

Teaching race and ethnic relations: *Do The Right Thing*

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how the film *Do The Right Thing* can be used to bring alive for students the concepts of the race and ethnic relations field. Situations and characters in the film illustrate concepts such as: power and authority; stratification; DuBois' notion of 'double consciousness'; 'internal colony'; and the construction of racial and ethnic identities and stereotypes. Scenes and scripts by the characters of the film are used as benchmark qualitative data to demonstrate a wide range of beliefs and feelings in response to prejudice, discrimination and racism in an urban environment. The historical vicissitudes and cultural values of groups, as well as the experiences of individual characters, are given some interpretation to provide analytical insights into the events which lead to the riot. Discussion topics are presented at the conclusion of each scene and/or script to stimulate student discussion and critical thinking on intellectual and emotional barriers to understanding racial and ethnic group relations. The film can be used in race and ethnic courses to approximate real situated actions in an urban environment, encouraging students to confront choices that they face in their own everyday world of culturally, racially and gender diverse college campuses.

Introduction

Motion picture films have historically served as a mode of discourse. One of their specific functions has been to invent and popularize institutionalized stereotypical notions of racial groups, particularly in America. Wilson and Gutierrez (1985, p. 79) have established the way in which early films presented 'movie themes that were derived from the attitudinal premises of white intellectual and moral supremacy and were applied at various times' to depict people of colour. Those themes often revealed a negative self-fulfilling prophecy of racial groups.

Films of the early twentieth century in the motion picture industry invented and popularized institutional inequality between people of colour and white Americans. They portrayed people of colour as inferior and began to stigmatize them in film as 'lazy' and 'simple-

mind', and as a people with 'low moral values' (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985). For example, when people of colour were allowed to perform in early Twentieth Century films they were often portrayed as having the following traits (cf., Wilson and Gutierrez 1985, p. 79).

Figure 1 Some traits commonly applied to minority portrayals in early movies

Intellectual	Moral
Preoccupied with simple ideas, inferior strategy in warfare/conflict situations	Low regard for human life
Low or non-existent occupational status	Criminal activity
Poor speech patterns/dialect comedic foil	Sexual promiscuity
	Drug/alcohol abuse
	Dishonesty

Wilson and Gutierrez (1985, p. 79) demonstrate, with the film *The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith (1915), how 'movies began to institutionalize racial stereotypes'. Indeed, this particular film established a pattern which endured for decades of 'portraying [African Americans] as intellectually and morally inferior to Whites. . . . the film carried a strong message against sexual contact between the races' (1985, p. 79). Wilson and Gutierrez point out that between 1930 and 1945 a major shift in the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in film occurred.

A more pronounced stereotypical shift took place in the movie characterization of [African Americans] during the boom period. The venomous, hate-filled disparagement of [African Americans] epitomized in *The Birth of a Nation* and other films of its era, such as *The Wooing and Wedding of Coon* (1905), *The Masher* (1907), and *The Nigger* (1915), evolved into less threatening characterizations. The new stereotype played to White perceptions of [African American] personalities who, in the vernacular of the era, 'knew their place' in American society. [African Americans] now appeared in movies for the purpose of entertaining White audiences within the context of social limitations. They had roles in musicals, where they could demonstrate their 'rhythmic' talents as singers and dancers. Meanwhile the supposed inferior mental capacities of [African Americans] made for hilarious comedy. [African Americans] were subservient to Whites as maids, mammies, domestics, and sidekicks (1985, p. 82).

Some scholars and interpreters of motion picture films in general (Lesage 1977; Shohat 1987) and more recent writers on African and African American film have interpreted the rise of African and African

American filmmakers as a counter and challenge to the invidious portrayal of African and African Americans in motion picture films: those negative, institutionalized racist, political representations and stereotypical portrayals of Africans and African Americans in motion picture films (cf. Diawara 1992; Reid 1993).

Diawara (1992) lists three ways in which African filmmakers have countered the negative portrayals of Africa and its people: *Social Realist Narratives*, *Colonial Confrontation*, and *Return to the Source* films. The *Social Realist Narrative* 'draws from existing popular forms such as songs and dance, the oral tradition and popular theater' (Diawara 1992, p. 141). These films focus on contemporary life situations and issues. For example, the issue of women's liberation may be thematized in these types of film showing that 'while African men have accepted progress. . . . they are regressive when it comes to giving up male privileges' (Diawara 1992, p. 144).

Colonial Confrontation African filmmakers demonstrate the 'historical confrontation that put into conflict Africans and their European colonizers' (Diawara 1992, p. 152). These types of African film provide for the audience a 'sense of pride and satisfaction with a history finally written from an African point of view' (Diawara 1992, p. 152). Diawara notes that 'these films position the spectators to identify with the African people's resistance against European colonialism and imperialistic drives' (Diawara 1992, p. 152).

Finally, the *Return to the Source* films 'prove the existence of a dynamic African history and culture before the European colonization' (Diawara 1992, p. 170). Diawara argues that there are at least three reasons why African filmmakers turn to this type: first, to be less overt with the political message in order to avoid censorship; secondly, to search for precolonial African traditions that can contribute to the solution of contemporary problems; and thirdly, to search for a new film language (Diawara 1992, p. 170).

Mark. A. Reid (1993) distinguishes black commercial films from 'black independent films' (1993, p. 2). Black commercial films 'perpetuate dominant assumptions by avoiding serious historical issues and ignoring the polyphonic forms of black subjectivity' (Reid 1993, p. 2), whereas 'black independent films' are films that 'focus on the black community and [are] written, directed, produced, and distributed by individuals who have some ancestral link to black Africa' (Reid 1993, p. 2). In his study of black film Reid shows how commercial films do not consider the 'particular cultural experiences of African Americans' so that it becomes difficult for one to examine the 'type of film blacks create when they retain control over the distribution of their films' (Reid 1993, p. 2).

This brief historical overview of how motion picture films functioned as a mode of discourse to invent and popularize institutional inequality

between people of colour and white Americans reveals that racial stereotyping is 'dependent upon the social, political, and economic realities of the moment, and changes accordingly' (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985, p. 103). Although positive images of racial groups have changed at any given historical period, negative images have not been totally abandoned (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985, p. 103).

Instructors in a race and ethnic course may want to consider having their students view some of the films mentioned above and carry out a class or individual student project. The project could specifically deal with black commercial films and 'black independent films' in order to analyse the cinematic language and perceptions of racial differences which might help students to see the differences between actual and fictional representations of racial groups. Such an analysis might allow students to think critically about the way in which the motion picture industry historically and socially positioned African Americans in commercial films during this period, and how commercial films attempted to portray African Americans in such a way as to perpetuate white attitudes of African Americans.

