

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS, HISTORICAL GROUNDS

By Shay-Akil McLean

Abstract

While “race is a social construct” is a common saying, the meaning of social construction escapes contemporary scientific critiques of biological race concepts. As a result, the social construction of race is often not enough to challenge the proponents of biological race concepts. Now, even anti-racist racialists agree that race is a social construct while also being biologically based. Needed to address this problem is both a critical historiography of race and racism and evolutionary biology to understand the relationship between race, racism, bodies, and biology. In this paper, I demonstrate the importance of what I call the historical grounds of the social construction of race and racism. This is done by presenting a settler-colonial critique of racial formation theory revealing racism as the etiological foundation of race by reviewing the temporal relations between historical events central to the social construction of race and racism.

Key words: race, racism, racial formation

Introduction

“Race is a social construct.” In the face of biological concepts of race, this statement suggests that the speaker is against racial bias. However, this mainstream rebuttal is not enough to dispel concepts of biological race. As Yudell et al. (2016) duly noted in *Taking Race Out of Human Genetics: Engaging a Century-long Debate about the Role of Race in Science*, it is time to consider removing race as a variable when discussing human genetics. Sociologist and anthropologist W. E. B. Du Bois set the foundation for the scientific critique of race, although racial social

constructionism is rarely attributed to his interdisciplinary work (Du Bois 1898). Du Bois’ approach to explaining the social causes behind racial inequity explore the complicated relationship between race, biology, and genetics. There has been an increasing call-to-action to remove race as a variable from the study of human genetics. However, this anti-racist approach is, at best, an attempt to shift the academy’s focus from the biology of race and racial identity to address the social problem of racism. Given the goal to remove race from genetics, this deviation is counter-intuitive: shifting the focus from race to racism implies that race is separate from racism.

Attempting to separate the shared duality of race and racism is rooted in the *Boasian* theorization of race. The Boasian model relegates race to culture and identity, thereby allowing scholars to discuss the politics of race without including racism (Boas 1921; Roseman 2014). By comparison, a *Du Boisian* theorization model explores the concept of race as motivated by racism and understands that racialization is the social reproduction of racialized distinctions motivated by enactments of political control. This *Du Boisian* theory of the race concept models race as the social problem of racism, the symptomatic and etiological foundations of the social construction of race.

The knowledge we produce about the classification system and its consequences become central to the analytic seeking of not socially reproducing it. The first step towards something like the abolition of race is to model it as a dynamic living system of practices that are taught, invested in, incentivized, and require particular conditions as well as producing conditions. This is but a humble walk towards an understanding. To do this, I seek to develop a temporal model of events as *sites* of the social construction of race and racism. This approach is what I call *eventful temporality*, which is modeled after W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1989) definition of a social problem, revealing the contingent events central to racial formation over time. It’s

an understanding of actions, dynamics, contingencies, randomness, probability, conditions, and resources. The goal of such an understanding is to develop a robust theory of race based on the context of the material constructions of relationships observed between varying conditions, actions, interactions, and events from time to time and place to place.

Social constructionism needs to be more than a means through which anthropologists claim anti-racist leanings and become a larger call for anti-racist practices. How can this be done? I argue that following a *Du Boisian* theorization of race and racism allows for anthropologists to move beyond treating settler colonialism as an event and moving toward treating it as a process that is enacted through collective coordinated and uncoordinated human actions. Below, I review the definitional dilemma of race, current focuses on phenotype rather than power, and focusing on the historical grounds of social constructionism. This requires a theory of race that faces the colonial hostilities that it perpetuates, which requires a historically informed definition of race grounded in practice.

Definitional Dilemma

In mainstream scholarship, race is conflated with ethnicity, referred to as identity, divorced from racism, and commonly referred to as cultural difference (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Omi and Winant 2015; Rodriguez 2000). Framing the researcher’s understandings as either seeing race as useful for understanding genetic susceptibility to disease versus that of a cultural construct always fails to tell the full and factual story of what race is. Many can and do simultaneously hold the belief that race is sociological, biological, and cultural. In any case, these critiques fall short of effectively combating hereditarian arguments and the political arrangements that come with them. Much like that of the 1951 UNESCO Statement’s separation of “social racism” from that of “racial science,” the social

construction of race has done more for advancing White supremacy under covert means than ever killing it off. The conflation of the structural inequality caused by race/ism with contemporary identity allows racialization and race/ism to hide under the guise of culture. The separation of race from that of racism is an ideological trick that takes race out of its historical and temporal contexts.

