

# The Theory of Racial Formation

Race is a way of “making up people.”<sup>1</sup> The very act of defining racial groups is a process fraught with confusion, contradiction, and unintended consequences. Concepts of race prove to be unreliable as supposed boundaries shift, slippages occur, realignments become evident, and new collectivities emerge. State-imposed classifications of race, for example, face continuing challenges by individuals and groups who seek to assert distinctive racial categories and identities. Historical shifts in scientific knowledge, in fields ranging from physical anthropology to the genomic sciences, fuel continuing debates about what race may or may not mean as an indicator of human variation. While such debates and reformulations regarding the concept of race initially occur in specific institutional arenas, public spaces, or academic fields, their consequences are often dramatic and reverberate broadly throughout society.

Race-making can also be understood as a process of “othering.” Defining groups of people as “other” is obviously not restricted to distinctions based on race. Gender, class, sexuality, religion, culture, language, nationality, and age, among other perceived distinctions, are frequently evoked to justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, subordinate status, and in some cases violent conflict and war. Classifying people as other, and making use of various perceived attributes in order to do so, is a universal phenomenon that also classifies (and works to amalgamate and homogenize) those who do the classifying (Blumer 1958). “Making up people” is both basic and ubiquitous. As social beings, we must categorize people so as to be able to “navigate” in the world—to discern quickly who may be friend or foe, to position and situate ourselves within prevailing social hierarchies, and to provide clues that guide our social interactions with the individuals and groups we encounter.

But while the act of categorizing people and assigning different attributes to such categories may be universal, the categories themselves are subject to enormous variation over historical time and space. The definitions, meanings, and overall coherence of prevailing social categories are always subject to multiple interpretations. No social category rises to the level of being understood as a fixed, objective, social fact.

One might imagine, for example, that the category of a person’s “age” (as measured in years) is an objective social category. But even this familiar concept’s meaning varies across time and space. In many societies where the elderly are venerated and highly valued as leaders and living repositories of wisdom, individuals tend to overstate their age in years. By contrast, people in the youth-oriented United States tend to understate how old they are. Processes of classification, including self-classification, are

reflective of specific social structures, cultural meanings and practices, and of broader power relations as well.

The definitions of specific categories are framed and contested from “above” and “below.” The social identities of marginalized and subordinate groups, for example, are both imposed from above by dominant social groups and/or state institutions, and constituted from below by these groups themselves as expressions of self-identification and resistance to dominant forms of categorization. In any given historical moment, one can understand a social category’s prevailing meaning, but such understandings can also be erroneous or transitory. They are often no more than the unstable and tentative result of the dynamic engagement between “elite” and “street” definitions and meanings.

## Race as a Master Category

It is now widely accepted in most scholarly fields that race is a *social construction*. Simply stating that race is socially constructed, however, begs a number of important questions. How is race constructed? How and why do racial definitions and meanings change over time and place? And perhaps most important, what role does race play within the broader social system in which it is embedded?

With respect to this last question, we advance what may seem an audacious claim. We assert that in the United States, *race is a master category*—a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States. Obviously, some clarification is in order. We are not suggesting that race is a transcendent category—something that stands above or apart from class, gender, or other axes of inequality and difference. The literature on intersectionality has clearly demonstrated the mutual determination and co-constitution of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. It is not possible to understand the (il)logic of any form of social stratification, any practice of cultural marginalization, or any type of inequality or human variation, without appreciating the deep, complex, comingling, interpenetration of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In the cauldron of social life, these categories come together; they are profoundly transformed in the process.<sup>2</sup>

We hold these truths of intersectional analysis to be self-evident. But we also believe that race has played a unique role in the formation and historical development of the United States. Since the historical encounter of the hemispheres and the onset of transatlantic enslavement were the fundamental acts of race-making, since they launched a global and world-historical process of “making up people” that constituted the modern world, race has become the *template* of both difference and inequality. This is a world-historical claim, but here we develop it only in the context of the United States.

