

# *Max Weber and Karl Popper in Michael Banton's analysis of the concept of race*

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**SYMPOSIUM**

# Symposium dedicated to Michael Banton (1926–2018) and his contribution to ASEN and the study of race, ethnicity, and nationalism

## Max Weber and Karl Popper in Michael Banton's analysis of the concept of race

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This print symposium is dedicated to the late Professor Michael Banton (1926–2018). It celebrates and gratefully acknowledges Michael's manifold contributions both to the study of ethnicity and nationalism, and to ASEN, the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism. Founded at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), in 1990, ASEN sought to bring together scholars interested in all issues and problems relating to ethnicity and nationalism, providing them with a platform for intellectual exchange and the advancement of knowledge. ASEN thus gave this field of study an institutional, organised expression and a centre of reference.

It was during the late 1980s, in the wake of the collapse of Communist regimes across East-Central Europe and the USSR, that the study of ethnicity and nationalism emerged as a field of study in its own right. Anthony D. Smith and the creation, under his aegis, of ASEN, by doctoral students, studying various aspects of ethnicity and nationalism at LSE, and other LSE-based academics, made crucial contributions to this development. "Nationalism Studies" would encompass a range of related fields and subjects, both new and well-established. Michael played a defining and powerful role in the development and consolidation of both the association and its intellectual cause, which would incorporate, under the umbrella term of "Nationalism Studies," the field of study with which he is most closely associated, "ethnic relations." Indeed, and as Tariq Modood notes in his contribution to this symposium, "Michael Banton was one of the founders of the study of ethnic relations in Britain, including what might be called 'the Bristol School of Ethnic Relations.'"

Michael was a solid pillar of ASEN and of its first journal, *Nations and Nationalism (N&N)*, whose first issue was published in 1995. He supported them, both from within, as an enthusiastic member of ASEN and of N&N's International Advisory Board, and from without, as an always willing guest speaker or discussant at

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ASEN's conferences and workshops. One of the founding members of N&N's International Advisory Board, he remained an impressively active and characteristically and usefully critical member of this Board, until his death. He was also a keen contributor of articles, both to N&N and to its sister journal, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism (SEN)*.

Michael had a powerful presence at the annual meetings of N&N's International Advisory Board. His sharp, critical mind would always liven up these congregations. He contributed a healthy and constructive scepticism about fashionable doctrines in academia, and at the same time an eagerness and excitement to discuss new ideas, definitions, and data. Never submitting to political correctness, he would demand of all article submissions the strictest analytical rigour and strong empirical foundations.

Michael was a loyal attendee at ASEN's annual conferences at the LSE, especially in his later years. Seated in the first or second row at plenary sessions or workshops, he gave these conferences the sense of a reunion of friends and the sense of continuity and consistency of purpose. He seemed to feel at home in ASEN. With his untiring intellectual energy, he astonished everyone, at the ripe age of 91, by initiating and leading an ASEN workshop for the 2017 ASEN conference, to consider the question: "What is nationalist behaviour?" The workshop was prompted by what he saw as the limited sociological knowledge that had been gained from research into nationalism as compared to the increase in historical knowledge about it. In his introduction to the workshop, where Steven Grosby acted as discussant, Michael urged for more sociological research on the interpersonal level, that would make use of experimental methods and reasoning into the forms of cooperation that a sense of common ancestry or nationality can trigger or, indeed, demand. The workshop provoked a lively but inconclusive debate, which he hugely enjoyed.

I first came across Michael's work in the course of my doctoral research at the LSE. Anthony D. Smith, who was my supervisor, suggested that I study Michael's writings on race for my research on the cultural significance of revivals of Classical Greek subjects in English and French art during the second half of the 19th century (Leoussi, 1998). My study of Michael's *Racial Theories* was a revelation (Banton, 1990). It dissipated the fog of prejudice and shook the rigidity of unquestionable Marxist slogans about origins of the idea of race in bourgeois ideology. Reading Michael made me think afresh of "the race concept" (Banton & Harwood, 1975).

