

12: RACE I

Read: Wade, Defining Race, 1-15; Existing Approaches to Race, 16-36; Historicising Racialized Natures, 37-68

I. Conceptions of race¹

A. Race is a social fact

1. Wade emphasizes that when studying the history of race, one always needs to unpack the terms
2. For example, an earlier notion about racial type:
3. Saw it as something not directly observable
4. But rather, seen to be an underlying essence, subject to all kinds of variation in its observable manifestations
5. **DISCUSS:** to what extent is this notion the opposite of current notions about race?

B. We must pay careful attention to how such notions change

1. Wade discusses various notions about how a changing environment creates 'fixed' qualities
 - a. Contradiction
 - b. E.g., God created humanity, but sometime in the remote past the races were established
 - c. Some people believed in polygenesis: distinct origins of the races
2. He cites Young:
 - a. "The question is whether the old essentialising categories of cultural identity, or race, were really so essentialised, or have been retrospectively constructed as more fixed than they were. When we look at the texts of racial theory, we find that they are in fact contradictory, disruptive and already deconstructed."

C. Earlier meanings of race included seeing it in terms of lineage

¹ The first part of this lecture follows Wade's exposition of race.

1. All the descendants of a given set of ancestors were members of a common stock
 - a. E.g., the *race* of Abraham
- D. The meaning changed so that by the nineteenth-century the concept of race was a system for classifying *types*
1. Humans were divided into a limited number of permanent racial types, sometimes seen as having distinct origins
 2. Static, relatively unchanging—although keep in mind Wade’s point about internal contradictions challenging this notion of fixity
- II. Today:
- A. A typical definition of race: “an interbreeding population whose members share a greater number of traits with one another than they do with people outside the group” (Ferraro)
1. The notion of unambiguous categories based on distinct sets of biological attributes and inferred distinct descents
 2. Note that establishing a boundary using this definition would be very difficult
- III. Underlying premises of the social construct of race:
- A. First: biology determines behavior
1. Many earlier racial schemes included traits we no longer consider to be physically inherited—“degeneracy,” laziness, poverty
 - a. Note Wade’s discussion of earlier “racial” classifications that allow for environmental influence, effects of culture
 2. Cultural, moral, aesthetic traits were included as “racial” traits
 - a. This continues, in a sense, today: Wade’s points about “cultural racism”
 - 1) Good exercise: list all the “racial” traits that turn out to be cultural

2) One high school had a “race war” on its hands when white girls decided to “dress black”

b. Sometimes traits described as “ethnic” are in fact being posited as racial, but the speaker doesn’t want to appear racist

B Second underlying premise: Europeans are superior

C. Third premise: race can be scientifically studied (note: only a few scientists today believe this)

1. By taking careful measurements

a. A good book by Harvard geneticist Stephen Jay Gould discusses this premise: *The Mismeasure of Man*

2. They carefully measured hair color and texture, eye color and shape, thickness of lips, breadth of the nose, body stature, skin color

a. Next week we will see a video with an example of such “scientific” research projects

1) *Stolen Generations*

b. **DISCUSS:** other examples you know about?

D. Problems:

1. First: depending on who was doing the categorizing, some racial typologies had hundreds of categories while others had as few as three

a. The familiar Mongoloid, Caucasoid, Negroid

2. Second: external traits traditionally used to classify and identify races were found to not correlate well with other physical and biological traits

a. Which are often useful markers of populations (e.g., the Diego factor in blood type)

3. Third: the various schemes differ depending on the traits on which they are based

a. All the following derive, in part, from genetic inheritance

b. Skin color

- c. Body stature—would produce very different “racial” categories
 - d. Hair color
 - e. Blood type
 - f. Earlobe structure
4. Fourth: variations occur not only within, but between breeding populations
- a. Much more variation within a given “race” than between races (if your number of races is small)
5. Our reactions to the idea of using some of these characteristics (using height: “silly”) demonstrate that races are social constructions
- a. **DISCUSS:** Why not height?
 - b. **DISCUSS:** those who have read Huxley’s *Brave New World*: how do the categories of people differ?