We suggest that the establishment and reproduction of different regimes of domination, inequality, and difference in the United States have consciously drawn

upon concepts of difference, hierarchy, and marginalization based on race. The genocidal policies and practices directed towards indigenous peoples in the conquest and settlement of the “new world,” and towards African peoples in the organization of racial slavery, combined to form a template, a master frame, that has perniciously shaped the treatment and experiences of other subordinated groups as well. This template includes not only the technologies (economic, political, cultural) of exploitation, domination, and deracination; it also includes the technologies of resistance: self-activity (James et al., 1958); “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*,” sisterhood, and abolition democracy (Du Bois 2007 [1935]).

Consider the questions of class and gender. Historically in the United States, race has provided a master category for understanding the definition of class and the patterns of class consciousness, mobilization, and organization. Class stratification in the United States has been profoundly affected by race and racism, and the reproduction of class inequalities is inextricably linked to the maintenance of white supremacy. Race has shaped the meaning of such concepts as work and worker, labor and employment, master and servant, supervisor and subordinate (Roediger 2007 [1991]). Race is a fundamental organizing principle of social stratification. It has influenced the definition of rights and privileges, the distribution of resources, and the ideologies and practices of subordination and oppression. The concept of race as a marker of difference has permeated all forms of social relations. It is a template for the processes of marginalization that continue to shape social structures as well as collective and individual psyches. Drawing upon social psychology and mind science research that explores mechanisms of “othering,” John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez assert: “Without being identical, most of the forms of marginalization and stratification in society share a common set of heuristics and structure, which is patterned on race” (Powell and Menéndez n.d.).

From conquest and slavery on, racial parallels and racial “crossings” have shaped gender relations. Women and slaves were at best lower-status humans, at worst not human at all. They were both subject to chattelization. Their labor was coerced and unremunerated; they were physically brutalized. Although there were, of course, very distinct and widely varied experiences of subordination among different classes of women and of blacks, the objectification of both groups was near-total. Repression of women’s autonomy, intellect, and bodily integrity was obsessive and often violent (Beauvoir 1989; Federici 2004). Blacks, Indians, and women were afforded very little recognition: Their entry into the public sphere, corporeal integrity, and intellectual capacity was strenuously denied. In political and legal theory, the sexual contract and the racial contract have been extensively compared (Goldman 1911; Rubin 1975; Pateman 1988; Mills 1999).

The corporeal distinction between white men and the others over whom they ruled as patriarchs and masters, then, links race to gender, and people of color to women. Whether they were defined by their racial status (as enslaved or “free,” black, Indian, *mestiz@*), or by the patriarchal family (as daughters, wives, mothers), they

were corporeally stigmatized, permanently rendered as “other than,” and the possessions of, the white men who ruled. As in the case of class distinctions, evolving gender distinctions coincided in important ways with racial ones. In part, this too was corporeal: Perhaps at the core of intersectionality practice, as well as theory, is the “mixed-race” category. Well, how does it come about that people can be “mixed”? What does the presence of mixed people mean for both white and male supremacy?

In short, the master category of race profoundly shaped gender oppression. It is fascinating that this pattern of combined political influence and political tension, which was established in the antebellum intersection between abolitionism and early feminism and reproduced during the struggle for women’s suffrage and against Jim Crow at the turn of the 20th century, was then reiterated again in the post-World War II years in “intersectional” alliance and conflict between the civil rights movement and “second-wave” feminism. To be sure, there were many “intersections” between the two patterns described here. The tense and ultimately ruptural relationship between “first-wave” feminism and the black freedom movement around the turn of the 20th century is perhaps the best-known example: The (white) women’s suffrage movement broke with its former black allies, abandoning black women (and black men too) in the process, as the Jim Crow system was institutionalized in the United States. Southern states’ ratification of the 19th Amendment was conditional on their continued denial of black voting rights. Such black women activists as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as many lesser-known figures, fiercely denounced this as a betrayal. Of course, it reflected the pervasive white racism of the epoch (see Crenshaw 1991; Cooper 1998; Collins 2008 [1999]; Davis 2011 [1983]).

