

Michael Omi, Howard Winant “Racial Formations”

Main Point: Racial categories and the meaning of race have changed over time and vary between different societies. Both are shaped by the social and historical contexts in which they are placed. Race, then, is not a fixed attribute, but rather a “complex of social meanings” (Gallagher p. 22) that are constantly being redefined. This is the concept of racial formation.

Central Issues and Concepts: Throughout history, race has been thought of in several constructs. This reading discusses race as a religious concept, a biological concept, a social concept, and a sociohistorical concept. *Religious concept:* European explorers in the New World wondered if the “natives” had redeemable souls, an idea that affected the relationship between the two groups. *Biological concept:* Since the 18th century, scientists have tried to uncover scientific methods of determining racial categories, but thus far “the concept of race has defied biological definition.” Today, scientists who study race in terms of this concept believe that each race is defined by a set of innate characteristics, of which skin color is only one part (p. 18). *Social Concept:* Beginning in the 18th century, scientists began to study race as a variable shaped by broader societal forces. *Sociohistorical concept:* Racial categories and the meaning of race are based on the specific social relations and historical contexts they are located in.

Racial formation is the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which these forces are shaped by racial meanings. Race is treated as a *central axis* of social relations; it cannot be broadened or restricted to fit into any other category.

Racialization is the social process by which a racial identity is attached to a group and that group is placed in a race-based social hierarchy.

Key Quotes:

“Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (Page 20)

“Once we understand that race overflows the boundaries of skin color, super-exploitation, social stratification, discrimination and prejudice, cultural domination and cultural resistance, state policy (or any other particular social relationship we list), once we recognize the racial dimension present to some degree in every identity, institution and social practice in the United States –once we have done this, it becomes possible to speak of racial formation.” (Pages 21-22)

Questions:

- If race is not a fixed characteristic, but rather a social construction that changes over time, then why is it so easy for us to classify people as being a certain race?
- How much emphasis do we still place on race as a determining factor for things such as personality, intelligence, athleticism, and sexuality?