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## What are race and racism?

Race is a concept determined by complex social, historical, economic and political factors rather than a static reductionist biological concept. The construction of race varies according to different geographic and social factors. The meaning of race is a matter of social interpretation not a fact of biology or genetics.

In essence racism is the word used to describe a complex set of attitudes and actions, which discriminate against people on the basis of their skin colour, country of origin, religion or nationality. This discrimination can be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, but is undoubtedly present in many different areas of social interaction.

### Roots of racism

Racism first developed as an ideology during the 18th and 19th centuries with the development of biological theories of race and the practice of imperialism.

### Biological theories of racism

This is the idea that ethnic and racial groups can be defined on the basis of claims about biological nature and inherent superiority or ability. White racists believe that white people are better than all other ethnic groups because of an inherent biological or intellectual superiority. These ideas derive from the work of the 19th century race theorists, such as Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. De Gobineau believed that there was a hierarchy of races with white people the most important followed by "yellows" and "blacks". He popularised the concept of the so-called "Aryan race". His fear of racial degeneration and belief in racial purity of the "Aryan race" were later adopted by Hitler and the Nazis.

Another strand of influential racist 19th century thought was the concept of Social Darwinism. This theory took Charles Darwin's idea of survival of the fittest and applied it to society. Racist theorists, such as Chamberlain, argued that the white "folk-nation" (which was thought to be Germany, in particular) was genetically superior to other nations and so would triumph over all other peoples. This linking of nationalism and racism with concepts of blood and soil was to become one of the central beliefs of nazi



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### **Imperialism and slavery**

The pseudo-intellectual racial theories of the 19th century were often used to justify the practices of imperialism and slavery. Since the 16th century, black people had been ruthlessly exploited and their countries plundered of resources to increase the wealth of the predominantly white European countries and the United States. The imperialists were motivated by economic considerations but the racist belief that black people were subhuman or an inferior race was used as a justification for the appalling and brutal exploitation of the native populations. The practice of slavery led to the deaths of at least 30 million people during transit in terrible conditions on the slave ships. Many British businesses and towns, such as Bristol, Liverpool and London, prospered because of their involvement in the slave trade.

### **Racism today**

Racism today affects thousands of people in Britain and takes many different forms. Below are some of the main areas in which members of ethnic minority groups suffer from discrimination.

#### **Institutional racism**

This term is used to describe the way in which ethnic minorities in Britain suffer from racism because of inherent racism in the structures of society. It refers both to racism within institutions (eg the police, judiciary, business, etc) and the way racism operates within the wider social and economic infrastructures that have power and influence over people's lives.

#### **Immigration**

Perhaps more than any other social issue, it is the question of immigration that has been used to provoke strong racist sentiments. Racism is fostered by a number of popular misconceptions and distortions, which are reiterated by the press and some mainstream politicians. This has led to a situation where the terms "immigrant" and "immigration" in popular usage are automatically assumed to refer to black people and ignore white immigration. In reality, as a report in 1994 revealed, nearly two-thirds of immigrants are white and more people have left Britain in the past 20 years than have come here as immigrants. The largest immigrant group in Britain is the Irish.

Hostility towards immigrants has a long history in Britain. For example, Jews fleeing antisemitism in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the century were subject to abuse in Britain. The same racist fears that were directed against them have since been applied to successive groups of immigrants, namely "they are stealing our jobs, dirty, smelly, criminal, sexually promiscuous". This gutter racism is encouraged by politicians and sections of the popular press, who stoke up unjustified fears about the number of supposed illegal immigrants coming to Britain. Racist politicians and fascist groups play this numbers game despite the fact that Britain has had racist immigration laws since 1962, designed specifically to exclude black people and their families from the country.

The 1992 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act reinforced this policy. With similar legislation across the European Union, it has helped to create a "Fortress Europe", which has severely restricted entry rights for economic migrants from poorer developing countries in Africa, eastern Europe and Asia. Such legislation has eroded basic human rights such as the right to appeal against refusal of entry. These constraints on entry are in marked contrast to the EU ideal of free movement of labour within the EU.

## **Racial harassment and attacks**

These are racially motivated violence, verbal or physical, and include attacks on property as well as on people. Racial harassment includes racist comments, jokes and graffiti. Racial attacks cover psychological damage, criminal damage, violence, arson and murder.

Persistent racial harassment, at home or at work, is often seen as low-level, consisting of repeated racist comments and petty vandalism. It is often carried out by racist neighbours or workmates over long periods. This type of harassment is often extremely frustrating and distressing and can make life a misery for the victims.

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