This article will demonstrate how the film *Do The Right Thing* can be used by college-level instructors and professors who teach race and ethnic relations to stimulate student critical thinking as well as challenge their assumptions about racial and ethnic group identity and other intellectual and emotional barriers.

Using film as a mode of discourse in teaching race and ethnic relations

In 1989 Spike Lee produced the film *Do The Right Thing*. The film sparked considerable controversy about the 'true' meaning of the film and Lee's motives for producing it. It was perhaps the first time in the motion picture industry that real racially-motivated situated actions were examined by tracing the course of a single day on a block in Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York. This film described the intimate and conflicting relationships between racial and ethnic groups in urban America. Indeed, *Do The Right Thing* invented and popularized the way in which racial and ethnic groups, through the use of symbols as well as verbal and non-verbal communication, cope with, respond to, and challenge institutional racism and racist stereotypes in America.

Lee's film provoked controversy because it sought to challenge the prevailing way in which racism, in an urban setting, systematically dehumanizes all people. The motive for producing the film, as Manning Marable points out,

was inspired by the death of Michael Stewart, a graffiti artist who was killed by New York transit authority officers allegedly for resist-

ing arrest. The events of Howard Beach, NY, further crystallized Lee's concerns about the deteriorating state of race relations in American's largest city. Lee's purpose was not to produce 'art for arts sake', but to create a thought-provoking and graphically honest account of racial tensions (Marable 1989, p. 64).

Marable goes on to describe and interpret the variety of criticisms of Lee's film:

A number of confused critics, [African American] and White alike, have deplored Lee's film for glorifying violence. Journalist Juan Williams has complained that the movie 'lacks vision' and promotes racial confrontation. Such criticism misses the entire point of the film. What White America needs is not an [African American] version of Disneyland or MTV, but some insight into the social consequences of institutional racism, poverty, generational unemployment, and police brutality. If the critics spent one day in the neighborhood depicted in Lee's film, they might wonder why Lee understated the fundamental economic and social inequities experienced by residents of the inner city. 'Do the Right Thing' provides a complex and dynamic examination of the state of American Racism and race relations (Marable 1989, p. 64).

Unlike the films of the early and mid-twentieth century that depicted and portrayed African Americans as less than equal to white Americans, *Do The Right Thing* can be used to demonstrate the way in which African Americans, in a particular urban setting, respond to the social, political, and economic consequences of institutional racism. The film can therefore be used to provide social scientists, who teach race and ethnic relations, with excellent ways in which to encourage students to think critically and challenge students' assumptions about racial and ethnic group identity and other intellectual and emotional barriers.

Method

The present article will use a variety of scenes and scripts in the film to serve as benchmark data for analysing race and ethnic concepts, symbols and verbal and non-verbal forms of communication between the racial and ethnic groups in the movie. This method is used to encourage and challenge students to think critically about their assumptions of racial and ethnic groups in America. Moreover, the use of each scene and script will be given some interpretation by the author in order to provide a way for instructors and teachers to stimulate

student discussion. Discussion topics for students will be suggested at the conclusion of each scene and/or script.

Concepts in the fields of race and ethnic relations will be constantly drawn upon in the article to allow students to reflect on intellectual discussions of racial and ethnic group interaction. Some of the cultural and historical experiences of racial and ethnic groups in urban America (e.g., experiences of voluntary and involuntary immigration) are symbolically brought into the film by the director. They provide a way to interpret the variety of responses these groups have developed to challenge and oppose institutionalized racism on a block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn on the hottest day of the year.

The use of the movie *Do The Right Thing* in a race and ethnic or gender related college course will be demonstrated with Joe Feagin's (1989) textbook on race and ethnic relations. Several textbooks can be used to develop the analysis presented in this article. Feagin's work is chosen here because he presents a readable Marxist ideological framework which allows students to understand immediately the power, authority and unequal relationships that limit racial and ethnic-groups social interaction in the United States.

Understanding the use of symbols

Throughout the film, *Do The Right Thing*, college instructors and professors should have their students pay particular attention to the style and form of communication among subordinate and dominant groups. The unconventional ways in which subordinate groups (i.e., African Americans) walk, gesture, talk and think may be viewed by white students as irrational and frightening. One of the ways to explain these symbolic forms of communication, which in many ways are the opposite of dominant group forms of symbolic communication in the film, is for students to consider how anthropologists such as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986), and Ogbu and Gibson (forthcoming) interpret these symbolic forms of communication. They argue that the kind of harsh discrimination by white Americans against African Americans leads them to form an 'oppositional social identity' and an 'oppositional cultural frame of reference'. As Fordham and Ogbu (1986) write:

Subordinate minorities like African Americans develop a sense of collective identity or a sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of White Americans because of the way White Americans treat them in economic, political, social, and psychological domains, including White exclusion of these groups from true assimilation. The oppositional identity of the minorities evolves because

they perceive and experience the treatment by Whites as collective and enduring oppression. They realize and believe that, regardless of their individual ability and training or education, and regardless of their place of origin (e.g., in Africa) or residence in America, regardless of the individual economic status or physical appearance, they cannot expect to be treated like White Americans, their 'fellow citizens'; nor can they easily escape from their more or less membership in a subordinate and disparaged group by 'passing' or by returning to a 'homeland' (1986, p. 181).

Thus the variety of symbols, forms of talk and non-verbal gestures used in the film are the ways in which the African American on this block have developed 'oppositional social identity' to counter the way they are treated by White America. They also form an 'oppositional cultural frame of reference'. A full statement of this concept by For-
dham and Ogbu (1986) explains it more completely:

Along with the formation of an oppositional social identity, subordinating minorities also develop an oppositional cultural frame of reference which includes devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and White Americans. Thus subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as *not appropriate* for them because those behaviors, events, symbols and meanings are characteristic of White Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior and other events, symbols, and meanings as more appropriate for them because these are *not* part of White American's way of life. To behave in the manner defined as falling within a White cultural frame of reference is to 'act White' and is negatively sanctioned (1986, p. 181).

In the film *Vito*, the younger son of Sal who owns the Italian pizzeria, is defined as 'down' by Mookie. Elijah Anderson (1976) defines the concept of 'down' as

a positive word, referring to valued attributes within the social order of the extended primary group and to social actions of group members that are seen as having been based on worldly wisdom and good judgement. There are down wineheads, down regulars, and down hoodlums. There are also down outsiders. 'Down' thus appears to transcend any particular crowd's own principles of status, transforming the 'places' within the particular status groups into a single stratification system. The 'down' person is wise to the social order. But most important, he understands his own place within that order; he knows who he is. He tries very hard to behave in accordance

with his understanding in order to avoid trouble between himself and others within the setting (1976, pp. 213–14).

