

**Richard J. Payne (1998) Getting Beyond Race – Chapter 2**

**Main Point:** Emphasizes that race is a socially constructed idea and that scientific evidence does not support genetic arguments for racial differences. The social implications of a person's race are different in different regions of the world. In America, hierarchical divisions of race were created by Europeans as a way to support and perpetuate the idea that they were superior. Economic interests also played a major role in the construction of race. The racial divides in America, especially between blacks and whites are so strong because Americans have internalized race as a part of their identities. In this chapter, Payne breaks his argument into six sections: Common Origins; The Social Construction of Race; Economic Interests and the Construction of Race; Racial Classification: Strengthening the Boundaries; Race, Science, and Intelligence; and Race as Magic, Myth, and Totem.

**Central Issues and Concepts**

- Common Origins*
- Race is based on pseudoscientific evidence used to justify the imbalance of political and socioeconomic power.
  - Humans have been “mixing” for centuries.
  - Scientific evidence does not support genetic arguments for racial differences
  - There is no such thing as a pure race.
  - “Genetically, there is no valid scientific evidence that races are inferior or superior to each other.”
- The Social Construction of Race*
- Race is a scientific fantasy but a social fact because of the acceptance of the idea that race is “fixed, measurable, concrete, and objective.
  - The idea of race cannot survive without a deliberate effort to sustain it and “acceptance by those who benefit and those who suffer from it.”
  - Use of race as a determinant of social status and cultural differences emerged during the spread of European colonialism and the development of slavery in the Americas.
  - Europeans believed they were serving God by “killing or enslaving the heathen.”
  - The ideas of whiteness and blackness were created to include those with privilege and exclude outside of that privileged circle.
  - Whiteness was socially constructed so that Europeans who previously held a lower status could be included in the privileged group.
- Economic Interests and the Construction of Race*
- Growing demand for labor in the colonies affected status and treatment of indentured servants and slaves.
  - To attract European settlers, treatment of indentured servants improved while enslaved Africans received harsher treatment.
  - White opposition to slavery before and after the American

Revolution was by New Englanders who were not economically dependent on slavery and viewed Africans and Native Americans as fully human.

- Southerners, though, were economically dependent on slavery and maintained the institution of slavery as part of their self-definition.
- Because of their psychological and economic interests in slavery, whites adopted the viewpoint that Africans were slaves by nature, thus creating a distinction between blacks and whites (rather than just between slaves and free men).
- The gradual freeing of slaves in Brazil and the humanistic treatment of Blacks there contributed to racial harmony in Brazil and made a positive impression on American visitors to Brazil, thus promoting “the building of bridges between blacks and whites.”

*Racial  
Classification:  
Strengthening the  
Boundaries*

- “...both blacks and whites have accepted the rigid categorization of people into distinct racial groups.”
- To Americans, race is part of who they are.
- Unlike in Latin America, in the U.S., “racial categories involving blacks and whites are dichotomous, fixed, and inflexible.”
- The one-drop rule is a racial classification system under which any degree of African ancestry makes an individual black, regardless of physical appearance.
- The one-drop rule was applied only to Americans with African ancestry. Under this rule:
  - white women could give birth to black children but black women could not give birth to black children
  - the number of slaves was increased
  - “Americanness” was denied to those with African ancestry

*Race, Science,  
and Intelligence*

- In American society, science represents the ultimate truth, but scientists are often influenced by values of the dominant culture.
- In *The Bell Curve*, Richard J. Herrnstein argues that:
  - humans possess varied abilities because of natural differences and not environmental influences
  - those natural differences are genetic and cannot be changed by factors in the environment
  - human nature guarantees formation of a social hierarchy.
- In the early 1900s, when research found differences between blacks and whites in scientific tests, white results were interpreted positively while black results were interpreted negatively.

*Race as Magic,*

- Like magic, the idea of race is based on irrational beliefs.

*Myth, and Totem*

- Both magic and science have specific aims and use a specific set of activities to accomplish their desired goals.
- Myths about race maintain the status quo and rationalize inequalities and social differences.
- Differences in skin color give myths a factual basis, making clear thinking about race difficult.
- “Totemism is both a mode of social organization and a system of religious beliefs and practices.
- Race is like totemism because, since Americans use skin color to form their identities and determine group membership, race is used “as a basis of social, economic, and political solidarity.”

**Two Key Quotes**

“Consequently, getting beyond race involves whites’ recognition of how whiteness is inextricably intertwined with blackness in an obverse relationship and what it means culturally to be designated as white... Ironically, many black Americans’ acceptance of race as their principal identity inadvertently enhances the ability of many whites to retain their racial identity and the privileges that accompany it.”

(Page 37)

“Race is the product of fears, emotions, and efforts by human beings to enhance their status and control others. Whereas the theories of science are determined by logic; those of magic are dictated by the association of ideas that emanate from the human desire to achieve specific economic and social objectives. Race, like magic, is therefore pseudoscience. Neither is based on logic.”

(Page 51)

**Two Questions**

Economic interests are mentioned as one of the influencing factors in constructing race. Is this still valid today? Are their economic reasons why society needs to differentiate between races, especially white and black?

The author mentions different time periods and geographical regions in which race is not seen as the determining factor of a person’s social status or treatment. Assuming Americans will never be blind to racial classifications, can we one day disassociate them from the stereotypes, myths, and presumed statuses with which they are currently associated?