



Preface

Anyone who opens this book will already know a lot about ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’. They are words heard on television, read in newspapers and used in conversation. What the words mean will usually be clear from the context in which they are employed. Yet, because it is not always easy to distinguish between words and things, people sometimes wonder what race (or ethnicity) actually is. This book tries to resolve some of the confusion by distinguishing between the words’ meanings in the popular or practical language of everyday life, and attempts to sharpen their meanings (or supersede use of them altogether) in technical or scientific language.

So there is more than one kind of knowledge. While we – all of us – know about the place of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in the practical sphere, this is not the end of the story. What specialists have learned in the past two hundred years or so about when and why racial and ethnic distinctions have become socially important is a different kind of knowledge, even if the two kinds can overlap. There may never be final answers to all the questions, but hopefully the nature of the underlying difficulties will have been clarified by the end of this book.

Many of the academic books about race and ethnicity that have been written by authors in the United States are prefaced by lists of the seminars and conferences at which portions of the work have been presented, exposing the arguments to beneficial criticism. The authors acknowledge the financial support of institutions, and, almost invariably, the contributions of many friends and colleagues who have helped them polish their texts. This is not that kind of book. The manuscript has been prepared in relative isolation and without any kind of grant. The stimulus for it – which came to me in June 2013 – has been the reaction of other specialists in the study of racial and ethnic relations who either reject or do not understand the philosophical presuppositions that underlie my recent writing. This

impulse has been coupled with a desire to address colleagues in the United States. To me, very many of them seem so concerned with the political aspects of the black-white division in their own country that they do not reflect sufficiently on what they might learn from a European perspective.

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