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# Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1980s

Michael Omi and  
Howard Winant



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### Racial formation

In 1982-83, Susie Guillory Phipps unsuccessfully sued the Louisiana Bureau of Vital Records to change her racial classification from black to white. The descendant of an eighteenth-century white planter and a black slave, Phipps was designated "black" in her birth certificate in accordance with a 1970 state law which declared anyone with at least one-thirty-second "Negro blood" to be black. The legal battle raised intriguing questions about the concept of race, its meaning in contemporary society, and its use (and abuse) in public policy. Assistant Attorney General Ron Davis defended the law by pointing out that some type of racial classification was necessary to comply with federal record-keeping requirements and to facilitate programs for the prevention of genetic diseases. Phipps's attorney, Brian Begue, argued that the assignment of racial categories on birth certificates was unconstitutional and that the one-thirty-second designation was inaccurate. He called on a retired Tulane University professor who cited research indicating that most whites have one-twentieth "Negro" ancestry. In the end, Phipps lost. The court upheld a state law which quantified racial identity, and in so doing affirmed the legality of assigning individuals to specific racial groupings.<sup>1</sup>

The Phipps case illustrates the continuing dilemma of defining race and establishing its meaning in institutional life. Today, to assert that variations in human physiognomy are racially based is to enter a constant and intense debate. *Scientific* interpretations of race have not been alone in sparking heated controversy; *religious* perspectives have done so as well.<sup>2</sup> Most centrally, of course, race has been a matter of *political* contention. This has been particularly true in the United States, where the concept of race has varied enormously over time without ever leaving the center stage of US history.

## What is race?

Race consciousness, and its articulation in theories of race, is largely a modern phenomenon. When European explorers in the New World "discovered" people who looked different than themselves, these "natives" challenged then existing conceptions of the origins of the human species, and raised disturbing questions as to whether *all* could be considered in the same "family of man."<sup>3</sup> Religious debates flared over the attempt to reconcile the Bible with the existence of "racially distinct" people. Arguments took place over creation itself, as theories of polygenesis questioned whether God had made only one species of humanity ("monogenesis"). Europeans wondered if the natives of the New World were indeed human beings with redeemable souls. At stake were not only the prospects for conversion, but the types of treatment to be accorded them. The expropriation of property, the denial of political rights, the introduction of slavery and other forms of coercive labor, as well as outright extermination, all presupposed a worldview which distinguished Europeans — children of God, human beings, etc. — from "others." Such a worldview was needed to explain why some should be "free" and others enslaved, why some had rights to land and property while others did not. Race, and the interpretation of racial differences, was a central factor in that worldview.

In the colonial epoch science was no less a field of controversy than religion in attempts to comprehend the concept of race and its meaning. Spurred on by the classificatory scheme of living organisms devised by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae*, many scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dedicated themselves to the identification and ranking of variations in humankind. Race was thought of as a *biological* concept, yet its precise definition was the subject of debates which, as we have noted, continue to rage today. Despite efforts ranging from Dr Samuel Morton's studies of cranial capacity<sup>4</sup> to contemporary attempts to base racial classification on shared gene pools,<sup>5</sup> the concept of race has defied biological definition.

None of the ostensibly "objective" measures to determine and define racial categories were free from the invidious elements of racial ideology. The eighteenth century saw the popular acceptance of a concept with roots in classical Greek thought — the "Great

Chain of Being." Posing a grand hierarchy starting with inanimate objects, up through the lowliest forms of life, through "man," and culminating with God the Creator, the "Great Chain of Being" framed discussion about the gradations which existed among humankind. Which races were closer to God and which to apes? In a period where hierarchical arrangements in society were being questioned, the notion of a "Great Chain of Being" legitimated status differences and inequality with appeals to the "naturalness" of distinctions between human beings. To challenge this order would be tantamount to challenging God himself.<sup>6</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Count Arthur de Gobineau drew upon the most respected scientific studies of his day to compose his four-volume *Essay on the Inequality of Races* (1853–55). He not only greatly influenced the racial thinking of the period, but his themes were to be echoed in the racist ideologies of the next hundred years: beliefs that superior races produce superior cultures and that racial intermixtures result in the degradation of the superior racial stock. These themes found expression, for instance, in the eugenics movement inspired by Darwin's cousin, Frances Galton, which had an immense impact on scientific and sociopolitical thought in Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to discern the *scientific meaning* of race continue to the present day. Although most physical anthropologists and biologists have abandoned the quest for a scientific basis to determine racial categories, controversies have recently flared in the area of genetics and educational psychology. For instance, an essay by Arthur Jensen which argued that hereditary factors shape intelligence not only revived the "nature or nurture" controversy, but raised highly volatile questions about racial equality itself.<sup>8</sup> Clearly the attempt to establish a *biological* basis of race has not been swept into the dustbin of history, but is being resurrected in various scientific arenas. All such attempts seek to remove the concept of race from fundamental social, political, or economic determination. They suggest instead that the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics, of which skin color and other physical attributes provide only the most obvious, and in some respects most superficial, indicators.