The matter of explaining the biological consequences of racism is commonplace where the distinctions between race and biology begin to blur, and our understandings of social construction begin to fall apart. Making sense of health disparities is one instance where human biology and genetics is racialized. How then do we come to talk about race and human biology without reproducing racism? I believe that answering this question requires that we take a critical look at the scientific critique of race and begin to center human actions and practices as the historical grounds of the social construction of race. This brings us to re-evaluate the definition of race and racial formation theory to ground it in historical practice. In this paper, I analyze the temporal relations of the racial formation theories presented by anthropologists and sociologists. By temporal relations, I mean, I pay close attention to when and where their racial formation theories begin and how they demonstrate the social construction of race through the dynamics of human actions and historical events.

Phenotype or Power?

One of the most commonly racialized traits is skin color. Humans around the world use skin color as an indicator of group identity and ancestry. Even biomedical research studies use race as an essential variable, believed to be a predictor for the likelihood of having a disease. However, our evolutionary history as a species tells a different story. According to genetic anthropologist Nina Jablonski, 87 percent of skin pigmentation variation is due to ultraviolet radiation from the sun (Goodman et al. 2012). Skin pigmentation genetics do not predict for any other traits. If the characteristics we know of as race do not provide meaningful biological

information, then how do we make sense of what race is and how it permeates our lives? What do these racialized distinctions mean when evolutionary genetics tell us that humans are one species? Is race a social construction or a biologically-based phenomenon? The answers to these questions can be provided through understanding how we got to here and now. This historical perspective that is central to evolutionary science then begins with understanding how colonial histories and processes matter today.

Is race based on physical differences or the social conflicts and interests that created the conditions in which race became an organizing principle of society? Race is a recent European invention in our long evolutionary history. The history of this concept reveals that it arose as a justification for Euro-Western colonialism and enslavement. Race is commonly defined as the hierarchical division of humans based on physical characteristics to formulate homogenous groups. However, this definition fails to demonstrate the relationships between European colonizers and colonized peoples that form the foundations of race. As a biological anthropologist, I have studied human osteology and human genetics like many who have come before me and arrived at their same conclusions. The characteristics that we know of as race do not fit models of human genetic variation nor human evolutionary history. Despite what we know about human variation, the world still grapples with racial difference. What mechanisms are at play behind the staying power of racialized distinctions? How do we incorporate this discovered biological knowledge and evidence without reproducing racialization?

Bodies not Biology

Reactions to biological essentialism are central to the very conditions that shape the scientific critiques of race. Statements on race have been an institutional-wide standard, subsequently transforming sociological definitions of race, resulting in a removal of biology from race studies (Omi and Winant 2015). Canonical sociological texts theorize bodies as sites where social conflicts and interests are

signified (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Omi and Winant 2015). From there, theorists shifted their focus to identity while the use of the biological concept of race became taboo. Despite these successes, the race concept suffers from a definitional dilemma, due to resting the definition of race on creeping essentialisms. I argue that this incongruity results from an operationalization that: (1) focuses on human phenotypic variation instead of power dynamics and (2) an assumption that biology is inherently essentialist.