College and university professors and instructors may ask students at this point in the film to think critically about why Vito accepts and 'buys into' the African Americans' way of life on the block.

Discussion topic(s)

Instructors may want to discuss with students how some white American students on college campuses 'accept' the behaviour, event, symbol and meaning of subordinate minority groups (e.g., talk, gestures, clothing and symbols). Are some white American students 'accepting', through some form of their own cultural resistance to the white American way of life, the oppositional cultural frame of reference of subordinate minority groups? Do these students view their actions as a legitimate response to their own feelings of being members of a racist and discriminatory white American society?

Basic concepts

Sociological concepts of power (the ability to control resources or to influence/manipulate the decision of others), authority (gained through rational legal authority or charismatic leadership), status (honour, prestige, and privilege), racial group, ethnic group, stereotype, isolated discrimination, internal colonialism, double consciousness and fetishism have functioned to shape widely-held notions of race and ethnicity in America. These concepts have had an impact on the way in which racial and ethnic groups conceive of themselves in any given situation. Each concept not only illuminates the racial and ethnic stratification of groups in the movie who compete, conflict, accommodate and use their values to determine how to define their situations on the block, but they also determine the variety of ways in which social interaction and discourse (verbal and non-verbal) affect the emotional and cognitive development of each group.

The social construction of racial and ethnic groups: stimulating and encouraging student critical thinking

The movie takes us beyond the basic concepts of race and ethnicity and into a consideration of how racial and ethnic groups are constructed. Racial and ethnic groups are defined as both positive identities and negative stereotypes. Students in race and ethnic courses are taught, on the one hand, that racial groups can be defined as groups

'naturally generated as part of the self-evident order of the universe'. On the other hand, students are taught that racial groups are a social group of persons who are inside or outside a group who have decided that it is important to single out an individual *someone* or a group as being inferior or superior, 'typically on the basis of real or alleged physical characteristics, subjectively selected' (Feagin 1989, p. 6). In the film Spike Lee counters the typical white attitudinal perception of racial groups which tends to perpetuate the former – that all racial groups have 'universal and natural' tendencies. This particular portrayal of racial groups challenges a common white attitudinal stereotype of 'all African Americans are alike'.

Students can observe the way in which Lee articulates and challenges biological or 'universal and natural' white attitudinal perceptions of African Americans by understanding how he constructs the social basis of a racial group in the film. In it he develops the character of Buggin Out in order to illustrate the social basis of a racial group. Note the scene on the block when Buggin Out begins his protest effort to mobilize his in-group (i.e., African Americans) to boycott Sal's pizzeria. Buggin Out's attempt to start a boycott of Sal's pizzeria falls, for the most part, on deaf ears. In this scene, members of the African American community are not united or willing to subscribe to some 'universal or natural order' of being African American, but have socially defined their role and Sal's place in the community as one of a shared appreciation of the quality of Sal's pizza and the fact that he has 'never done anything wrong' to the people on the block.

By observing Pino's¹ character students can analyse how a person, outside a group, subjectively selects a group as inferior even though he is unaware of the internal divisions within the group – namely, the way in which the group socially defines itself in the eyes of others differs from one individual to another. Pino, however, struggles with the way in which African Americans can socially define themselves and resorts to developing a 'universal or natural' justification of African Americans to legitimate socially his racial stereotypes of them. Note the scene in which Pino discusses with Mookie his distinction between 'niggers' on the block (and in the larger society) and Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. He states that Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan are 'not niggers, I mean . . . they are different'. A stereotype as defined by Feagin is an 'overgeneralization associated with a racial or ethnic category that goes beyond existing evidence' (1989, p. 11).

In fact, Pino's definition of the situation in terms of his relationship with African Americans, which he conceives as an imposed one because of his father's pizzeria on the block significantly affects his relationship with his peer groups in Bensenhurst. Pino's struggle in this instance mirrors Milton Gordon's adaptation scheme of assimilation. That is, Pino, unlike his brother Vito, has not adapted what

Gordon calls attitude-receptional assimilation, where there is an absence of prejudice and stereotyping (Feagin 1989, p. 26). Moreover, Pino is unable to confront his contradictory notions of African Americans because he is too similar to the African Americans around him and in some cases he is not their equal (e.g., throughout the movie one gets the impression that his educational skills seem to be less than average, if that).² It seems that the reason Pino doesn't see Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson as 'niggers' is because they symbolically represent something different – 'I mean they're not niggers' – (i.e., he is willing to admit that they are clearly superior to him. However, the African Americans with whom he interacts on the block in Bedford-Stuyvesant could not possibly be superior to him).

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to begin to ask students to think critically about these two scenes from the perspective of how their assumptions of racial groups are related to either the 'natural or universal' or to the social basis definition of race and ethnic groups. Clearly students make assumptions as to why racial group students are on their campus, particularly if it is a predominantly white institution. Although African Americans or other students of colour may be present because they have the academic ability, some students (i.e., white or white ethnic) may attribute their presence on campus to be associated with either Affirmative Action Programs or be due to the college/university criteria in the admissions office having been 'relaxed' in order to increase the pool of 'minorities' on campus.

In certain instances racial group students tend to 'flock together'. What are the reasons for their in-group clustering on college or university campuses, especially when the campus is predominantly white? African Americans and other students of colour may be dealing with what Zweigenhaft and Domhoff describe as a 'triple jeopardy' (1991, p. 172):

Not only do they encounter the usual negative stereotypes and the assumptions by most Whites that they are 'tokens', hired [or recruited] only because of affirmative action, but they must also cope with their 'solo' role – being the only [or few] Black employees [or students] in their company [or schools] at their level. Faced with this triple jeopardy Black employees [or students] become even more self- and race-conscious.

An ethnic group as defined by Feagin (1989, p. 9), using a narrow definition, is 'a group socially distinguished or set apart, by others or

by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or nationality characteristics' (1989, p. 9). Students can once again observe the process of how a group socially defines itself in the movie when the critical division that sparks the conflict on the block is caused by Buggin Out³ who challenges Sal⁴ to put some 'Black [African American] pictures on the wall'. As Buggin Out states: 'Rarely do I see any *I-Italians* in here and since we [African Americans] spend much money here we deserve to have some black [African American] pictures up on the walls'. Sal defends his ethnic group by socially defining the internal space (inside his restaurant) which he controls. Sal states that 'this is *my pizzeria* and only Italian Americans are on the wall'.

