

The Use of the Term “Racism”

Words are the primary weapons on the battlefield of ideas. This notion, central to Marxian conflict theory, has rarely been more obvious than in the context of the controversy currently swirling around the use of the term “racism.”

Traditionally the term has been used by sociologists to denote a belief (or action based on belief) that one racial category is innately superior or inferior to another. Generally such beliefs have been bolstered by scientific, or more properly pseudo-scientific, claims based on the supposed biological differences between the races.

Thus, for example, the arguments that Aboriginals were constitutionally unable to accept the responsibilities inherent upon free men and women are rather easily classified as racist. In the last few decades, however, the ways in which this term have been used have been changing in at least two very different ways.

Advocates of minority liberation, following the lead of 1960s militant American leader H. Rap Brown, who declared that “racism is as American as apple pie,” have come to define as racist any pattern of thought or action that has negative consequences for a minority, whether or not these patterns are inspired by deliberate discriminatory intent. Thus, for example, the requirement that RCMP officers wear the broad brimmed Stetson hat, has been denounced as racist (and eventually changed), because it had the practical consequence of preventing traditional Sikhs from becoming RCMP officers. The intent of such uses of the term is to extend the public’s negative feelings about racism to virtually anything that in any way, deliberately or unintentionally, supports, condones, or perpetuates the disadvantaged position of a minority group.

Advocates of this position sometimes deny that it is possible for members of minority groups to act in a racist fashion. By defining racism exclusively as behaviour or actions that harm minorities, these activists exclude the possibility that attacks on whites by minority youths or the inflammatory anti-white rhetoric of leaders like the U.S. Islamic leader Louis Farrakhan can be called racist. Their logic rests on the observation that the behaviour of the minority group, which is by definition relatively powerless, cannot seriously harm the dominant community, while the attitudes of the dominant group, termed racist, frequently have devastating implications for the life chances of minorities. By denying the possibility of minority racism, this rhetoric focuses full attention on the behaviour of the dominant group, which is seen as more or less entirely responsible for the minority’s dilemma.

In contrast, opponents of the liberation movements have chosen to redefine racism in an entirely different way, a redefinition that has already had profound implications for our national policies regarding minorities. These opponents, mostly political conservatives argue that any action that takes any recognition of race whatsoever is “racist,” whether perpetuated by the dominant or the minority community. This definition of racism has been used to mount an intense and increasingly successful assault against the principle of affirmative action. Arguing against any policy that is not totally colour-blind, advocates of this definition of racism oppose any form of quotas or goals for employment. Ignoring the fact that the lingering consequences of blatant historical discrimination have not yet been fully overcome, conservatives insist that they are only trying to create a “level playing field” in which no one is given any advantages

on the basis of his or her racial identity.

Opponents of this position, while fully sensitive to the ultimate desirability of a truly colour-blind society (at least as regards economic and social opportunity), respond that, given the present circumstances, a truly non-racist society, defined as the conservatives would define it, would be a society that in practice continued to discriminate against minority groups, because it did not give them the assistance that a they require to fully overcome the consequences of centuries of exploitation and discrimination they or their ancestors experienced in this country.