Positioning themselves as wary of any references to biology, Omi and Winant (2015) only mention body politics, racial bodies, and social bodies. The phenomic and ocular character of bodies distinguishes race from ethnicity (Omi and Winant 2015)—bodies but not biology. If the *phenomic* and *ocular* are not biological, what are they? For Omi and Winant (2015:22), race is more than culture; it is a “corporeal marker of identity and difference.” If phenotypes are parts of the bodies of living humans, how is race not *biologized* ethnicity? Skin color, hair texture, nose shape, eye shape, genitalia, buttocks, feet, hands, nor organizational bureaucratic documentation brings us to a closer understanding of the role of racialization in health inequities. If race is not biology, we are presented with two questions: What is race? And what is biology? If race is not biology, then we have a responsibility to define race and present an evolutionary understanding of biology, especially in light of the biological consequences of racism. A focus on phenotype fails to make a positive statement about how phenotypes came to become what we know as race; when prior, there were other social systems. The mark of color, like W. E. B. Du Bois said, is just a *mark* that is useful in specific contexts while not useful at all in others. Therefore, Omi and Winant (2015) theorize how identities get laid onto bodies, thus, providing us with a theory of racial *transformation* rather than a theory of its *formation*.

Time Will Tell

Here, I want to discuss the role that time plays in theorizing what sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) calls the *sites*

of the social constructions of race and racism. When and where you begin is crucial to the narrative told. I emphasize the importance of a historical narrative because history holds struggles, tactics, and strategies. It holds a collection of actions, and the actions of particular groups have impacted the fitness levels of a vast array of forms of life on this planet. The teleological view of human history as well as that of human variation also lends themselves to being convenient legitimating rationales for denying the humanity of another group of human beings.

Who is introduced into history, when, where, and how is a sociological and a biological narrative within the fiction of modernity. This presents a set of stories about progress and development while ignoring the colonialism and imperialism required to generate it. What is required is a theory of events to provide us with an eventful understanding of the social formations of race and racism. How humans treat one another is a dynamic ecological system and should be analyzed as such. However, that cannot be done without an understanding of how to trace genealogies of power, relationships, and social practices on the micro- and macro- levels of human interactions. What is needed then is a tracing of the history of race, understanding its origins, its plasticity, rather than clinging to the things that colonizers said about the people they systematically target and eliminate for profit.

Contemporary canonical sociological critiques of biological race are inheritors of a *Boasian* race concept. For instance, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation Theory in the United States* (2015:109) define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed." Omi and Winant think they are bringing attention to the *when* and *where* of the formations of race. Instead, Omi and Winant begin their discussion when racialized bodies already exist. Omi and Winant's earliest temporal point in their racial formation theory is in the 16th century, at the beginning of the *encomienda* system in early Spaniard colonies in the New World. Starting in the 16th century presents a problem because if something is socially constructed, then

there are points in time when it did not exist. All previous states are just as central to developing a robust theory of racial formation. The chronological relationships between the events that Omi and Winant detail in their racial formation theory begins with displacement, dispossession, settlement, and genocide versus starting with how such events came to be.

The chronology of Omi and Winant's racial formation theory starts in the 16th century, where they tell the story of European conquest and contact with the new world. Omi and Winant begin this discussion by pointing to an awareness of distinctive groups in prehistory, calling them rehearsals for racial formation. They make numerous references to an interesting sequence of events:

The conquest, therefore, was the first—and given the dramatic nature of the case, perhaps the greatest—racial formation project. Together with African slavery, it produced the master category of race, the racial template we have discussed. (Omi and Winant 2015:112)

These authors go on to reference the "discovery" of "natives" as the point of no return, a point back in time when everybody suddenly noticed that not all humans looked alike. One can only assume that they do not expect their readers ever to notice that Europe is physically surrounded by humans that look different from them. We are expected to be convinced that a peninsula between the continents of Africa and Asia had somehow never noticed skin color.

Moreover, there are no mentions of the contingent events that led to the beginning of the transoceanic slave trade. They tell us these individuals were enslaved but omit any details about the conditions and events leading to and through the transoceanic slave trade and rise of European empire. Where we start our story is central to our overall understanding of it.

In like manner, Omi and Winant (2015:110) state that race refers to "different types of bodies." Whether race refers to different types of bodies or *typifies* bodies remains unclear. Omi and Winant (2015) are not the only scholars to do this.

The significance of bodies can be seen in other sociological definitions of race. Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann's (2007) *Ethnicity and Race* refers to race as based on physical characteristics. While Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer's (2009) definition of race in "What Is Racial Domination" makes an emphasis on race being based on phenotype. This emphasis stops right at fragmented bodies, while biology and references to it are taboo. Canonical sociological research on race is okay with defining race as based on phenotypes, just do not get caught calling race biological. They base racism on racial conflict or cultural difference and phenotype and without ever saying the word biology.

