

Social Construction of Race

Race is constructed. Boundaries are not natural but created. Constructions of race and politicized nature of language can be discussed together. There is always political contestation over who is in a group, who is out, how many groups there are, what their boundaries are.

This matters because it is about the distribution of rights and privileges. Some people own land, some do not. Some people are rich, some are poor. Some are the bosses, some are the workers. Some have political rights, some do not. Those who are wealthy and powerful tend to believe that they deserve what they have and construct accounts that justify their position. They develop ideologies and value systems which justify their inherent superiority, and create beliefs about why those who are poor deserve to be poor.

Today, in our society, the wealthy and powerful tend to believe that their positions are the direct result of their own individual hard work or intelligence or self-discipline and character, and they believe that those who are worse off than they are just lazy, stupid, or undisciplined. In medieval Europe, the wealthy believed that God had placed each person in his or her positions, and their duty was to live the life to which they had been born, without challenging God's wisdom in creating inequality. They also believed that people who were not Christians were infidels who deserved to be conquered or enslaved. In the 19th century, Europeans came to believe that they were naturally, biologically, racially superior to the people they had conquered and colonized, turning the ideas of biological evolution and the survival of the fittest into the tenets of scientific racism.

Those who are poor and weak either accept the dominant ideology that explains their lower position, or develop an alternate ideology that challenges the dominant view of who is superior and who is inferior. Race matters in the US, then, not because it would logically have to matter, but because it became the basis for Europeans' self-justifications for conquering and enslaving other people and taking control of their land. The other groups became race conscious in response. Naming and renaming, grouping and regrouping as part of a multi-faceted contestation over rights, rewards, power, and privilege in society. If you accept the dominant ideology, you accept the name the dominant group gives you. If you reject the dominant ideology, you reject its name for you and you name yourself in another way, to express your counter-ideology. Naming and renaming is by no means trivial.

1. White, Caucasian, European American. (Or German, Swiss, Danish, Russian, Italian, Swedish.) Major Protestant attacks on Catholics through 1960. Racial notions of Jewish. Irish considered a race by English, tied to colonization. Southern Europeans vs. Northern. "White" is a racist construction; it is defined and has meaning with reference to "black" or "colored." Aryan race. Racists around 1900 were especially concerned with the "racial" differences among Europeans. "Caucasian" is linked to Caucasus Mountains, the presumed origin of the race. It is a term from scientific racialism: Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongloid as the three basic "types" of people. [This classification ignores lots of smaller subgroupings.] In today's world, sounds old fashioned, gentrified way of saying "white." To say Caucasian would be to connote a sense of

biological classifications as basic, while "white" can be more readily interpreted in social terms. KKK uses "white," and the "White Students Alliance" sort of sounds racist. Many people use "Caucasian" because it just sounds more educated or correct. But in today's nuances, you could say "White Students Against Racism" but probably not "Caucasian Students Against Racism." I've started using "European American" and "European" as a response to the shift to African American. I like it because it points to origins, and fits with a regionalist or geographic approach to identity construction, which seem better to me than racist constructions.

2) Black, Negro, African American, Afro-American. Also: African, Nigerian, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Haitian. Reality of mixed ancestry. Reality of cultural identity. Reality of white racism which overarches people's self-definitions. Negro=Spanish for black. Used by Europeans in African to denote those eligible to be slaves. Passing. Recent meanings. Things tend to go in cycles. Each generation of politically active people tends to reject the word of the previous generation and use a new one with new connotations & significations. Around turn of the century, references to Africans were either idea of "back to Africa" or pejorative, belong in Africa, not US. Negro tied to 20th century integrationist politics, The New Negro, more progressive, middle-class, educated, respectable. To use the word was partly to claim belonging in the US, part of US culture as inherited from Europe. People who called themselves Negroes were generally not emphasizing their links to Africa. "Colored" the genteel word for blacks, can used by blacks among themselves in a friendly way, especially older southerners. Acknowledges the varied racial mixture of the people in the category. Black has been used all along. In response to the gentility of colored, black stresses its oppositeness from white, among blacks in the late 1960s, early 1970s it went with black nationalism, black power, black pride, black is beautiful. Currents of Pan-Africanism in this period, too. Afro-American is used in 1970s to pick up this theme, somewhat fades in the 1980s. African American rises in the 1990s. Emphasizes pride in things African, African heritage. Nationalist Africanist images & separatist politics tend to predominate when whites are being resistant.

In South Africa, there were 4 races: White, Indian, Colored (mixed white & African, dating from early colonial period), Black/African. Whites were on top, but Indians and Coloreds had more rights & privileges than Blacks/Africans. In challenging apartheid, Colored people rejected that label and started calling themselves Black.

3) Hispanic = hispano, references Spanish. Emphasizes Spanish language, European heritage. Spanish-surname. Spanish are Hispanic. Filipinos with Spanish surnames get pegged as hispanic (which they are) but are from Asia & are Asian-Americans. Tends to be used on East Coast, preferred by Cubans, Puerto Ricans. Latino emphasizes origin in America, preferred by Mexicans & Central Americans, the term of choice on the west coast. A more geographic, racialized identity, tends to point to indigenous ancestry. Mexican American, Mexican, Mexicano, Chicano. Plus the specific national identities: Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Argentinian, Indio.

4) Asian. Oriental is the old-fashioned word, means "easterner." Is out of fashion, and is sometimes considered insulting by young politicized Asian people, but has never been used as the attack word. (Insult words are Jap, Chink). Chinese, Japanese, Hmong, Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, Filipino. People mostly identify with their country of origin, not with the category "Asian." The exception is second and third generation Americans of Asian descent who

sometimes have a broader identity. People get beat up on the streets regardless of where their ancestors came from. Vincent Chin, the adopted son of a US-born Chinese descent father and a Taiwan-born mother who was raised in Detroit, was beaten and killed by European American men who called him a Jap who took their jobs. The attackers got off with fines, which outraged Asian Americans and precipitated the Asian American movement. We use the racialized word "Asian" to refer to the "type" that includes Chinese, Japanese, Koreans. But this physical type blurs across the category: Southeast Asians, Indians, Pacific Islanders, Arabs are all lumped into the census category. None of these people think of themselves as being all in one "race."

5) Native Americans. Indian is the mixed up label the Europeans gave. Because they are used to it, it is the label people often use for themselves. On reservations, people identify more with their specific groups: Ojibwa, Cherokee, Navajo, Lakota, etc. People have separate languages, cultures, histories. But there is also intermarriage and intermingling, especially in the cities, and there is also a common sense of being the Native Americans, First Americans, indigenous, original people. American Indians, (or Amerinds). Because everyone born in America can claim to be Native American, this has been an uneasy usage, and it moves to Native American Indians.

6) Mixed ancestry. What group do you belong to?

7) Colored, minority, person of color. All the constructions that fall out from the history of being lumped together by colonizers/oppressors who defined themselves as "white." People hate being lumped together as "nonwhite." All they have in common is a common oppressor. But in the US where whites really are the majority, it is hard to gain advances one subgroup at a time. You either have to argue that your group deserves to be treated as white, even though all the other groups deserve what they get, or you have to band together with other groups. When you band together, you need a label. "Person of color" is the currently understood in most circles as the label for that common identity. Its advantage over "minority" is that it links people in the US, where nonwhite people are a minority, to the post-colonial nations around the world, where the nonwhites are a majority. Even though it is semantically the same, colored person cannot be used in the same way because the language is tied to old racial systems: the doors on segregated bathrooms read "white" and "colored." Colored was a racial subdivision in South African apartheid.