Discussion topic(s)

This scene in the film allows students to analyse the way in which racial and ethnic groups socially construct a system of stratification among groups who have power, authority and status. Dominant groups, for the most part white students, on college or university campuses also 'flock together'. Yet is flocking together for dominant groups a sense of power and authority where some groups are excluded (African Americans and other students of colour)? Do dominant group students socially construct control over their internal space by not allowing other groups perceived as 'different' from them to have access to what may be considered privilege information about university life and its functioning?

The age old sociological truism, 'birds of a feather flock together', should be reflected on by students at this point. They should be made aware that the type of interactions within a college or university environment tends to heighten racial and ethnic group consciousness, especially at predominantly white educational institutions.

These scenes in the film also give students a clue to understanding the emerging conflict between private property (ownership) and collective rights (consumer demands) on the block. More will be said on these issues when the analysis proceeds to developing ways in which students can discuss the riot on the block.

Students can also begin to think critically about minority groups on their campus and how they correspond to the groups in the film who are in an unequal group position relative to a dominant group or majority group. In the movie race and ethnic stratification, 'a ranking system in the form of a hierarchy of more or less powerful groups' is present and forms the basis of typification and stereotypes (Feagin 1989, p. 9).

The African Americans are consumers at Sal's pizzeria and the Korean grocery store. Mookie is employed by Sal. The neighbourhood

is patrolled by two white ethnic (Italian) police officers who have very little sympathy for the local culture and the people on the block. Feagin points out that:

More important than ease of observation is the way in which economic or political exploitation often leads to the need to identify the exploited group in a certain way. The real or alleged physical characteristics singled out to typify the exploited group often become seen as inferior racial characteristics in the process of justifying exploitation (Feagin 1989, p. 7).

In the movie skin colour becomes a way in which different obligations and privileges are assigned to groups. The police officers popularize racial stereotypes when they tell the white person whose car has been flooded by two African American teenagers that 'they suggest that he get in his car before these people rip him off'. In this scene the police officers are inferring behaviour, based on a stereotype and on skin colour, to 'these people'. They are symbolically using the behaviour of two individuals to reinforce and popularize racial stereotypes of African Americans like the earlier films of the twentieth century which sought to depict them as 'reckless and lawless' (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985).

The police officers also display racial stereotypes and prejudices when they drive their squad car past the three street-corner men saying 'What a waste'. One of the street-corner men lipreads the words and says 'He said, what a waste'; the other states 'New York city's finest'. Students may want to interpret these scenes from the way in which each racial and ethnic group in the film socially constructs and defines its group position with respect to how the larger society portrays each group (Blumer 1958). By understanding and critically thinking about how racial and ethnic groups internally define themselves and are externally defined by the larger society, students are placed in the context of viewing how the film deals with dominant subordinate group formation.

Culture, history and the concept of double consciousness

Students can begin to consider critically how each racial and ethnic group in the movie identifies with an historical experience and cultural value system. The inequalities identified in the previous section can be traced historically; while the action in the movie is confined to a single day, Lee forces us to consider the past that leads up to these twenty-four hours.

The African American is forced to cope with what Buggin Out labels

'a cruel and harsh world': a world tied to the historical underpinnings of slavery and a caste system of racism and discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Even though the historical reality of African Americans has been plagued by slavery and a caste system of racism and discrimination, African Americans have been actors in history, not only victims, and we see a variety of possible courses of action and alternative definitions of the situation.

The character of Smiley, the stutterer, typifies the variety of historical and cultural vicissitudes among the African American groups in the film. Marable (1989) describes Smiley's role well by stating:

Lee explores many themes in the movie, and metaphors abound. By projecting Smiley as a stutterer who sells photos of Malcolm and Martin, the film seems to say to us that the legitimate voices of resistance and activism are frequently held down or denigrated. There's a dialectical tension underscoring the whole film from beginning to end between a hope for interracial peace and nonviolent change vs. the need for group solidarity, empowerment and advocacy of armed self defense against racial brutality (Marable 1989, p. 64).

Spike Lee's indictment of racism and inequality goes beyond showing us the haves and have-nots, racists and those who are discriminated against. He shows us how racism fragments and dehumanizes people; the humour and grotesqueness of the portraits highlight this fragmentation. One form of fragmentation is especially important to note in his analysis.

The loss of human speech

Another way in which racism distorts and diminishes human beings is symbolized in the loss of language. Lee establishes a hierarchy from past to present. In the past the heroes, Malcolm and Martin, were eloquent; their speech was powerful and moving. As Marable notes, Smiley's stuttering refers to the loss of these voices. At the next level of the hierarchy, in the older generations of the three men of the 'chorus' as well as for Mookie and Sal, speech is no longer beautiful, but it does at least connect people in conversations and dialogues. At the lowest level, among some of the younger characters, speech has lost even the capacity to establish relationship among peers. Radio Rachim is almost literally voiceless except through his boom box. Buggin Out (whom I see as largely a negative and destructive character in Lee's eyes) speaks in an echo of the movement – the rhetoric and slogans he uses once had meaning, but now they are hollow-sounding, absurdly and dangerously out of touch with the real situation on the

block. Also disturbing in this regard is Mookie's girlfriend who can only utter obscenities and profanities; the director creates an incongruity between her attractive appearance and her dreadful language, so exaggerated as to call to mind the girl in the folk-tale who vomits toads and snakes whenever she opens her mouth to speak. Mookie, himself, is put off by her 'foul mouth', which mirrors the vileness of the police officers' language. Racism literally leaves people speechless; the capacity for language – the most distinctly human of all our traits – is destroyed.

The scene in which Buggin Out's new Air Jordans⁵ get run over by the white American wearing a green Boston Celtic shirt may allow students to see how Lee attempts to exemplify the way in which racism and capitalism dehumanize and exploit African Americans on the block. This incident is a prelude to understanding how dead objects become more important than human life in a racist and capitalist society. Buggin Out's existence and status are symbolically tied to the gym shoes he wears. One concept that may allow students to discuss intellectually this scene is called fetishism.

Fetishism

Fetishism is the distorted form of thought and action in which inanimate matter, a dead object, takes on life and appears to be more powerful and more real than the human beings that created it. This theme runs throughout the film. It appears in some minor form (for example, the basketball shoe incident) but is central to the character and fate of Radio Rachim. Radio Rachim's existence is tied up in his radio, and its destruction heralds and prefigures as well as precipitates his murder. The radio is then, in turn, linked to the riot and the destruction of the pizzeria. Spike Lee's message here is that in a racist and capitalist society, property is more alive, more beautiful and more valuable than human beings. Property not only creates inequality between rich and poor; it also diminishes human beings by absorbing their life into dead objects. Sal, almost as much as Radio Rachim, lives for what he owns. A relationship with dead things (the radio, the pizzeria) substitutes a relationship with living people. The movie ends with Sal tossing money at Mookie – the cash nexus threatens to put an end to the human relationship.