Michael was a militant scientist. He was a committed and polemical advocate of the scientific method. He fought, in the numerous intellectual skirmishes in which he engaged throughout his academic life, for the *scientific* understanding of social relations. Michael argued for the analytical, objective, empirical, and critical examination of beliefs and interpersonal behaviour. He was not alone in his defence of the sober pursuit of genuinely scientific knowledge, against political ideology and especially Marxist ideology. He consciously aligned himself with some of the pioneers of objective social science and especially with Max Weber, Edward Shils, and Karl Popper. As Martin Bulmer notes in his contribution to this symposium, arguably, "the Popperian approach to academic argument ... remained his [Michael's] most distinctive characteristic which persisted for over seventy years."

Michael's approach to the study of "the race concept" was a mixture of Weber and Popper. As Martin Bulmer again notes, Michael had attended Popper's lectures at the LSE as a BSc (Econ) student there, in 1947–1948. This is how he was exposed to Popper's ideas, becoming a Popperian. Through the influence of Edward Shils, who was also at LSE at that time, and who taught him, Michael was introduced to Max Weber.

There were important similarities between Popper and Weber. Both had advocated the value of objectivity in the social sciences and had developed methodological programmes and criteria to guide the process of scientific discovery. However, although Weber distinguished between the natural and the social or cultural sciences, emphasising the power of inner forces—rational calculation, material and cultural interests, and emotions—in motivating human behaviour, as opposed to external forces that determine the motion of inanimate objects, Popper developed principles of scientific discovery that were applicable to both (Gellner, 1996). Similarly, Weber and Popper distinguished

between objective truth and prophecy, both condemning Marxism, and Weber also Psychoanalysis, as religions or prophecies.

Weber and Popper favoured individualistic approaches to social phenomena, against impersonal group mind or collectivist theories of human behaviour and history. They both emphasised the role of individual judgement, that is, of personal responsibility, in the emergence of social phenomena. Karl Popper would apply this methodological individualism to the understanding of the Holocaust as the result of choices made by individual Germans.

Michael would align himself with methodological individualism. However, he would be drawn to a particular variety of methodological individualism, that which gave primacy to rational choice rather than culture, emotion, custom, or fear in accounts of human conduct. Indeed, as Conversi notes in his contribution to this symposium, Michael did not take sufficiently into account the cultural dynamics of ethnicity and nationalism. According to Grosby, in his own contribution to this symposium, “in the late 1970s, the complexity of Banton's analytical perspective became qualified by his acceptance, largely unequivocal, of one side of the *Methodenstreit* of the late nineteenth century in Germany: the nomothetic account of human action represented first by Karl Menger, namely, that human action and social relations can only be accounted for by self-interest, marginal utility and methodological individualism in opposition to the ‘institutionalists’ of the so-called ‘historical school.’” This was an account that was adopted by neo-classical economists who saw man as primarily *homo oeconomicus*. As Michael stated in his introduction to the ASEN workshop mentioned above, “Sociologists, social psychologists, students of comparative politics, and human geographers all have much to learn from theories developed by economists.” It was along these lines that Michael developed his own research, which included measuring the strength of ethnic alignment by comparison with self-interest.

Consequently, Michael did not believe in the agency of “nations” or “classes,” but rather in the cost–benefit calculations of individuals. The contributions to this symposium by Steven Grosby and Daniele Conversi critically discuss, albeit from different perspectives, Michael's attachment to rational choice theories for understanding ethnicity and nationalism.

Acutely conscious of the multiple interests that underly human conduct, Michael emphasised the variety of motives that could lead individuals to engage in similar forms of conduct. He would thus agree with Gabriella Elgenius' sociological studies of celebrations of national days, in which she had shown that the motives of the organisers may be as varied as those of the participants—political interest, a day out with the children, and sense of belonging (Elgenius, 2011, 2017).