Following this further, the focus on the phenomic and ocular characteristics of race is central to repeated claims of its *basis on physical differences*. Is race based on physical differences or the social conflicts and interests that created the conditions in which race became an organizing principle of society? Omi and Winant (2015) argue that the European contact with "natives" in the new world is what spawned race; they even refer to it as the first racial formation project. Omi and Winant describe this as an event where suddenly Europeans realized that not all humans look alike. They do not describe how the selection process for these racial *traits* takes place. Omi and Winant have done no more than provide a racial *transformation* theory.

Even when critiqued about their sensory and phenomic conceptualization of race, Omi and Winant respond by following up with two paragraphs to justify ignoring it. The authors glaze over Osagie Obasogie's (2014) critique of what they call the *ocularity* of race. They note that it challenged their emphasis on racialized phenotypes as sensory and visceral. Obasogie's critique revealed that racialization was never dependent on visual observation alone; it was then noted but never put into practice. This evidence points to the creeping essentialism of self-identified race and ethnicity conceptualizations. In their over-emphasis on phenomic and ocular characteristics of race, Omi and Winant ground their definition of race on a settler fiction and fail to point readers to

any historical grounds to demonstrate how that argument is social constructionist. In their view, types of bodies, their differences, and reactions to them are what race is, while racism is the hatred of those who look different from an individual's racial in-group. What is socially constructed about saying that groups of living humans identify with other living humans with the same physical features? Nothing at all.

Taking Social Constructionism Seriously

Racial formation theory is the perfect example of how people talk about race absent of the explanatory power of racism. The utility of race is its stabilization of colonial and imperial power amassed through historical and ongoing displacement and dispossession in an expanding processual global fashion. As Dorothy Roberts (2011) points out, the first step of dividing humans into categories is a political practice. Liberal niceties and intentions are no match for state-sanctioned race nor the continued use of biological essentialism in the natural, social, and applied sciences. Race continues to have a grand utility because it serves the social, political, and economic interests of dominant groups, historical and contemporary actors (individuals and institutions).

One of the greatest tricks of race is convincing people that racism is a consequence of the grand problem of difference in phenotype and attitude rather than a difference in power and resources. Race is a product of racism, always. Race, as a set of classificatory regimes and practices, is not limited to its doctrines that maintain group specific modes of colonial domination (Roberts 2011; Wolfe 2016). How we collectively use race academically, publicly, and privately fails to communicate this meaning effectively. This requires a racial formation theory that does not legitimate the Euro-Western colonial epic of "we made this land" (Fanon and Philcox 2004). An understanding of history that is dynamic is required in mainstream racial formation theory, and it requires a settler-colonial critique, more expansive evolutionary understanding of time, processes, and history. A settler-colonial consciousness requires that we

trouble the categorizations of *problematic beings*. The inequalities that we see are reproduced, and race is a colonial doctrine formed to justify and normalize exploitative relations. Racial formation theory then requires a de-normalization of the American Dream, the Last Mohican narrative, and of the one-drop rule.

The banishing of biology from the study of race and racism has left us with a theory of bodies as an index of phenotypes with *changing* racial identities. Contemporary sociological theories of race prioritize explaining race-based resistance movements and understanding racial identity amongst colonized peoples (Omi and Winant 2015). Omi and Winant's definition of racial formation theory is concerned with the changing of racial identities over time. This approach assumes that biological concepts of race rest on essentialist ideologies and typologies transforming a political problem into a technical problem. This is a reaction to essentialism and rigid theorizations of natural orders and kinds in early natural theology. As El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz once said, racism, "... is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year." "Racial identities change" is not a sufficient argument against other varieties of hereditary racialism outside of essentialism. For example, in 1950, Coon, Garn, and Birdsell wrote a book on the racial formations of man, arguing that racial differences are the result of adapting to different environmental and ecological systems. That perspective is not far from that of Ernst Mayr, who referred to races as ecological races in the 1970s. What Coon, Garn, Birdsell, and Mayr's arguments reveal is that the idea that races are fixed homogeneous essences is not the central tenet of racism. With this in mind, the racist works of Wade, Sesardic, Herrnstein, and Murray are part of a broader attempt to frame political problems as caused by individual troubles motivated by some genetic unit. These works fall into the category of what philosopher Lisa Gannet refers to as *statistical racism*. Statistical racism has prospered under the populational concept of race versus the previous typological concepts of race (which understood races as homogeneous groups) (Gannet 2001). These population

