unconscious force which racist discourse itself exerts. For this is above all a discourse which ties a congenital link between origins and destinies, and draws on images of birth and blood, the functions of the body and sexual reproduction, kinship and filiation, to do so.

It is not surprising then that such symbolism should unconsciously echo or evoke those elementary structures of representation through which the child first learns to know its place in the world, or that these should be reproduced in the way racism is itself conceptualised. But is there a special internal relation between the racist imaginary and these forms of phantasy?

When Freud was asked what he thought about racism he referred to it, half ironically, as a narcissism of minor differences.(41)But perhaps this is indeed a case of a truth spoken in jest.For as a myth of origins, racism predicates its perverse ideology of inheritance precisely on a narcissistic model of identity,a model which both disavows difference and fetishises its smallest effect. For what defines the Master Race is above all a body ( and a body politic) of immaculate conception,one which gives birth to itself and reproduces its pure origin identically over time and space without recourse to any 'copula'. What is ideal about this body is that it is complete in itself;it

lacks nothing; it is supremely desirable precisely because it leaves nothing to be desired.

The omnipotence of the master race thus rests on a phantasy of perfection and its perpetual regeneration. But this 'ideal life force' remains haunted by the ghosts of a constitutive difference who always threaten to erupt and destroy the whole fragile phantasy, and who come to focus, in this context, not just a dread of the Unknown, but the Great Fear of impotence and death. The aggressive or envious identifications which are made with subject races: the celebration of their exotic otherness, the desire to penetrate and possess (without being possessed by ) their cultures, and finally the mission to civilise and suppress their difference altogether - all this has no other object than to turn these 'subjects' into servile ghosts whose task is to guarantee the immortality of the racial ideal. That is why their resemblance to human beings is both incited and denied; the desire to assimilate is both encouraged as final proof that the master race is the supreme embodiment of humanity, and is seen as the ultimate threat to its project of total domination.

This racialised form of narcissism, based upon the denial or disavowal of sexual otherness, is articulated in two ways : through rituals of mis/recognition focussed on the play of visual signifiers or 'looks'; and through the language games of the double bind. In the first case racism's discourse of the body elicits that grandiose structure of feeling which Freud called 'oceanic'- a global sense of self as merged, or perfectly mirrored in its environment, 'at one' both with itself and the whole universe. Metaphors of organic community, whether based on soil and blood, or reason and refinement serve to anchor these pre-oedipal fixations of the 'mirror stage' to a body politics dedicated to preserving the purity of the race. The same structure is encoded in teleological tales which guarantee the triumph of the chosen people, nation or the

race; and these too are the object of a genealogical research, which 'proves' the claim to innate superiority in terms of an imaginary patrimony or pedigree premised on some special relation to the conditions of human origination.

Racist discourse translates this 'universalism' back into the terms of ethnic particularity through a particular form of double bind. The double bind can be characterised as a special language game of undecideability in which the subject is trapped in a perpetual oscillation between two contradictory modes of address and positioning, each of which is negated by the other; the subject is unable to choose one position rather than the other, nor has the power to reposition themselves outside the field of discourse. Each move (or statement) in the game simultaneously reinforces its opposite, and negates its performative effect. You are damned if you are have P (because you are not Y) and damned if you lack P (because you are X).

A modified form of the double makes introduces a further more qualified term of distinction in terms of more or less P. Thus X is absolutely P, Y is a bit P ( and a bit not P\_ and Z is absolutely not P. The double bind thus establishes a symmetrical inversion of properties (P +/-) belonging to an asymmetrical power relation (X/Y) which both writes the unwritten rules of the game and has to be denied as condition of playing it.

In contemporary racist discourse the central double bind involves a simultaneous positioning as a race apart (absolutely not P) associated with Z ness and the backbone of the nation between (absolutely P) on condition of absolutely identifying with X ness and denying Z ness, with an intermediate position of being Y which oscillate around being more or less P. Where P signifies the properties of English or Britishness or some other ethnic particularism presented as universal. At a more mundane level, we have the familiar accusation that black are parasites if they are

unemployed ( sponging off the British taxpayer) and if they are employed ( taking British jobs).

A similar process of double binding applies to body language. The subject race is accused either of being too visible, having too much ethnicity, or being invisible, having too little. The body of the subject race not only has to bear the burdens of the 'civilising process' but of representing everything which has been repressed or disavowed in the master's own discourse of origins: sexuality, history, the desire of the Other, the law of Difference. All these return by their bad side as signs of degeneracy, promiscuity, hybridity, or some other transgressive property. It is in this form that they become associated with the subject race and its 'oceanic' powers of social combination - its 'waves of immigration', its 'swamping of our way of life'. For now it is the subject race which is invested with an imaginary omnipotence, an impossible unity against which the masters are powerless to act. The ghosts always return to haunt the machinery of oppression.