While race is a template for the subordination and oppression of different social groups, we emphasize that it is also a template for resistance to many forms of marginalization and domination. The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, for example—the women’s movement, the student movement, the anti-war movement, the gay liberation movement—were inspired by and consciously drew upon the black movement’s theoretical insights, strategies, and tactics to organize their specific constituencies, make political demands, and challenge existing practices of exclusion and subordination. These movement challenges underscore the dual-edged and dynamic qualities that inhere in the social category of race. These qualities are, once again, economic, political, and cultural technologies. They involve asserting previously stigmatized identities, “fusing” previously “serialized” groups (Sartre 2004), creating “commons” where resources can be shared. “Making up people” racially, then, has been “portable” across U.S. history. It has spread from one oppressed group to another and proved transferable to other marginalized identities, social cleavages, and political struggles.

Before we can consider and fully evaluate the notion of race as a master category of social organization in the United States, we need to think about how race itself is defined, what meanings are attached to it, and how it is deployed to create,

reproduce, or challenge racist structures. The process of race making, and its reverberations throughout the social order, is what we call racial formation. We define racial formation as the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.

Our presentation of racial formation theory proceeds in several steps. First, we provide a concept of racialization to emphasize how the phenomic, the corporeal dimension of human bodies, acquires meaning in social life. How are corporeal differences among humans apprehended and given meaning? Next, we advance the concept of racial projects to capture the simultaneous and co-constitutive ways that racial meanings are translated into social structures and become racially signified. Then, we discuss the problem of racism in an attempt to specify under what conditions a racial project can be defined as racist. Finally, we discuss racial politics, the way society is racially organized and ruled. Here, we consider despotism, racial democracy, and racial hegemony as frameworks for racial rule and racial resistance. We suggest that in the early 21st century the hegemonic concept of race in U.S. society is that of colorblindness. The ideological hegemony of colorblindness, however, is extremely contradictory and shallow. It confronts widespread resistance and falls short of achieving the political stability that hegemonic projects are supposed to deliver. This chapter ends there; the post-World War II political trajectory of race is treated in detail in the chapters that follow.

## Racialization

Race is often seen as a social category that is either objective or illusory. When viewed as an objective matter, race is usually understood as rooted in biological traits, ranging from such familiar phenomic markers as skin color, hair texture, or eye shape, to more obscure human variations occurring at the genetic or genomic levels. When viewed as an illusion, race is usually understood as an ideological construct, something that masks a more fundamental material distinction or axis of identity: our three paradigms of ethnicity, class, and nation typify such approaches. Thus race is often treated as a metonym or epiphenomenon of culture (in the ethnicity paradigm), inequality and stratification (in the class paradigm), or primordial peoplehood (in the nation paradigm).

On the objective side, race is often regarded as essence, as something fixed and concrete. The three main racial classifications of humans once posed (and now largely rejected) by physical anthropology, Negroid, Caucasoid, and Mongoloid, are examples of such an essentialist perspective. Another example is mixed-race identity: To consider an individual or group as multiracial or mixed race presupposes the existence of clear, discernible, and discrete races that have subsequently been combined to create a hybrid, or perhaps mongrel, identity. Here race is functioning as a metonym for species, although that connection is generally not admitted in the present day.





















































2. The notion of *intersectionality* was advanced by legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, who argued that both oppression and resistance are always situated in multiple categories of difference (Crenshaw 1989). Failure to grasp how categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class dynamically interact and shape one another, she asserted, led to a fragmented politics:
- Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. (Crenshaw 1991, 1242)

Two other key intersectionality theorists should be mentioned. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the mutual determination of race, gender, and class in her survey and theoretical synthesis of the themes and issues of black feminist thought. Collins invented the phrase “matrix of domination” to describe the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (Collins 2008 [1999] 227–228). Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues that race and gender are relational concepts in an interlocking system, providing a historical examination of citizenship and labor in the United States between 1870 and 1930. Glenn argues that these categories cannot be understood separately, but are defined and given meaning in relationship to each other: “Race and gender share three key features as analytic concepts: (1) they are relational concepts whose construction involves (2) representation and material relations and (3) in which power is a constitutive element” (Glenn 2002, 12–13). In many respects, race is gendered and gender is racialized. Inequality is always racialized and gendered as well. There are no clear boundaries between the “regions” of hegemony, so political conflicts will often invoke some or all these themes simultaneously.