## Race as a social concept

The social sciences have come to reject biologicistic notions of race in favor of an approach which regards race as a *social* concept. Beginning in the eighteenth century, this trend has been slow and uneven, but its direction clear. In the nineteenth century Max Weber discounted biological explanations for racial conflict and instead highlighted the social and political factors which engendered such conflict.<sup>9</sup> The work of pioneering cultural anthropologist Franz Boas was crucial in refuting the connection between race and culture, and the assumption of a continuum of "higher" and "lower" cultural groups. Within the contemporary social science literature, race is assumed to be a variable which is shaped by broader societal forces.

Race is indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies.

In the United States, the black/white color line has historically been rigidly defined and enforced. White is seen as a "pure" category. Any racial intermixture makes one "nonwhite." In the movie *Rainree County*, Elizabeth Taylor describes the worst of fates to befall whites as "havin' a little Negra blood in ya" - just one little teeny drop and a person's all Negra."<sup>10</sup> This thinking flows from what Marvin Harris has characterized as the principle of *hypo-descent*:

By what ingenious computation is the genetic tracery of a million years of evolution unraveled and each man [sic] assigned his proper social box? In the United States, the mechanism employed is the rule of hypo-descent. This descent rule requires Americans to believe that anyone who is known to have had a Negro ancestor is a Negro. We admit nothing in between. . . . "Hypo-descent" means affiliation with the subordinate rather than the superordinate group in order to avoid the ambiguity of intermediate identity. . . . The rule of hypo-descent is, therefore, an invention, which we in the United States have made in order to keep biological facts from intruding into our collective racist fantasies.<sup>11</sup>

The Susie Guillory Phipps case merely represents the contemporary expression of this racial logic.

By contrast, a striking feature of race relations in the lowland areas of Latin America since the abolition of slavery has been the relative absence of sharply defined racial groupings. No such rigid descent rule characterizes racial identity in many Latin American societies. Brazil, for example, has historically had less rigid conceptions of race, and thus a variety of "intermediate" racial categories exist. Indeed, as Harris notes, "One of the most striking consequences of the Brazilian system of racial identification is that parents and children and even brothers and sisters are frequently accepted as representatives of quite opposite racial types."<sup>12</sup> Such a possibility is incomprehensible within the logic of racial categories in the US.

To suggest another example: the notion of "passing" takes on new meaning if we compare various American cultures' means of assigning racial identity. In the United States, individuals who are actually "black" by the logic of hypo-descent have attempted to skirt the discriminatory barriers imposed by law and custom by attempting to "pass" for white.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, these same individuals would not be able to pass for "black" in many Latin American societies.

Consideration of the term "black" illustrates the diversity of racial meanings which can be found among different societies and historically within a given society. In contemporary British politics the term "black" is used to refer to all nonwhites. Interestingly this designation has not arisen through the racist discourse of groups such as the National Front. Rather, in political and cultural movements, Asian as well as Afro-Caribbean youth are adopting the term as an expression of self-identity.<sup>14</sup> The wide-ranging meanings of "black" illustrate the manner in which racial categories are shaped politically.<sup>15</sup>

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and re-formed. We use the term *racial formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a *central axis* of social relations which cannot

be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception.

### Racial ideology and racial identity

The seemingly obvious, "natural" and "common sense" qualities which the existing racial order exhibits themselves testify to the effectiveness of the racial formation process in constructing racial meanings and racial identities.

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize – someone who is, for example, racially "mixed" or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.

Our compass for navigating race relations depends on preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like. Comments such as, "Funny, you don't look black," betray an underlying image of what black should be. We also become disoriented when people do not act "black," "Latino," or indeed "white." The content of such stereotypes reveals a series of unsubstantiated beliefs about who these groups are and what "they" are like.<sup>16</sup>

In US society, then, a kind of "racial etiquette" exists, a set of interpretative codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life. Rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the "presentation of self,"<sup>17</sup> distinctions of status, and appropriate modes of conduct. "Etiquette" is not mere universal adherence to the dominant group's rules, but a more dynamic combination of these rules with the values and beliefs of subordinated groupings. This racial "subjection" is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes "common sense" – a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world.

