

Wacana, Vol. 11 No. 1 (April 2009): 95–106

‘Race’ and inequality in postcolonial urban settings

Examples from Peru, Jamaica, and Indonesia¹

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ABSTRACT

In this essay we present three case studies of Peru, Jamaica and Indonesia to illustrate the use of the concept of race in daily life in relation to labour, popular culture and beauty respectively. These cases demonstrate how the use of the concept of race changes in the transition from a colonial into a postcolonial setting, depending on the role of the state and nation building. In Peru, we see a clear continuation of racialized thinking; thinking and speaking in terms of ‘race’ is still the norm. In Jamaica we find a process of inversion: the concept of race is maintained as a frame of societal analysis, but blackness is revalidated and has become a prerequisite for national and cultural belonging. In Indonesia racialized categorizations have disappeared almost completely as ‘race’ has become subjected to the development rhetoric, which just allows limited space for ethnic manifestations. However, discrimination on other rhetorical basis, such as non-citizenship, remains.

KEYWORDS

Race, beauty, skin, city, servants, songs.

Human identifications and behaviour tend to articulate a combination of the individual and the social. Being an individual requires diversity and difference in relation to others, while being social requires conformity and comprehension. The interaction of these two aspects constitutes a fundamental drive for social distinction, resulting in individual and social identities. Extreme and moderate forms of social distinction can be seen as fundamental forces resulting in a great diversity of historically produced configurations. Such distinctions are made along a variety of lines, a prominent distinction being ‘race’. The twentieth century saw scientists turn to the concept of ethnicity, which refers not only to ‘racial’ but to every human characteristic applied in constructing social division or similarity. Regarding patterns of social distinction in general, two broad types of societal configurations can

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