

1-2000

## Book review: Contemporary Racisms And Ethnicities: Social And Cultural Transformations

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### Recommended Citation

Louw, E., Book review: Contemporary Racisms And Ethnicities: Social And Cultural Transformations, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 8, 2000, 179-180.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss8/16>

**MAC AN GHAILL, Mairtin (1999)**  
**Contemporary Racisms And Ethnicities: Social And Cultural Transformations.** Open University Press, Buckingham. ISBN 0335196721 (pbk)

**Reviewed by Eric Louw**  
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Mac an Ghail has produced a useful book for opening up a debate about how we study and understand racism. The book provides a comprehensive examination of those theories of racism that have been influential in Britain. It also provides an excellent critical overview of actual studies of racism within the United Kingdom.

Mac an Ghail's basic premise is that a more sophisticated analysis of the phenomenon of racism and reconstruction of this branch of knowledge is called. It is argued that there are a number of problems with British racism studies. The most serious critique offered by Mac an Ghail is that the studies to date have reduced the issue of racism to the binary opposition of black versus white — i.e. racism is seen to be about a British white majority discriminating against African Caribbean and Asian migrants. This narrowed vision of racism has consequently ignored the discrimination suffered by other groups, such as the Irish and Jews. The suggestion is made that there is a need to move beyond a concern with the majority-minority dichotomy and an inter-ethnic focus. In its place should come an examination of intra-ethnic dynamics, and of the interconnectivity between a range of social variables such as class, ethnicity, race, regionalism, generational differences, religion, gender and sexuality.

Mac an Ghail argues that each of these variables needs to be considered as part of any comprehensive analysis of social exclusion. In addition, it is argued that any attempt to grapple with the nature of racism requires focussing on the specific contextual conditions within which that brand of racism has emerged. Racism as a set of attitudes and practices is seen to be the outgrowth of conditions which position people in certain ways. Hence, comprehending racism requires understanding the contextual factors which conditioned the rise of such behaviours and beliefs in the first place. The book also argues that understanding racism requires the recovery of history — because each form of racism is embedded within a specific historical narrative.

Furthermore, it is suggested that when analysing patterns

of social exclusion and inclusion in the United Kingdom, some time should be spent exploring the construction of Anglo-ethnicity as a set of beliefs, discourses and practices. In this regard, the author is especially interested in the evolution of Anglo-identity in relation to the successive waves of migration to Britain over the centuries. Mac an Ghaill's valuable proposal is that the discourses associated with mainstream (majority) identity need to be taken as seriously as the identities, discourses and experiences of those who are socially excluded.

Another strength of this book is that it engages with the new social formations being thrown up by globalizing informational capitalism. The impact this is having on contemporary British ethnic relationships, national identity and racist attitudes is explored. This current context is used to reflect back upon earlier social formations and how racism was perceived in those earlier times. The author consequently provides a useful exploration of how social transformations (in the United Kingdom) have impacted upon both racial and ethnic relationships over time, as well as how such transformations alter academic sensibilities.

If the book has a weakness it is its narrow focus on British racism and racist studies. However, this is an inevitable result of a key proposition made by the author, namely that any variety of racism is a contextually-bound phenomenon which necessarily requires a contextually-bound analysis. So although the book may not tell us a great deal about other (non-British) racisms, but it does provide an approach to the study of racism that can be applied to other contexts. So ultimately, despite its British focus, Mac an Ghaill has produced a book that has value to anyone interested in racism and ethnicity. ■