3. “The truth is that there are no races; there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us. . . . The evil that is done is done by the concept, and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application” (Appiah 1992, 45). Appiah’s eloquent and learned book fails, in our view, to dispense with the race concept, despite its anguished attempt to do so; this indeed is the source of its author’s anguish. We agree with him as to the non-objective character of race, but fail to see how this recognition justifies its abandonment.
4. George L. Mosse (1985) argues that anti-semitism only began to be racialized in the 18th century. For a competing view, see Thomas 2010.
5. As Marx put it:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. (1967, 75)

David E. Stannard (1992) argues that the wholesale slaughter perpetrated upon the native peoples of the Western hemisphere is unequalled in history, even in our own bloody century. See also Lovejoy and Rogers, eds. 1994.

6. Debates of a similar nature also took place among the subjects of conquest and enslavement. On Native American perspectives, see Calloway 1994; Richter 2003; White 2010. On African perspectives, see Opoku-Agyemang et al., eds. 2008; Thornton 2012.

7. In Virginia, for example, it took about two decades after the establishment of European colonies to extirpate the indigenous people of the greater vicinity; 50 years after the establishment of the first colonies, the elaboration of slave codes establishing race as *prima facie* evidence for enslaved status was well under way. See Jordan (2012 [1968]).
8. In 1550–1551 two Spanish Dominicans, Bartolomeo de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, conducted a prolonged theological debate in Valladolid, Spain, about the humanity and spiritual status of Spain's Native American subjects. The debate was carried out at the behest of the Spanish king, Charles V, and in the shadow of the Inquisition. While ostensibly theological, and thus focused on such questions as the status—or even presence—of the souls of the Indians, the debate also addressed questions of Spanish imperial development strategy, notably the scope and legitimacy of slavery and the status of the *encomienda* system vis-à-vis religious and royal authority. See Hanke 1974; Todorov 1984.
9. For a pointed, parallel demonstration of the imperative of racial classification during relatively early stages of conquest, see the genre of Mexican *casta* paintings (Denver Art Museum 2004; Katzew 2005).
10. Proslavery physician Samuel George Morton (1799–1851) compiled a collection of 800 crania from all parts of the world, which formed the sample for his studies of race. Assuming that the larger the size of the cranium translated into greater intelligence, Morton established a relationship between race and skull capacity. Gossett reports that “In 1849, one of his studies included the following results: the English skulls in his collection proved to be the largest, with an average cranial capacity of 96 cubic inches. The Americans and Germans were rather poor seconds, both with cranial capacities of 90 cubic inches. At the bottom of the list were the Negroes with 83 cubic inches, the Chinese with 82, and the Indians with 79” (Gossett 1997 [1965], 74). When Steven Jay Gould reexamined Morton's research, he found that the data were deeply, though probably unconsciously, manipulated to agree with his “a priori conviction about racial ranking” (1981, 50–69).
11. See UNESCO 1950/1951. The production of the documents was coordinated by Alfred Metraux (1951). The 1950 authors included Professors Ernest Beaglehole (New Zealand), Juan Comas (Mexico), E. Franklin Frazier (U.S.), Humayun Kabir (India), Claude Lévi-Strauss (France), Morris Ginsberg (United Kingdom), and Ashley Montagu (U.S.). It was revised by Montagu “after criticism submitted by Professors Hadley Cantril, E. G. Conklin, Gunnar Dahlberg, Theodosius Dobzhansky, L. C. Dunn, Donald Hager, Julian S. Huxley, Otto Klineberg, Wilbert Moore, H. J. Mullet, Gunnar Myrdal, Joseph Needham, and Curt Stern” (ibid, 35). The 1950 document was criticized as excessively sociologically oriented; the 1951 revision included text drafted by anthropologists, geneticists, and biologists as well. On Metraux see Prins 2007.
12. These are complex cases. The Cherokee Freedmen are the descendants of black slaves owned by the Cherokee (Jones 2009). The Seminole Blacks are the descendants of U.S. maroons who fled slavery to tribal lands in Florida, Indian territory controlled by Spain until 1821. The U.S. fought two “Seminole Wars” (1817–1818 and 1835–1842) to recapture the area and reimpose slavery. Many Seminoles were transported (or fled) to the Oklahoma territory, but some remained in Florida. In 1849, threatened by slave-raiders, c.200 armed Black Seminoles under the leadership of John Horse escaped from Florida and conducted a heroic “long march” across slave-holding Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas.