In the spirit of Weber and Popper, Michael passionately insisted that scientific discovery was a process of finding answers to clearly defined scientific problems. Scientific discovery was a process of conjecture and refutation. The search for cases that refuted the conjecture or hypothesis was more important than the search for cases that confirmed it. Scientific discovery also, and most crucially, depended on an open-minded scientific community to whom claims would be submitted for criticism and replication. Popper's epistemology, or theory of knowledge, which underpinned his logic of scientific discovery, was most graphically expressed in his famous distinction between the searchlight and bucket theories of knowledge (Popper, 1935/2002). Popper favoured the searchlight theory—the theory that saw scientific knowledge grow out of the search for answers to specific questions but, also, through trial and error—hypothesis and its refutation by the facts (Ter Hark, 2003).

Michael's contribution to our understanding of the idea of “race” has been massive, radical, and controversial. In the numerous books and articles that he published on this subject, he set out to examine the origins of the modern idea of “race” and “racial type,” and the social relations that these concepts inspired, from inclusion to exclusion and extermination. He found their origins in the history of modern scientific thought. As a true Popperian, he affirmed, in one of his earlier contributions to the academic debate on race, *The Race Concept*, which he wrote with Jonathan Harwood, that “[T]he theory of racial types was a fateful error which contributed

significantly to Europe's imperial arrogance at the turn of the century and to the politics that entailed the murder of 6 million Jews" (Banton & Harwood, 1975, p. 32). Recognising the significance and terrible cost in human lives of this mistake, Michael examined exhaustively the circumstances that led to it and also the subsequent developments in scientific thought that would refute it, most notably, Darwin's theory of evolution. As Michael wrote: "It [The theory of racial types] was no ordinary mistake, so it is necessary to look a little closer into its origins. The reader should remember at the outset that 130 years ago [in 1975] biologists were ignorant of much that even the man in the street today takes for granted. ... Educated people were then very ignorant about the formation of the embryo in the mother's womb and many believed that a person's character was determined by the shape of his head" (Banton & Harwood, 1975, p. 32). In addition to the limited knowledge in the so-called life sciences, or biology, another major factor in the establishment and spread of the idea of race and racial determinism was the absence, in England, and other Western countries, of a well-organised community of biological scientists, with a University base. Darwin never held a University post. As Michael explained, "Criticism of racial theories failed to destroy them at that time not because the proponents of racial theories were evil, prejudiced men, but because the scientific community in the biological field was still very loosely organised and the world outside was eager to utilise the theories before they had won widespread scientific support" (Banton & Harwood, 1975, p. 33).

In his analysis of race, Michael set up Darwin as paradigmatic of the Popperian account of scientific discovery as a process of trial and error. He thus summarised the history of the idea of race, as follows: "the problem 'why is the Negro's skin black?' changed from 'because of a Biblical curse', to 'because it has always been black', and then to 'because it confers a selective advantage in certain environments'" (Banton, 1998, p. 7; see also Banton, 1961). Interestingly, if not significantly, Michael, with the help of his daughters, Ragnhild and Dagmar, bought a house in Downe, Orpington, where he spent the closing years of his life. This house was a short car ride from Charles Darwin's home, Down House—the house where Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species* (1859). Michael's house was also on the same road as Down House, Luxted Road, and had the same postal code, BR6 7JT. At the same time, the location of Michael's last home gave him easy access to London, and especially to the Royal Anthropological Institute, of which he had been President (1987–1989), and the LSE, attending meetings and conferences in both, until the very end of his life (Barot, 2018).

In his analyses of minority-majority (to which he referred as *Staatsvolk*) relations in contemporary Britain, Michael became increasingly convinced that these should be described as "ethnic relations" instead of "race relations." He was critical of the very use of the term "race" which he considered an obsolete term which had been discredited by science but remained, wrongly, present in popular as well as political and academic discourse. As Modood further explains in his contribution to this symposium, Michael sought to dissolve the use of this term as not only an erroneous but also socially harmful descriptor of personal and group identity. Instead, Michael favoured the use of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other cultural or occupational categories. These categories, in their turn, should be used loosely and should avoid the creation of hard boundaries between groups and individuals, as individual identities are multiple and changeable. Most crucially, however, he insisted that group categorisations were secondary to considerations of the personal merit of individuals in all spheres of social life.

Michael's passing is a loss of a unique and brilliant mind, and of a loyal member of ASEN and the International Advisory Board of its journal, *Nations and Nationalism*. It is also a loss of a dear friend.

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