

REVIEWS

INEQUALITIES

Racism, by **Albert Memmi**. Translated by **Steve Martinot**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 242 pp. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-8166-3164-6. \$15.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8166-3165-4.

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In the decades immediately following the Civil Rights movement, American social scientists produced many sophisticated theories of the material construction and consequence of race in American life. However, their economic and institutional emphasis had the effect of downplaying the images, ideologies, and interests that constitute race as a distinct empirical phenomenon. Fortunately, attention to the independent, irreducible aspects of racial formations has reemerged in recent years. And so it is that Albert Memmi's expansive essay on racism, originally published in France in 1982, seems relevant and timely.

Racism, according to Memmi, has its roots in interactions in which "one finds oneself in contact with an individual or group that is different and poorly understood." Difference, then, is the core of Memmi's conception of racism. But difference only becomes a problem, or "racism only becomes racism" (p. 32), in a social context where differences are "deploy[ed] to denigrate the other" (p. 37). Thus, the "entire machinery of racism" is about "the legitimation and consolidation of power and privilege" (p. 38).

Memmi spends much of the volume considering how broadly racism should be conceived. This reflects tensions that had appeared in earlier works where Memmi oscillated between a definition based strictly on biological differences (imagined or real) and a broader conception whereby "racism" came to stand in for a whole variety of social and cultural distinctions. (Four of the essays that prefigured this analysis—including two chapters from Memmi's best-known work *The Colonizer and the Colonized*—appear in the

volume as Appendices.) In the end, Memmi opts for a broad concept, which he terms "heterophobia," and posits biologically based racism as a special case. Memmi's primary contribution may be, as K. Anthony Appiah suggests in his brief but useful preface, his "care in distinguishing these different ways of thinking about racism" (p. ix). His formulations are particularly generative, in my view, for thinking about why race seems so often to serve as a master trope for difference in the modern world. In any case, what will probably be most provocative for sociologists is how Memmi grapples with what Robert Miles has called the "conceptual inflation" of racism without falling into what I might call the "poverty" of traditional prejudice approaches.

What sets Memmi apart from prejudice theorists is that while he sees racism as deeply flawed he does not believe it to be irrational. Quite the contrary, he is interested precisely in what makes it rational, why racism remains such a powerful force even when no one will explicitly claim and defend it. One of the insights he offers, informed by psychoanalysis, is that racism reflects not just a fear of the other but also an uncertainty about the self—what Memmi calls "the duality of fear and aggression" (p. 103). This is also where his insistence on the social context of racism becomes crucial. Here, Memmi's analysis is reminiscent of Blumer's seminal reformulation of prejudice within a broad, socially grounded race-relations rubric. Memmi's contribution is further distinguished by his refusal to reduce ideologies about social difference (racial and otherwise) to material interests. For Memmi racism serves a social function but is also an ideological form that cannot be reduced to that function. It is, in other words, both a manifestation of domination and the ideological mechanism by which domination is reproduced.

Memmi's is the kind of in-depth, critical-theoretical exposition too often missing or marginalized in contemporary sociology with its materialist orientation, its rigid value-neutrality, and its privileging of methodological rigor over intellectual creativity. Nevertheless, Memmi's discussion may raise more questions than it answers. For example, much of his

argument depends on the claim that racism takes shape only under conditions of social inequality, yet Memmi does not have much to say about how these conditions may vary or what impacts such variations might have. Similarly, Memmi does not offer much in the way of understanding the complexity and variety of racial ideologies in a postcolonial, post-Civil Rights era. Memmi's formulation is useful when racism proceeds through direct, referential practices of denigration and exclusion. But racism seems to manifest itself these days through what critical race historian George Lipsitz (1998:216) has described as "indirect, inferential and covert policies that use the denial of overt racist intent to escape responsibility for racialized consequences." Recognizing this, it becomes critical to ask what evidence would support Memmi's foundational claim that difference (rather than a base drive to domination) is the key to racism, not to mention how to unpack the two for empirical analysis.

If Memmi's abstract, philosophical style does not lend itself to the specification of social mechanisms and historical contexts, his ultimate purposes are anything but abstract. Memmi sees racism not just as a phenomenon to be analyzed but as a condition to be "treated"—and it is here that the real payoffs of Memmi's critical and psychoanalytic approach become clear. With his commitment to understanding difference, Memmi is obviously aligned with contemporary advocates of identity politics. Yet, unlike many, Memmi refuses to allow the politics of difference to supercede a broader, more universal conception of identity and community. "Instead of renouncing [universalism]," Memmi argues, "what is needed is more universalism, that is, the passage from an abstract to a concrete universalism. *It is not sufficient simply to condemn racism; it is necessary to act on the collective social conditions of its existence.* In effect, universalism must pass from being just a philosophy to becoming an activity. A double activity, actually, both negative and positive: a struggle against oppression and a struggle for effective and reciprocal fraternity" (p. 157; italics in original). This vision, only tantalizingly captured here, not only distinguished Memmi from many of his contemporaries, it could, if circulated more widely, become a real force among many of ours.

Reference

Lipsitz, George. 1998. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female, by **Lorraine Delia Kenny**. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 229 pp. \$20.00 paper. ISBN: 0-8135-2853-4.

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In the past decade, there has been an explosion in the North American literature on girls and girlhood. However this literature has a number of disciplinary and thematic imbalances and gaps. Studies of girls in the fields of psychology, history, English, American Studies, and social work have tended to focus on girls' self-esteem, girls' friendship networks, sexuality, and "deviance" with little analysis of how racial inequality and racial discourses shape the subjectivities and experiences of white middle-class girls. In the field of sociology, most of the empirical research on race has neglected white and middle-class girls, focusing instead on what have been considered deviant categories of girlhood. There have been, until now, no ethnographic or community studies devoted specifically to white, middle-class suburban girls in the contemporary United States.

Lorraine Delia Kenny has written a groundbreaking cultural analysis of white teenage girlhood. Her ethnography, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female*, is a compelling and courageous "auto-ethnography" based on field research conducted from 1993 to 1994 on Long Island. This book defies easy classification and is described by Kenny as "part ethnography, part memoir, and part cultural study . . . or, more succinctly, an autoethnography" (p. 1). In this autobiographical ethnography, Kenny draws on a hybrid theoretical genealogy in the fields of feminist anthropology, feminist sociology, and whiteness studies. She employs several innovative methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of race and,