

RACE: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

WHAT EVEN IS 'RACE'?

'Race' as we (think we) know it is a modern idea invented by Northern Europeans and white Americans and developed in the 15th to 18th centuries to act as a marker of social difference. But the concept itself is actually *vacuous*, it has no meaning until meaning is assigned to it.

Since there is no one true meaning, it is subject to change throughout time and depending on context. In other words, 'race' cannot be defined in *essentialist** terms because it is *dynamic*.^{1,2}

*Essentialism refers to the idea of something is fixed or unchanging throughout time and space, regardless of social, political, cultural, or other contexts.

THE 'TERM' OF A CENTURY

Before the 18th century, the dominant belief was in *monogenesis*; the idea that all people descend from one ancestor so are born equal and only become different with experience. During this time, the term 'race' was used biblically to depict a sense of peoplehood.

It wasn't until the 18th century that scholars started considering the possibility that people came from different ancestors, which gave rise to a new belief in *polygenesis*; the idea that people are born of different origins. This is also when the term 'race' was first used as a synonym for variety.²

(DON'T) TRUST THE PROCESS

Racialization is a historically specific process, meaning that different groups have been racialized in different ways in different contexts. Often, these groups are marginalized, *minoritized*, and subject to varying racisms.

In discussing systems of oppression, it is necessary to also consider those who benefit from these systems because of their 'race'. Specifically, recognizing whiteness as a social construction allows us to reframe questions of inequality towards structures of white supremacy.¹

CAN YOU FIND IT IN THE BODY?

NO!! Efforts to find a biological basis for 'race' began in the 18th century and have continued since then despite no one ever having found any scientific evidence to support this idea. 'Race' is social, not natural.

Historically, 19th century scientific research has been done with the intention of *naturalizing* race to justify the subordination and mistreatment of certain racialized groups. It is rarely politically innocent and almost always biased.²

SPEAKING OF 'RACE'...

A BIT ABOUT LANGUAGE, TERMINOLOGY, & DISCOURSE

RACIALIZED, MINORITIZED, NATURALIZED, & NORMALIZED: WHY THE 'IZED'?

These terms are used to emphasize the social basis of such processes. They assign accountability by highlighting the active role people have in the formation and reproduction of dominant ideas.

For example, referring to a group as a 'minority' implies that there is something inevitable or natural as it is about low numbers, whereas using the term 'minoritized' illuminates the underlying active and artificial process.³

WOMEN 'OF COLOR'

In 1977, a group of black women attending the National Women's Conference created a 'Black Women's Agenda' to contest insufficiencies in the proposed plan of action. Upon hearing about this agenda, other minoritized groups of women wanted to be included in the plan.

They created the term "women of color" for themselves to accommodate this inclusion and to signify solidarity. It acts as a "political designation", not a "biological destiny."⁴

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE CONVERSATION?

Antiracism is constrained by *epistemic* oppression, which is the way in which some forms of knowledge are circulated, popularized, and validated over others.

Western academic conventions have structurally oppressed minoritized voices by controlling education systems and the retelling of history. It is important to recognize institutionalized biases so that we can actively amplify and validate silenced narratives.³

THE 'ILLUSION OF INCLUSION'

- Antiracist theorists argue that *color-blind* forms of racial rule, which are predicated on the idea that racism has been eradicated, actually work to uphold racial hierarchies.
- It is insufficient and even counterproductive to discount or be 'blind' to the influence of race since its invention and in our operating society.
- To make meaningful change, we must 'see' race, recognize systemic inequalities, and redistribute power. Understanding history is essential to creating a better future.³

References

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