Racial beliefs operate as an "amateur biology," a way of explain-

ing the variations in "human nature."<sup>18</sup> Differences in skin color and other obvious physical characteristics supposedly provide visible clues to differences lurking underneath. Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race. Such diverse questions as our confidence and trust in others (for example, clerks or salespeople, media figures, neighbors), our sexual preferences and romantic images, our tastes in music, films, dance, or sports, and our very ways of talking, walking, eating and dreaming are ineluctably shaped by notions of race. Skin color "differences" are thought to explain perceived differences in intellectual, physical and artistic temperaments, and to justify distinct treatment of racially identified individuals and groups.

The continuing persistence of racial ideology suggests that these racial myths and stereotypes cannot be exposed as such in the popular imagination. They are, we think, too essential, too integral, to the maintenance of the US social order. Of course, particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, but the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of US culture.

Film and television, for example, have been notorious in disseminating images of racial minorities which establish for audiences what people from these groups look like, how they behave, and "who they are."<sup>19</sup> The power of the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place. D. W. Griffith's epic *Birth of a Nation*, a sympathetic treatment of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, helped to generate, consolidate and "nationalize" images of blacks which had been more disparate (more regionally specific, for example) prior to the film's appearance.<sup>20</sup> In US television, the necessity to define characters in the briefest and most condensed manner has led to the perpetuation of racial caricatures, as racial stereotypes serve as shorthand for scriptwriters, directors and actors, in commercials, etc. Television's tendency to address the "lowest common denominator" in order to render programs "familiar" to an enormous and diverse audience leads it regularly to assign and reassign racial characteristics to particular groups, both minority and majority.

These and innumerable other examples show that we tend to view race as something fixed and immutable – something rooted in

"nature." Thus we mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations. Races do not emerge full-blown. They are the results of diverse historical practices and are continually subject to challenge over their definition and meaning.

#### Racialization: the historical development of race

In the United States, the racial category of "black" evolved with the consolidation of racial slavery. By the end of the seventeenth century, Africans whose specific identity was Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, etc., were rendered "black" by an ideology of exploitation based on racial logic – the establishment and maintenance of a "color line." This of course did not occur overnight. A period of indentured servitude which was not rooted in racial logic preceded the consolidation of racial slavery. With slavery, however, a racially based understanding of society was set in motion which resulted in the shaping of a specific racial identity not only for the slaves but for the European settlers as well. Winthrop Jordan has observed: "From the initially common term *Christian*, at mid-century there was a marked shift toward the terms *English* and *free*. After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared – *white*."<sup>21</sup>

We employ the term *racialization* to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one. Racial ideology is constructed from pre-existing conceptual (or, if one prefers, "discursive") elements and emerges from the struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently. An account of racialization processes that avoids the pitfalls of US ethnic history<sup>22</sup> remains to be written.

Particularly during the nineteenth century, the category of "white" was subject to challenges brought about by the influx of diverse groups who were not of the same Anglo-Saxon stock as the founding immigrants. In the nineteenth century, political and ideological struggles emerged over the classification of Southern Europeans, the Irish and Jews, among other "non-white"

categories.<sup>23</sup> Nativism was only effectively curbed by the institutionalization of a racial order that drew the color line around, rather than *within*, Europe.

By stopping short of racializing immigrants from Europe after the Civil War, and by subsequently allowing their assimilation, the American racial order was reconsolidated in the wake of the tremendous challenge placed before it by the abolition of racial slavery.<sup>24</sup> With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, an effective program for limiting the emergent class struggles of the later nineteenth century was forged: the definition of the working class in racial terms – as "white." This was not accomplished by any legislative decree or capitalist maneuvering to divide the working class, but rather by white workers themselves. Many of them were recent immigrants, who organized on racial lines as much as on traditionally defined class lines.<sup>25</sup> The Irish on the West Coast, for example, engaged in vicious anti-Chinese race-baiting and committed many pogrom-type assaults on Chinese in the course of consolidating the trade union movement in California.

Thus the very political organization of the working class was in important ways a racial project. The legacy of racial conflicts and arrangements shaped the definition of interests and in turn led to the consolidation of institutional patterns (e.g. segregated unions, dual labor markets, exclusionary legislation) which perpetuated the color line *within* the working class. Selig Perlman, whose study of the development of the labor movement is fairly sympathetic to this process, notes that:

The political issue after 1877 was racial, not financial, and the weapon was not merely the ballot, but also "direct action" – violence. The anti-Chinese agitation in California, culminating as it did in the Exclusion Law passed by Congress in 1882, was doubtless the most important single factor in the history of American labor, for without it the entire country might have been overrun by Mongolian [sic] labor and the labor movement might have become a conflict of races instead of one of classes.<sup>26</sup>