IV. Race is a social construction, but what kind? Here is Wade’s argument

- A. The notion that races exist with definable physical characteristics
 - 1. And that some races are superior to others
 - 2. Is the result of particular historical processes
 - a. Colonization by European powers
- B. We can’t even assume there is such a thing as the brute fact of phenotypical variation
 - 1. We can’t stop at recognizing that races don’t exist as objective biological entities
 - 2. And then reconstruct an objective basis for recognizing ‘racial’ distinctions by grounding them in phenotype
 - 3. This glosses over the problem that the apparently “natural fact” of phenotypical variation is itself socially constructed
- C. Physical differences that have become cues for racial distinctions are quite particular ones

1. They correspond to the geographical encounters of Europeans in their colonial histories
2. It is *specific combinations* of skin color, hair type and facial features that have been worked into racial signifiers

D. Phenotype cannot be independent of history

1. Because only certain phenotypical variations become racial categories
 - a. The ones that count do so because they have emerged through history
2. This is why height doesn't work as a race
 - a. Height is important—and is a source of discrimination
 - 1) Why Randy Newman's ironic song "Short People" evoked such outrage—he was on to something that people didn't want to acknowledge
 - b. But height doesn't "do" what the social fact of race "does"—it can't
 - c. **DISCUSS:** what work—social, cultural, political, economic—does race do?

E. Conclusions: Racial classifications cannot be understood to be social constructions elaborated on the basis of phenotypical variation

1. Because they do this using the particular aspects of phenotypical variation that were worked into vital signifiers of difference
2. During European colonial encounters with others
3. The study of race is part of that history, not outside it

V. **EXERCISE:** before reading further, do this exercise with the current most prominent signifier of race, skin color

- A. Take out a piece of paper and list all the ways skin color alone doesn't "work"—is not successful at this task
 1. S. Asians' skin color darker than many African-Americans
 2. Many African-Americans would be considered white in Nigeria

3. Example of untranslatability of “white” into Spanish in Colombia
 - a. Blacks in the Vaupés where I did my fieldwork (on the equator and on the border between Brazil and Colombia)
 - b. Were called *blancos* (“whites”)
 - c. The important divide there was between *blancos* and *indígenas* (“Indians”)
 - d. To us, “white” signals skin color; clearly in the Vaupés its Spanish translation signaled “non-Indian,” and “not from here,” rather than skin color
 4. Brazilian use of “white” (Portuguese: *branco*) is also quite different from English
 5. Different meanings of “white” at different moments in history
 - a. Jews, Irish, Syrians were not “white” earlier in U.S. history
 - B. Should we conclude that all these classificatory schemes are wrong and only ours is correct?
- VI. Differences in racial classification systems around the world
- A. Constitute another set of evidence for a social constructionist explanation of race
 1. Like ours, these classifications derive from the type of colonial enterprise and sets of social relations that were established in each region
 - a. Gandhi was called a “nigger”
 2. Look at the TV news: you will see Afghanis, Pakistanis, etc. who are darker than many African Americans
 3. The populations on opposite coasts of the Red Sea look completely alike, yet the African ones are classified as “black” and the Middle Eastern ones classified as “white” (if one is using a threefold classification system)
 4. **DISCUSS:** any other examples?
 5. In North America: category ‘black’ supposedly includes anyone with a known ‘drop of black blood’

- a. Nagel discusses how different this is from how one is assigned to the category “Indian,” or “Native American”
6. Whereas in Latin America racial classifications take the form of a continuum of racial categories
- a. Often it is only people who look quite African in appearance who will be identified as ‘black’
 - b. Other people are classed by a variety of terms denoting a position in between
 - c. A Puerto Rican or Cuban may not be classed as black in their country, but might be in the U.S.
 - 1) Not to say racism doesn’t exist in Puerto Rico or Cuba (just ask any dark-skinned Puerto Rican or Cuban)
 - a) But the system there is “colorism,” not our binary classification system
 - b) Colorism exists in the U.S., too
 - d. Brazil: the phrase “money whitens”
 - e. Also in Brazil “*A sua branqueza*,” “your whiteness,” may be said as a way of buttering someone up
 - 1) Both notions sound silly in English
 - f. Someone poor who has light skin in Brazil *will be perceived* and classified as darker than a comparably colored person who is rich
 - 1) All kinds of studies have been done establishing this
7. In the U.S., race and class are correlated, but racial classification isn’t changed by class
- a. People do pass, of course—a “one-drop” rule makes this quite possible
 - b. And colorism results in lighter-skinned people being more likely to be higher socioeconomically
 - c. But in Brazil colorism processes are labeled, are very explicit

- B. Clearly, when used to refer to categories of people, “black,” no matter what the language, has no simple universally applicable referent
1. How could it be possible to create an objective concept that’s applicable everywhere?
 2. Impossible
 - a. No matter what the terminology is (e.g., “Negroid”—sounds scientific, but simply derives from Spanish for “black”)

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.226 Ethnic and National Identity
Fall 2011

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.