Discussion topic(s)

The concept of fetishism can lead students to reflect on the current issues like team jacket murders and drugs. Lee has been criticized for not including drugs in the movie, but the fetishism theme is an allusion

to this issue. Drugs are also an instance of something inanimate becoming all-absorbing, vital, beautiful, and valuable beyond human life. We do not need to see drug dealing on the screen because we already know that it is a logical outcome of this type of society.

The confrontation between Buggin Out and the white male wearing a Boston Celtic shirt deals with another form of exploitation on the block: neighbourhood gentrification. Gentrification is often associated with young white urban professionals buying brownstones in poor neighbourhoods at very cheap prices. The buildings are then rehabilitated which leads to property and rent increases. This process has a negative effect on those African Americans on the block who are displaced because they can no longer afford housing in the area. Buggin Out's oppositional social identity unveils in this scene as he states 'moth-er-fuck gentrification'. Buggin Out is unable to do anything about the process and can only oppose it verbally. His statement typifies one of the ways in which subordinate and disparaged groups respond to discrimination and racism on the block. This scene symbolically represents a feeling of powerlessness and a lack of control over one's environment.

The theory of internal colonialism may also be elaborated on in this context. The economic dependency of the film's lower- to underclass African Americans on external economic business can lead students into discussions around whether African Americans are a 'colony' in White America in regard to education, economics, and politics' (Feagin 1989, p. 35). That is, are they exploited by a larger system of institutional racism either directly or indirectly (Feagin, 1989, p. 14). The latter, indirect institutional racism, applies in 'situations where restrictions in one area are shaped by racial discrimination in yet another' (Feagin 1989, p. 14).

Students should be able to understand how the racial and ethnic groups in the movie are a microcosm of the race and ethnic stratification system of the larger society. The lower- to under-class African Americans in the movie, who live in an area that seems socially disorganized because of its physical deterioration, are dependent on the businesses of white ethnics (Sal's pizzeria) and new immigrants (the Korean grocery). The white ethnic and Korean businesses in the movie can be seen as examples of the status position of 'middle-men minorities' who are small business people positioned between producers and consumers. They 'act as a go-between to society's subordinate classes' (Feagin 1989, p. 39).

The three street-corner men discuss the economic dependency of African Americans on the block. They begin to argue and get into conflict over whether their race or class is the cause of why African Americans cannot start their own businesses in their own neighbourhoods.

Student discussion: is it a race? or is it class?

Race as a cause is expressed as 'it's because we are black' by one of the African American street-corner men (who is actually West Indian). Students should note the contradiction being expressed in this scene by Lee. He begins the film by articulating how race is socially constructed, but then forces us symbolically to understand how the use of the colour *black* has been internalized by one street-corner man to explain the African Americans' position on the block. The concept of internal racism, when people of colour begin to 'accept' their oppression and agree to the dominant group's definition of them, may lead students to discuss how dominant group perceptions influence the cognitive development of African Americans. The contradiction is clear when students think about how whites may use the colour *black* as an explanation for African American economic subordination on the block. That is, 'because we are black' exemplifies for the one African American in this scene the 'universal and natural' way in which white Americans treat them in economic, political, social and psychological domains. However, is it accurate here to say that all white people have a 'universal and natural' way of treating African Americans: 'it's because we are black?'

Discussion topic(s)

Professors can ask students to discuss whether using colour to explain one's economic position in life corresponds to the dominant society's popular notion of the symbol *Black*? Furthermore, by 'accepting' *Black* as a way to explain one's subordination, does the colour tie one to the symbol rather than to the social structure of individuals and groups who constructed it? The very colour *Black* mystifies the effort to explain the economic subordination of African Americans on the block.

William J. Wilson (1980) argues that as a result of institutional changes after World War II, structural opportunities increased in the labour force which stimulated the occupational differentiation of the African American population. As a result of these changes, the African American middle class expanded. Yet as the African American middle class advanced, the economic position of African Americans who were unable to take advantage of these opportunities grew worse. Wilson concludes that although race is still an important factor in understanding these changes, class has become a more relevant way in which to understand the life chances of African Americans (Wilson 1980).

Class, as an explanation, is related to the scene in which comparison is made between the West Indian and the Korean immigrants by Sweet D . . . Willey when he remarks: 'Hey Coconut, you got off the boat,

too. . . . when you gone start your business . . . just like I thought. . . . you ain't gone do nothing but sit your old monkey ass on this corner'. The issue is now explained in terms of class, since the West Indian got off the boat, too.

Discussion topic(s)

Students may want to discuss the history of these two groups and analyse whether the comparison made by Sweet D. . . . Willey is relevant. Race and class as explanations of the economic position of the African Americans on the block can lead students to discuss the intellectual and emotional barriers to understanding racial and ethnic group relations.

Intergenerational conflicts

In another scene the three young African American males and one female get into a conflict with 'De Mayor'⁶ and demonstrate alternative conceptions of their definition of the situation based on their historical experiences and cultural value systems. One young African American male denigrates De Mayor because he is perceived by him as a 'drunk ass'. De Mayor responds by saying 'What do you know . . . you can't even pee straight . . . I know your mamas and your papas . . . you disrespectful . . . you don't know my pain or my sorrow until you walk into your doorway and you have three hungry children . . . and there is nothing you can do . . . until you have seen that you don't know shit'. The young African American male responds in a manner that mirrors his cultural adaptation or cultural assimilation. His cultural patterns have been changed to those of the dominant society whereby he has internalized the individualized system of mobility in America by saying 'First of all I would get a job or something . . . I wouldn't just stand there' (Feagin 1989, p. 26). The young African American female, at the end of this scene in the film, looks on with sympathy for 'De Mayor'.

This episode in the movie alludes to the internal segmented socialization patterns, based on the vicissitudes of African American historical experiences and adapted cultural value systems in the film, of young and old African Americans.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to involve students in a discussion of historical and contemporary forms of racism and discrimination. In the film young and old attempt to define their social situation in terms of their

historical experiences and adapted cultural value systems. What social, political and economic factors have changed in the second half of this century that the young African American male in this scene is so stimulated as to see individual motivation as the sole cause of success in society?

One outcome of African Americans' historical experience is what W. E. B. DuBois (1970) called double-consciousness, and Spike Lee's characters exemplify this perspective. DuBois' description of double consciousness is illustrated in the following statement:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but lets him see himself through the revelation of the outer world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tap of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (DuBois 1970, p. 52).