thinkers see differences among populations as statistical, where *within-group variation* far exceeds *between-group variation*. As Gannet points out, racism flourishes within-population thinking because all it does is replace the word race with population. Populational thinking still lends itself to the same racist logic of what constitutes a group in the first place.

Contemporary critiques of race do not take social constructionism seriously. The social construction of race starts and stops at racial identities; the rest of the definition is an explanation of historical conflicts and interests being played out through inherent predispositions for phenotypic sameness. However, if race is socially constructed, there are times and places when race did not exist. Defining race as based on types of bodies implies that race is primordial, while what we know as racism is a modern phenomenon. These phenotypic similarities and differences then are understood as significations of racial heredity and geography. Phenotypic differences are then framed as a function of geographic distance, and races are then the consequence of different environments and not makings of Euro-Western colonialism. Unfortunately, Euro-Western colonialism is treated as an epoch at best and an event at worst in mainstream critical race theories.

Omi and Winant (2015:105) refer to race as a way of "making up people," but what constitutes both making and people has been undertheorized. In the act of making up people, social distinctions are organized through an index of phenotypes; settler logics of heredity and reproduction regulates the very making of families. Race/ism then is a colonial breeding principle that governs and mediates lives through the active making and management of relational indexes of hegemonic difference. This entails an understanding of human genetic variation that is not driven by dominion-based logics. I start at the level of how we study human genetic variation by asking: how do we talk about how someone gets their genes in a social constructionist way? The context within which groups come to be constitutes the stories of how groups interacted with one another and reveals a

dynamic product: the rich interconnect-
edness of human ecology.

As Omi and Winant point out, the body had been all but removed by name from the study of race and racism. Biology did not recruit race; instead, race and racism recruited biology. For example, before the rise of race in the late 18th century, Europeans had no need of race nor the field of biology to colonize. Why? European traditions and histories reveal that they were already experienced in practices of settler colonialism and religious demonology before, *not after*, the rise of race (Wolfe 2016). The doctrine was already there, and Europeans had been long busy practicing it on one another (Olson 2005; Robinson 1983; Wolfe 2016).

Furthermore, at the rise of early merchant capitalism in 11th century Europe, it was already practicing slavery, demonology, and discrimination on itself (Robinson 1983; Wolfe 2016). Cedric Robinson (1983) argued that this medieval colonial slavery was the model for Atlantic colonial slavery. Before the 18th century, European settlers did not need race to subjugate those they conquered (Wolfe 2016). In fact, that is a point that Omi and Winant (2015) note when discussing the evolution of racial consciousness. An emphasis on the phenomic and ocular characteristics of race pulls our attention away from prior conditions, actions/practices, events, and dynamic interactions that produced racial distinctions and doctrines. Given these points, racialized identities and phenotypes are abstractions that take away from the practices of racialization within the larger system. Given the temporal and power relations that contextualize the relationships between biology, genetics, race, and racism, we are dealing with the racialization of human biology and genetics. The racialization of human populations occurs before the fishing of statistical data analysis. In racial formation theory, types of bodies are indexes of phenotypes present since time immemorial, while racism is associated with the rise of modernity.

The separation of bodies from biology and race from racism obscures the historical conditions of the social basis of the formation of race. The knowledge we produce about the classification system

and its consequences become central to the analytic seeking of not socially reproducing it. The first step towards something like the abolition of race is to model it as a dynamic system of practices that are taught, invested in, incentivized, and produce the very conditions in which we live and die.

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