Accompanied by some traditional (i.e., non-black) Seminole comrades led by the Seminole chief Coacoochee. This amazing feat culminated in their crossing into abolitionist Mexico in July 1850; they formed a community in Coahuila that is still called *Nacimiento de los Negros*. See Mulroy 2007.

13. The Implicit Bias Test (IAT) was developed in the mid-1990s by experimental/social psychologist Anthony G. Greenwald. It has spawned a large literature and been applied to various issues of bias (notably race, gender, and stereotyping of various types) in numerous settings, particularly educational, political, and legal. For a small sample of relevant work by Greenwald and collaborators, see Greenwald et al. 2003; Greenwald et al. 2009; Kang et al. 2012.
14. The legacy of Kant is particularly evident here (McCarthy 2009), but sociological and psychological concepts such as “consciousness of kind” (Giddings 1932) have also acquired great followings over the years.
15. See “The Conservation of Races” (1993 [1897]), an early statement that has occasioned much debate among Du Bois scholars (Marable 1986, 35–38; Appiah 1992, 28–46; Lewis 1993, 372–373; Reed 1997a).
16. Boas’s work has drawn contemporary criticism for its residual essentialism; his early physical anthropology at times overwhelmed his vaunted cultural relativism (Boas 1912a, 1912b; Williams 1996).
17. Park’s *Race and Culture* (1950) is still useful; see also Lyman 1992; Steinberg 2007. Locke’s 1915 lectures at Howard University, unpublished until 1992, bear a remarkable resemblance to contemporary racial theories and comparative historical sociologies of race (Locke 1992 [1915]).
18. Proposition 54 was defeated, less because voters wished to preserve racial categorization as an overall state practice, but rather because in a few particular areas of state activity they had been convinced that maintaining racially based data was good for society overall. A particularly crucial source of Connerly’s defeat was a series of campaign ads run by medical societies arguing that collecting racial data was important for public health purposes (HoSang 2010).
19. In August, 2012 the Bureau announced that it was considering redefining the Top of Form–Bottom of Form “Hispanic” category to the status of a racial category, possibly called “Hispanic/Latino,” that would be equivalent on the form to white or black. See Cohn 2012.
20. We are not unaware, for example, that publishing this work is itself a racial project.
21. *Floyd, et al. v. City of New York, et al.*, a class action suit brought by the Center for Constitutional Rights on behalf of victims of “stop and frisk” racial profiling by New York City police, was decided on August 12, 2013. Federal judge Shira Scheindlin decided for the plaintiffs and ordered a series of modification and reforms of “stop and frisk.” See Center for Constitutional Rights 2013. Challenges to the decision suggest that the case’s ultimate outcome remains in doubt.
22. Racial jurisprudence largely relies on the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and on the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The full extent of Supreme Court rulings on the nature of racism cannot be addressed here. An exemplary decision is *Washington v. Davis* (U.S. Supreme Court 1976), which established the rule of “invidious discriminatory purpose” as the criterion for determining if discrimination had occurred. The Court understood “purpose” as “intent” and refused to extend its concept of discrimination to include “disparate

- impact”; in other words the consequences of practices alleged to be discriminatory were officially ignored. See Pillai 2001.
23. Bonilla-Silva defines this view as an “institutionalist perspective,” in which “racism is defined as a combination of prejudice and power that allows the dominant race to institutionalize its dominance at all levels in a society (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 466). See also Katz 2003.
  24. See our debate with Joe Feagin and Chris Elias over these issues: Feagin and Elias 2013; Omi and Winant 2013.
  25. In practice, this just means rendering the racial dimensions of race informal, outside explicit legal regulation, but still subject to political pressures, and thus to racist projects and anti-racist ones as well. Thus it may be an overstatement to say that such restrictions were “abolished.”
  26. This term refers to the practice, widespread throughout the Americas, whereby runaway slaves formed communities in remote areas, such as swamps, mountains, or forests, often in alliance with dispossessed indigenous peoples. The Black Seminoles discussed above were a maroon people.