Mookie⁷ in the film personifies this concept of double-consciousness. He is employed by Sal and sees himself through the eyes of Sal's pizzeria (the other world); yet, he is also African American and must maintain the consciousness of the world of his peers on the block. In a sense, Mookie is a buffer between the middleman Italian pizzeria and the reality of the social order on the block. This is clearly evident when the confrontation between Sal and Buggin Out occurs. Mookie is thrust into two roles, his role through the eyes of Sal's pizzeria and his role with Buggin Out in the social world of the block. Mookie confronts Buggin Out by saying to him, after he has been asked to leave the pizzeria, 'What are you trying to do, fuck my shit up?'. Buggin Out responds 'I ain't trying to fuck your shit up, Mook'. later Buggin Out states 'Hey, Mook..stay black'. Is race declining or is class more significant?

Another example of double consciousness in the movie occurs when Mookie witnesses what he perceives to be Sal's advances towards his sister Jane. In this scene Mookie is identifying with being African American and his historical experience of how white males treated African American women in slavery. Jane, in this scene, defends Sal as being innocent, whereas Mookie is convinced that Sal is guilty and only wants to 'ride in the salami'. Students should pay close attention to this scene especially when Mookie and Jane are discussing Sal's intentions; on the wall above them Spike Lee has inserted the statement 'Tawana Told the Truth'. This refers to a case in New York City in which Tawana Brawley accused a group of white racists of raping her. What Lee is suggesting here is that although Brawley may have lied in the strict, *literal* sense, she was telling a larger historical truth:

white men have raped and victimized African American women. Harriet Jacobs (1988) profoundly portrays the symbolic reaction of Mookie in this scene:

The value of male slaves was primarily determined by the work they performed for whites. The value of the female slaves was derived not only from their work, but also from their ability to bear and rear children, the human property upon which the slave system depended. The slave codes drew no distinction between the slave's sexual autonomy and the master's property rights; slave women were thus subject to rape and to forced liaisons that both satisfied their master's sexual desires and increased their capital accumulation (1988, p. xxx-xxxi).

This scene represents the other side of Mookie's consciousness as an African American: the economic dependency of African Americans on the block and Mookie's role as perhaps the male 'slave', with the master (Sal) having freedom to do whatever he pleases. This historical experience places Mookie in a situation where he has to demonstrate that the former inability of the African American male slave to protect the female slave, in having autonomy over her sexual desires, is no longer the case, even though whites still control the economic and political system of the African American community on the block.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to engage students in a discussion on how racial groups in the movie are tied to a history of exploitation and institutional racism. Students may want to discuss how the actors in the film are not merely reacting to a practical situation on the block and how students from racial and ethnic groups on their campuses do not react either to the practical situation on campus, but may in fact base their responses to any given situation on campus as related to their racial and ethnic group's historical experiences of exploitation and institutional racism.

This is why Lee strategically places symbols in the movie to convey to the viewers that people's sense of self is not only based on their immediate experiences, but also on the accumulation of their experiences as a group throughout their history.

The role of gender

Spike Lee does little in the film to portray women in positive and empowered roles. Although the above scene in the film deals with an

important history, the historical treatment of African American women by white men, the film neither captures nor deals with sexism in the African American community. Almost all the women in the film are relegated to menial roles. Although African American males are located throughout the film in subordinate status arrangements, Lee does not balance their film image with the role of women in this African American community. Many of the women have very limited and stereotypical roles. Bell Hooks (1990) argues that the female characters in the film play a stereotypical sexist role.

Many of the scenes highlighting the presence of black women in the film appear spliced into the central drama (various conflicts between men) like commercials. They take the heat off and replace it with erotic play. Every relationship between black females and males in this film has a sexualized dimension. Every black female in the film, whether she be mother, daughter, or sister, is constructed at some point as a sex object (Hooks 1990, p. 176).

Reid (1993) argues that many of Spike Lee's 'black independent films' fail to create empowered black female characters.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to engage students in a critical discussion about the absence of empowered females in the film. The literature on black feminism can be used at this juncture to demonstrate how the film fails to deal with the reality of sexism in the African American community and African American male and female issues and conflicts.

Economic dependency and interracial conflict

In the film both Sal's pizzeria and the Korean grocery shop symbolize the way in which certain groups gain capital and benefit from an historical system of institutional racism and white American attitudinal perceptions of African Americans. Lee wants to demonstrate how these immigrant entrepreneurs are able to take advantage of their position in the social structure and the fact that they have not been systematically portrayed as less than equal to white Americans.

In one scene the Korean Americans, African Americans, Italian Americans and Puerto Rican Americans all illustrate the impact of white attitudinal perceptions on their racial and ethnic group's stereotypical views of each other. Pino stereotypes African Americans with the remark 'Take your fuckin pizza and go back to Africa'. The Italian police officer stereotypes Puerto Rican Americans with the remark

'Fifty in a car goya bean eaten. . . . ' The Korean stereotypes Jewish Americans (e.g., Mayor Koch) with the remark 'Bagel eating creme deluxe. . . . ' African Americans stereotype Italian Americans, and so on. Finally, 'We Love Radio Station, Love Daddy', tells the racial and ethnic groups in this scene 'time out . . . time out . . . you'll need to cool that shit out . . . and that's the truth . . . ruth'.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to ask students to think of the ways in which racial and ethnic groups in America are beginning to experience a double consciousness, seeing themselves in terms of their relationships to other groups (e.g., economic status, civil rights).

For example, although Sal has maintained the traditional values of the Italian American culture, he also understands the racial groups that frequent his pizzeria. He knows them, has watched them grow up, and participates in their lifestyles. In a sense Sal, and, even more so, Vito, have moved towards what Feagin (1989), using Gordon's scheme, defines as behaviour-receptional assimilation. That is, Sal does not intentionally discriminate between the African Americans on the block and his Italian American history and cultural values, but his sons, Pino and Vito, typify the dialectical tension inherent in double consciousness in the film. Unlike Sal, their consciousness is formed in reference to other groups: it is no longer a single, simple identity and it has both negative and positive potentials. Pino suffers from peer-group pressure and the trouble he has in defining his role in relation to the African Americans on the block. Let me be clear here. Sal is of the older generation that is still firmly rooted in Italian-American culture and values and which form a positive core of his identity. Sal could still proudly and *innocently* put only pictures of Italian-Americans on his wall; this choice reflects a single consciousness of pride in his heritage. Pino's defence of the picture selection, however, is no longer innocent – at this point in history; it is racist, the negative pole of a double consciousness in which one's own group is defined primarily as a rejection of other groups.

