

Foreword

All science worth its name seeks to analyse and explain familiar phenomena by exploring their deeper connections, and expresses its findings in a precise and clearly defined language. Unlike the natural sciences, social sciences do not have a language of their own. While on rare occasions they invent new terms, for the most part they take over the familiar words of ordinary discourse, invest them with new and reasonably precise meanings, and transform them into concepts and terms. Since the activities they study concern us deeply, their conceptual vocabulary does not remain confined to academic discourse. It is taken over by journalists, politicians and ordinary men and women and used as part of a popular discourse. In the process it loses its preciseness, gets misinterpreted or oversimplified, and is invested with dubious and ideologically charged meanings.

This has several consequences. Since academic and popular speech use the same terms in quite different and even opposite senses, they become mutually unintelligible. In a recent report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, we used the term 'post-nation state' in its academic sense, and found to our horror that most journalists, politicians and ordinary readers took it to mean disintegration of the state into loose clusters of communities! Furthermore, those ordinary men and women who are seriously interested in knowing what social sciences have to say about different areas of social life have no means of doing so except by wading through the enormous and sometimes incomprehensible academic tomes which they have neither the competence nor the time to understand. Both the integrity of the academic and popular debates and their fruitful interaction require that academics should find ways of rendering their concepts and theories accessible to a wider audience.

It is in this context that we can best understand the emergence of the new genre of literature that is best called the professional dictionary. Neither like the ordinary dictionaries that are inescapably brief, insufficiently informative and largely concerned with the ordinary usage of words, nor like the bulky and diffuse encyclopaedias, these dictionaries provide concise and authoritative academic statements of the available body of theoretical knowledge within a manageable volume. They are either discipline-based (as in the case of such titles as the dictionary of sociology, politics, philosophy or economics) or subject-based. The latter genre is particularly relevant to areas that fall under several disciplines and can only be studied in an interdisciplinary manner. Professional dictionaries have to satisfy both experts and non-experts, render difficult ideas accessible without distorting them or appearing patronizing, and both assuage and arouse intellectual curiosity, and this is not at all easy. The difficulty is acute in the case of subject-based dictionaries, which should neither be dominated by a single discipline nor marred by a soggy interdisciplinary mishmash and which should alert their readers to national differences without losing the theoretical focus.

The *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture* is a fine example of a subject-based professional dictionary. As its very title indicates, it recognizes that the often unrelated areas of race, ethnicity and culture are historically and theoretically inseparable. They feed off each other, and their study involves common conceptual and theoretical tools and forms a coherent area of investigation. The 200 entries cover nearly all the important concepts, and include terms borrowed from ordinary discourse and transformed into technical concepts as well as those specifically coined by social scientists. The entries are succinct but not oversimplified, are clearly written, long enough to be informative yet short enough for a quick reference, and are composed by distinguished and carefully selected contributors drawn from a range of countries and disciplines. Since concepts develop over time and are often differently understood in different countries, the *Dictionary* wisely deals with the entries in a historical and comparative manner. Many of its entries also bring to bear on various topics the complementary perspectives of psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology and social anthropology, and offer unusually rich and illuminating accounts of the relevant subject matter.

On many occasions I have had students desperately seeking reliable accounts of crucial concepts while writing essays on race, ethnicity and culture, and have also had journalists and political colleagues asking for intelligible explanations of terms they have encountered in academic writings. I can now confidently direct them to this excellent guide.

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