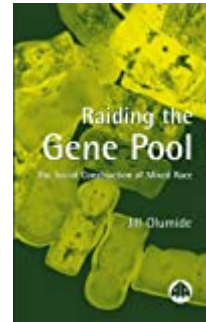




Jill Olumide. *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race.* London: Pluto Press, 2002. xii + 212 pp. \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7453-1764-9; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7453-1765-6.



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The Social Experience of Mixed Race

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The author, a medical sociologist at the University of London, defines the “mixed race condition” as encompassing the “patterns and commonality of experience among those who obstruct whatever purpose race is being put to at a particular time” and describes mixed race as “the ideological enemy of pure race as a means of social stratification” (p. 2). The concept as used in this study includes not only people of mixed racial origin but also those who are perceived as mixing race as, for example, in the case of couples involved in inter-racial relationships or people adopting children of a different race.

This book explores the social experience of people who have been designated mixed race. It examines the operation of racialized boundaries and how they are promoted, sustained and constructed through changing ideologies of race and ideas of mixed race. It asserts that the mixed race condition has resulted in similar social experiences across time, place and social class and endeavors to explain why this is the case. As its definition of mixed race above illustrates, this is a strongly anti-racist tract and takes every opportunity of challenging

the racial bases of social differentiation, especially the preferential treatment of people whether by officialdom or in the private domain. Olumide expresses dissatisfaction with the current state of mixed race studies and sets out to create “fresh knowledge” on the subject (p. 3). She complains that the term anti-racism “has become a very moth-eaten construct” and insists that for it to regain validity it “must endeavour to be anti-race. Nothing less will do” (emphasis in the original, p. 5). As this example indicates, the writing sometimes verges on the polemical in its anti-racial posture.

The book consists of eight chapters. After a brief opening chapter that maps out the conceptual framework of the study, the second explores the different ways in which ideas of race and mixed race have been conceptualized and the social uses to which they have been put. It stresses that racism “has been of particular value in the capitalist project” and that it has invariably been used “to justify exclusion and privilege” (p. 39). Admitting this to be a “necessarily incomplete” examination of racialized difference the chapter comes to the conclusion that: “If race is a can of worms, mixed race is a pit of snakes in

its diversity of meanings” (p. 38). Chapter 3 is devoted to the ways in which race mixing has been presented in a range of discourses, most notably in various fields of scientific enquiry including biology, eugenics, and psychology. Olumide here notes that racial mixing is invariably constructed as problematic, unnatural, even pathological. It is usually assumed that the “problem” resides within those construed as mixed race rather than in society and its value systems that employ race as a means of classification and stratification. The fourth chapter examines the construction of mixed race through history. The analysis discerns a consistent pattern of mixed race people having suffered marginalization, social exclusion, economic exploitation, violence, and the devaluation of their humanity, sometimes to the extent of being the victims of mass rape, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. All of these chapters are based on secondary sources.

Chapters 5 and 6 are grounded in primary research and investigate the mixed race experience of what the author characterizes as “a small English research population” (p. 12). This research consists of thirty-five interviews with people in mixed race situations and two workshops for women described as dealing with “issues for mixed race families.” The first of these two chapters is meant to have been reserved for discussing the positive aspects of the mixed race experience of this research population while the latter is ear-marked for the negative aspects of their social experience. Given all the anxiety, suspicion, prejudice, negative stereotyping, rejection, marginalization, and intolerance described in the former, there is very little positive to be—or that can be—said about the mixed race condition. The rather amorphous penultimate chapter attempts to theorize mixed race by interpreting the interview and workshop material in the light of sociological theory. After reviewing the main features of mixed race experience the final chapter comes to the conclusion that the message that mixed race should bear on its collective t-shirt is that: “There are no races. Just an infinite range of major and minor differences between people of the same race. Some differences may be physical, most are socially constructed” (p. 188).

I confess to an ambiguous reaction to this study. On the one hand, I fully identify with its uncompromising anti-racist stance and found much of it informative and interesting reading. The book, in addition, offers a number of penetrating insights into the operation of racialized distinctions especially in the United Kingdom of the recent past. It is well written and is particularly eloquent in its denunciation of racism and prejudice toward racial

mixture. On the other hand, the study suffers from a number of weaknesses.

First, the concept of mixed race as used in this book is so wide and vague as to be almost meaningless if taken at face value. Defining “the mixed race condition” as referring to anyone “who obstructs whatever purpose race is being put to at a particular time” is singularly unhelpful and an indication of a lack of conceptual rigor in this study. In terms of this definition, for example, any person writing a letter to the press objecting to racial discrimination qualifies as being mixed race, whatever their supposed racial constitution. Taking it to its logical extreme, simply regarding someone of another racial group as a worthy human being or treating such a person with respect would make one mixed race. This lack of precision renders the concept analytically useless. In practice, Olumide uses the term mixed race to refer to people of mixed racial parentage or those engaged in longer term, emotionally significant inter-racial relationships such as marriage, romantic involvement, and adoption.

The second major weakness of this study is that it rests on a very narrow empirical foundation. The primary research on which the central chapters are based consists solely of the thirty-five interviews and two workshops mentioned earlier. Clearly a wide range of other source material including newspapers, court records, government publications, private journals and documents, state archives, and literary sources to name but a few could have been used to good effect. A wider range of source material may have resulted in significantly different research findings and at the very least would have added nuance and texture to the analysis. The theoretical and historical chapters also draw on rather limited secondary reading. The various regional and thematic case studies are invariably based on a narrow, and in some cases, an inappropriate selection of texts. My own area of expertise, Coloured identity in South Africa, serves as a case in point. None of the extant works on Coloured identity were consulted. Instead the author relies on two journalistic works on apartheid South Africa, one very broad general history, one newspaper article, and the impressions of a British academic passing through Cape Town that had been posted on the internet. The result is inevitably superficial and partially informed analyses of both Coloured identity and South African racism.

A third criticism of this book is that despite the claims of its title, it is more about the social experience than the social construction of mixed race. Some attention is

paid to the social construction of racial mixture in the theoretical and thematic sections but is largely ignored in the core discussion based on primary research. Here the analysis focuses on the social experience of people in mixed race situations. Throughout the text it is the social experience rather than the social construction of mixed race that is consistently and systematically explored. The five features of mixed race ideology identified in the conclusion—that mixed race has an ambiguous social location; is a contested site; suffers induced dependency; is a conditional state; and is a point of articulation in the ordering of race, gender, and other divisions—do

not amount to an analysis or summary of its social construction. If anything, this discussion conflates the social experience and social construction of mixed race as the rest of the analysis tends to do.

Having voiced these criticisms, I would, nonetheless, recommend this book to anyone interested in issues of race and mixed race. It is an interesting, at times even entertaining, read that offers some provocative insights on the operation of race and racialized boundaries and presents useful material on mixed race experience in modern-day England.

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