Students may want to discuss how Pino and Vito represent white ethnics at the crossroads, in the new reality in which European identity is fading away. White ethnics can't 'go back' to the traditions of the Old World, a single consciousness still represented by Sal. They can either become like Pino, the crabbed and racist defenders of a turf ('Bensenhurst') that has lost much of its cultural distinctiveness and only stands for exclusion and hatred; or, like Vito, they can accept and fit into the new, more complex multicultural society that is emerging.

Discussion topic(s)

After discussing the views of Sal, Pino and Vito, students may want to explore the political and economic causes of white ethnic attitudes by reading pieces such as Jonathan Rieder's (1985) book and the Edsalls' (1991) provocative article 'Race'. These concerns are more prevalent today on college and university campuses with debates on multicultural curricula and 'political correctness'. Students may want to discuss the issues associated with multicultural education and issues of inclusion versus exclusion.

The Korean shop owners, on the one hand, confront double consciousness by identifying with some of the prevailing stereotypes of the larger society to describe African Americans, and, on the other hand, by identifying with African Americans as a racial group. The latter is observed in the scene when they are confronted at the end of the film by mostly African Americans and some Hispanics who move towards their establishment with the intention of doing the same thing that was done to Sal's pizzeria. The Korean male responds to their social action, as he tries to fend them off with a broom, by saying 'Me same. . . . I'm black.' In this scene, African Americans and the Korean Americans are confronting the underpinnings of a capitalist system that is predatory.

Korean Americans have a double consciousness because they are not of America although they are in America. Yet, they are afforded the economic opportunity to position themselves, by the larger dominant groups in society, in such a way as to benefit from the historical and contemporary exploitation of African Americans. At the same time, they want to be symbolically like African Americans in order to maintain a sense of common purpose and struggle.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may ask students to reflect on the tensions between African American and Korean or Middle East store owners in African American communities in urban America. On the one hand tension may be generated by the African Americans' feeling of being 'ripped off' by outsiders who have little concern for the economic development of the community. On the other hand, tension may be generated by a feeling of resentment in which these groups, from the perspective of African Americans, are 'set-up' to demonstrate and popularize the economic 'inferiority' of African Americans.

Analysis and interpretation of the riot: beyond property rights

The final section of this article attempts to give the student, in a race and ethnic course, some insight into understanding and interpreting, from a sociological and a race and ethnic perspective, what primary factors were associated with the occurrence of the riot. The racial and ethnic conflict that leads to the riot starts with Buggin Out challenging Sal to put 'some black pictures on the wall'. The racial and ethnic conflict over the pictures on the wall is related to issues of power and stratification in race and ethnic relation courses.

There are two levels of race and ethnic power and stratification that can be used to begin to understand and interpret what the primary factors associated with the occurrence of the riot were. At the first level Sal has power, through his ownership of the pizzeria, to determine the kind of pictures he hangs on the wall. Sal has economic power in the sense that he is the sole owner of the pizzeria and so all the resources taken by his pizzeria belong to him alone. Buggin Out confronts Sal's economic power with potential or emerging political power. Buggin Out is aware of the primary consumers of Sal's pizzas (i.e., African Americans) and knows that if he can mobilize a boycott against Sal's pizzeria it would virtually cut off all Sal's economic power. This is the first level of understanding and interpreting race and ethnic power and stratification in the film with regards to the occurrence of the riot.

The second level is more historical and deserves more attention. The constitution of the United States preserves, legitimizes and values the individual right to have private property and accumulate capital. This is why at the end of the film and the aftermath of the riot the news on the 'We Love Radio' station says 'the Mayor [of New York] has convened a committee to look into the incident that occurred last night; the City of New York will not tolerate crimes against private property'. Yet, one's right to private property in the larger society often conflicts with individual and collective political rights legitimated by the democratic principles of the republic. Even though individual rights to own private property are sacred, in the larger society, the individual and collective right to question or protest at the intentions of private property owners is also sacred in the United States (e.g., free speech).

Buggin Out used a very successful historical strategy of resistance to challenge the economic power of Sal's pizzeria – boycott. The Civil Rights movement of the sixties used the bus boycott as an effective movement strategy to foster the empowerment of African Americans who challenged the economic and public institutions of the South that relegated them to separate but equal status. Buggin Out's reliance on this movement strategy was reflective of his historical and cultural values of resistance. It was also reflective, however, of the right of

individuals and collectivities to question the motives and intentions of private economic establishments that depend on individual and collective acts of consumerism.

Even though Buggin Out is unsuccessful at mobilizing the majority of African Americans on the block to boycott Sal's pizzeria, he is persistent. He finally gets the support of Radio Rachim and Smiley and confronts Sal's pizzeria. What ensues at this point is a racial and ethnic conflict that is rooted in the economic stratification of the block and the individual and collective rights now being pursued by Buggin Out, Radio Rachim and Smiley. Radio Rachim enters the struggle because Sal challenged his public right to play his music in Sal's private business. In this instance, Sal has legitimate authority to control the type of atmosphere in his establishment. However, Radio Rachim perceives it as Sal's dislike for his music and himself, since Radio Rachim's whole identity is tied to his radio.

The riot occurs out of the economic and identity frustration of the two parties involved. Sal continues to ask Radio Rachim to turn the music off (using his legitimate individual rights to control private property); Buggin Out asks for Sal to put 'some motherfuckin' black pictures on the wall' (using his individual and collective rights to challenge the intention of Sal's pizzeria), and Radio Rachim tells Sal to 'turn it [his music] off' (exercising his consumer preference [which is not legitimate in this instance]). Sal becomes angry and uses the word 'nigger'. The audience now becomes involved in the riot. The young African American male who confronts the 'De Mayor' stands up and says 'oh. . . so we are niggers now'. Sal smashes Radio Rachim's radio and the rest is history.

The riot shifts our attention to police actions as the police come and break up the fight between Sal and Radio Rachim, Buggin Out, and Sal's Boys [Pino and Vito]. Buggin Out is taken to the police car asking 'you are taking me out . . . what about Vito, Pino and Sal?'. This inquiry shows Buggin Out's awareness of the unequal treatment and assumption the police have made in defining the situation. From the policeman's point of view, Sal and his sons are the victims regardless of the circumstances. Radio Rachim, during this scene, is being choked by the more muscular police officer. Even though his partner tells him 'Gary, that's enough', he continues brutally choking Radio Rachim. Radio Rachim is killed by the officer. The police quickly exit from the scene. This action is related to the concept of isolated discrimination (Feagin 1989, p. 14). Isolated discrimination, as defined by Feagin, is

harmful action taken intentionally by a member of a dominant group against members of a subordinate racial or ethnic group, without being socially embedded in the larger organizational or community

context. An example might be a white police officer who implements antiblack hostility by beating up a black prisoner at every opportunity, even though police department regulations specifically prohibit and punish such actions (1989, p. 14).