This reversal, which is integral to the oscillations of racist discourse sets a fatal trap. For it constitutes an all too seductive image of political potency for those struggling to mobilise real powers of social combination against racism. It offers the possibility of transforming negative stereotypes into positive ones, allowing what has been repressed by racism to return on the 'good' side. And this inevitably involves a process of idealisation whereby sexuality, history, alterity, are all assumed as forces of transcendence untouched by contradiction. The impact of racism - discourse of The Other - is not allowed for a moment to fracture the unity of this 'aboriginal' form of identity, which becomes the touchstone of the struggle for emancipation. Its chief 'guardian' is a more or less punitive superego, often embodied in some ideological authority figure; no distinction is made between real and

imaginary wounds, capital is made equally out of both as pretexts for acts of retaliation whose real function is to endorse a sense of moral self righteousness. Imperceptibly the desire for freedom is converted - or perverted- into a dream of revenge. It is not enough to remove the structures of oppression; the aim is a state in which no whites/goyim/Jews etc are able to exist. A Utopia which finally realises an oceanic solidarity based on a dictatorship of the oppressed.

The strategy of reverse representation thus leads in a dangerous direction. It does not so much transvalue the signs of difference as incorporate them within a countervailing culture of narcissism. But it is also a necessary starting point, a privileged means of bringing the ghosts who have been trapped in the machinery of racism back to life, a way of reclaiming an essential/ist humanity if only in order to throw a spanner in the works. To construct ones own ideal image of the body /politic against its systematic denigration, to elaborate an ideology of inheritance against its all too material dispossession, to eternally regenerate a culture from its own roots without recognising any debt to external sources, to play ones own language games with 'race' to insure a triumph of the political will, these become primary means of resistance precisely because they mirror or mimic the rhetorical devices of the racist imagination itself.

The problems arise when this moment is prolonged and institutionalised as occurs, for example, in the case of separatist or fundamentalist movements. Equally the more persecutory and overpowering the reality principles of racism, the harder the blows delivered to the pride of a people, the harder it is for them to move on from this 'mirror stage' of struggle, and the greater their dependency on teleological tales which provide its rationale.

At certain times this may not matter. Such rhetorics of emancipation and empowerment may initially make it easier to withstand set backs, to hold on to a belief in ultimate victory when times are hard. They may also make it easier to sustain an autonomous space of representation for ethnic minorities who have been otherwise silenced or marginalised, a place where they can find their own political voice, in their own mother tongue. But in the longer term, and certainly in the context of the more complicated state of contemporary race relations in Europe the 'fix' or 'hold' or 'take' which these rhetorics seem to promise on reality proves both illusory and frustrating. For instead of empowering, they ultimately reinforce a sense of helplessness by making the protean forms of racism seem more omnipotent cohesive and enduring than they actually are.

As a general rule, the more racism is represented as a unitary or undifferentiated phenomenon, the more reductive the analysis which is used to pin it down, and the stronger the pull of primary process thinking in characterising the object of knowledge and struggle; this produces global strategies which have little purchase on concrete forms, while at the same time assuming the burden of a messianic project in which the enemy is supposedly being smashed, crushed or stamped out for ever. En route the world tends to be split into the familiar opposition between goodies and baddies. And once this kind of polarisation is set in motion, it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy in which everyone who is not with us is against us. If you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem.

The result is the opposite of what is intended; instead of adding new inflections or registers to a common language of struggle there is a proliferation of unnecessary divisions amongst those who proclaim the need for unity on all sides. Rather than an opening out of the sociological imagination, there is closure around ethnocentric concerns

Anxiety of influence, whether issuing from divided loyalties, or more complex and differentiated views of the world, is repressed while the catechisms of 'correct thought' are given new roots, old up beat endings set to more popular and contemporary tunes.

Yet, paradoxically, it is only when 'impure' or 'hybrid' narratives are openly admitted into the language games of race and ethnicity that the way is open to move beyond the mirror stage, to develop an anti-reductive theory and practice in which the internal contradictions between different modes of racism can be properly recognised and exploited.

This in turn points us towards a different strategy for reading racist discourses and for using them as study texts in anti-racist education. In practice our 'teleological tales' did not provide the means to understand what was going in the discourse of the street gang, or police force. However valiantly we tried to see them as embryonic forms of Nazi storm troopers, or struggled to locate them in some common dialectics of race and class, or even assimilate them to some general model of human prejudice the specificity of the texts themselves resisted. Instead we needed to develop a method of 'deconstructive' reading which allowed these texts to speak in all their complexity, taking particular notice of the tensions and ambiguities of meaning to be found within them. For it is at these points that the contradictions which underlie racist statements break through and where, consequently alternative or counter narratives may gain a foothold and point 'common sense' in a different direction.