The crowd now looks on with shock and uncertainty. The street-corner men remark, 'Ain't gone take this shit . . . fuckin police . . . this ain't no fuckin Alabama . . . Bull Conners shit'; another says, 'They didn't have to kill the boy'. The Hispanic male remarks 'Murder . . . Michael Stewart'. The African American male states 'Murder . . . Eleanor Bumpest'. These remarks relate to the historical and cultural vicissitudes of each person's experience in a society that is racially, ethnically, and economically divided.

'De Mayor' assumes the role of a charismatic leader trying to dissuade the people from doing something they will 'regret for the rest of their lives . . . [for] Sal and his boys had nothing to do with what the cops did'. 'De Mayor' and Buggin Out represent two halves of a whole subject: De Mayor is the voice of human compassion and individual caring, but without the hope of a changed future; Buggin Out, the negation of the Mayor, speaks for political action and collective identity, but without regard for the complexity and tragedy of human life. Taken separately, each position is limited and leads to no higher resolution; Lee, of course, does not answer the question whether a dialectical union of compassion and struggle is possible. Although the Mayor is unsuccessful in warding off the riot, he is successful in getting Sal and his sons to safety.

Mother sister, on the one hand, is cheering the crowd on 'Burn it down . . . burn it down'. Later, on the other hand, she is in the middle of the street, after the riot has been calmed, saying 'No. . . .no. . . .'. Mother sister is now deeply disturbed about the continual plight of African Americans, who must continue to use their individual and collective resistance strategies to empower themselves to foster social change. What she sees is history repeating itself and it is frightening. Smiley walks into the burnt out pizzeria and places the pictures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King on the wall.

The riot begins by Mookie throwing a trash can through the window. Mookie has now outlived his double consciousness in the sense of coping with his pent-up frustrations of being a 'Negro and American'. The last images of the movie show us the constitution of Mookie as a subject, no longer as an other or an object created in the white man's looking glass. Whether Mookie, with his new consciousness, will take Martin or Malcolm's path cannot, as yet, be answered. Did anyone **Do the Right Thing?**

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want students to discuss issues involving racial and ethnic group social movements and non-violent and violent civil right protest strategies in American society.

In many ways *Do The Right Thing* is a case of life imitating art. The riot in Los Angeles on 12 May 1992 and in the film are related to the deep-seated experiences of African Americans in a racist and capitalist society. The action of the police in the movie corresponds to the action of the Los Angeles police department and the verdict in the trial of the four police officers in Simi Valley. Police brutality, a major form of social injustice, was found to be appropriate action taken by these officers by a jury of our peers. The film and the real actions of over a year ago in Los Angeles are not broken statements about the legacy of racism in America, but in some sense are logically connected experiences of the life and times of African Americans in inner cities throughout the United States.

Discussion topic(s)

Professors may want to engage students in a discussion on the recent police incident in Los Angeles, where an African American male was brutally beaten by Los Angeles police officers for 'resisting arrest'. Professors may also want to engage students in a discussion about the media's coverage and controversy surrounding both the film and the riot in Los Angeles. Students may want to recall how the police action is called brutality by the media and the ensuing action in the riot, on the part of African Americans, is described as savage. Why the distinction?

Conclusion

In *Do The Right Thing* Spike Lee is attempting to demonstrate how African Americans have been able to use their material and cultural 'raw materials' to 'construct a whole range of responses' (Clarke *et al.* 1983, p. 45). Some of their responses may be viewed as coming from a repertoire of resistance to the specific history of their group which allows them socially to construct a reservoir of power and knowledge in their struggle to survive and 'win space' on the urban street (Clarke *et al.* 1983, p. 45). In this sense African Americans in the film have developed intervention strategies out of their historical experiences and cultural material to restate and transform their existence. Lee seems to be attempting to show how they respond to the hegemonic system of White rule on the block and in the larger society. He may have developed in the film 'institutional solutions' (Clarke *et al.* 1983,

p. 41). That is to say, the director may be attempting to show us how institutional solutions

structure how the dominant and subordinate cultures coexist, survive, but also struggle, with one another inside the same formation. Many of these institutions preserve the corporate culture of the subordinate class but also negotiate its relations with the dominant class. . . . The negotiated version shows how dominant values are not so much rejected or opposed as modified by the subordinate class as a result of circumstances and restricted opportunities . . . not because the class is passive and deferential to ruling class ideas, but because its perspectives are bounded and contained by immediate practical concerns or limited to concrete situations (Clarke *et al.* 1983, pp. 41-42).

In using this film in race and ethnic relations or minority studies courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, students, instructors and professors at colleges and universities are confronted with not only having to deal with the objective and subjective historical and cultural values and experiences depicted in *Do The Right Thing*, but also their own historical and cultural values and experiences. Questions arising from the film abound. Who was right? Who was wrong? Who did the right thing? What could Sal and Buggin Out have done to resolve the race and ethnic conflict in the film in a peaceful way? Did the stereotypes, power, authority, status, racial and ethnic stratification on the block, individual private property and individual and collective rights interfere with both parties coming to some mutual agreement with regard to some African American pictures being hung on the wall?

Although Sal and Mookie come to terms at the end of the film, it is clear that Sal defines and interprets the situation of race and ethnic conflict on the block and the riot from an economic, private property standpoint, and Mookie from an individual and collective rights point of view. Both see themselves as having to define the situation and the social order of the block from two different and, at times, contradictory vantage points.

Students should note that there are no single answers to the questions raised in the film about race and ethnic relations. However, discussion of *Do The Right Thing* in the classroom can lead to ways in which students can interact around common problems that confront these groups on an everyday basis. The questions do, however, allow everyone in a race and ethnic or minority studies course to reflect on the historical and cultural experiences of racial and ethnic group interactions and relations in the United States as well as our own objective and subjective experiences of these complex issues.

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Notes

1. Pino is Sal's elder son.
2. Recall in the movie the scene where Mookie asks Pino whether 'he reads'. His response is 'Yeah. . . . I read'.
3. Buggin Out is the militant character in the film.
4. Sal is the owner of the Italian pizzeria in the neighbourhood.
5. This refers to the promotion of NIKE basketball shoes by Michael ('Air') Jordan - Chicago Bull's star player and NBA all-star.
6. 'De Mayor' is the social drunk who sees himself as being responsible for maintaining order and looking after the children on the block.
7. Mookie is the African American male who delivers pizzas for Sal to customers in the neighbourhood.

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