More recent economic transformations in the US have also altered interpretations of racial identities and meanings. The automation of southern agriculture and the augmented labor demand of the postwar boom transformed blacks from a largely rural, impoverished labor force to a largely urban, working-class group by

1970.<sup>27</sup> When boom became bust and liberal welfare statism moved rightwards, the majority of blacks came to be seen, increasingly, as part of the "underclass," as state "dependents."<sup>28</sup> Thus the particularly deleterious effects on blacks of global and national economic shifts (generally rising unemployment rates, changes in the employment structure away from reliance on labor intensive work, etc.) were explained once again in the late 1970s and 1980s (as they had been in the 1940s and mid-1960s) as the result of defective black cultural norms, of familial disorganization, etc.<sup>28</sup> In this way new racial attributions, new racial myths, are affixed to "blacks."<sup>29</sup> Similar changes in racial identity are presently affecting Asians and Latinos, as such economic forces as increasing Third World impoverishment and indebtedness fuel immigration and high interest rates, Japanese competition spurs resentments, and US jobs seem to fly away to Korea and Singapore.<sup>30</sup>

#### Racial formation: the creation of racial meanings

Much racial theory, we have argued, treats race as a manifestation or epiphenomenon of other supposedly more fundamental categories of sociopolitical identity, notably those of ethnicity, class and nation. In such accounts, race is not regarded as a continually evolving category in its own right; in fact, these approaches have often imagined that race would decline in importance, even disappear, as economic or political "progress" rendered "race-thinking" obsolete.<sup>31</sup>

We hope to alter this situation by presenting the outlines of a theory of *racial formation*. In our view, racial meanings pervade US society, extending from the shaping of individual racial identities to the structuring of collective political action on the terrain of the state.

An approach based on the concept of racial formation should treat race in the United States as a fundamental *organizing principle* of social relationships. To give this notion some concreteness, let us distinguish between the *micro-level* and *macro-level* of social relations.

At the micro-level, race is a matter of individuality, of the formation of *identity*. The ways in which we understand ourselves and interact with others, the structuring of our practical activity – in

work and family, as citizens and as thinkers (or "philosophers")<sup>32</sup> – these are all shaped by racial meanings and racial awareness.

At the macro-level, race is a matter of *collectivity*, of the formation of social structures: economic, political and cultural/ideological. Social structure may be understood as a series of "sites."<sup>33</sup> We conceive of a site as a region of social life with a coherent set of constitutive social relations – the *structure* of the site. Thus in the advanced capitalist social formation, the liberal democratic state, the capitalist economy, and the patriarchal family may be considered sites in that each may be characterized by a distinct set of "rules of the game" for participation in practices.<sup>33</sup>

In the space available, it is only possible to outline very briefly some racial dimensions of these sites as they exist in the United States. At the level of the economy, for example, the definition of labor ("slave versus "free"), the allocation of workers of distinct places in dual/segmented/split labor markets, and the composition of the "underclass" have all been dependent on race as organizing principles or "rules of the game." The state, as we shall demonstrate in the following chapter, is structured by such factors as racially based citizenship and naturalization laws, by racially oriented social policies of all types, and in response to political movements which, from the Workingmen's Party to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, have organized political life along racial lines. The family is racial terrain *par excellence*, and has been extensively analyzed as the site of racial socialization.<sup>34</sup> In the cultural realm, dress, music, art, language and indeed the very concept of "taste" has been shaped by racial consciousness and racial dynamics, for instance in the absorption of black musical forms into the white "mainstream."

The racial order is organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity between these two "levels" of social relations. The micro- and macro-levels, however, are only analytically distinct. In our lived experience, in politics, in culture, in economic life, they are continuous and reciprocal. Racial discrimination, for example – considered as a "macro-level" set of economic, political and ideological/cultural practices – has obvious consequences for the experience and identities of individuals. It affects racial meanings, intervenes in "personal life," is interpreted politically, etc.<sup>35</sup> Another example: racial identity – considered as a "micro-level"



complex of individual practices and “consciousness” – shapes the universe of collective action. The panoply of individual attributes – from one’s patterns of speech or tastes in food or music to the economic, spatial, familial, or citizenship “role” one occupies – provides the essential themes for political organization, the elements of economic self-reliance, etc.<sup>36</sup>

The theory of racial formation, then, suggests that racial phenomena penetrate and link these two “levels” of social relationships. But this is only part of the story: the concept of race as an organizing principle of social relations provides a description, a *classification* of racial phenomena in the US, and also explains the continuity of these phenomena,<sup>37</sup> but it does not yet offer a conception of the *process* of racial formation. To grasp this process we must understand the way in which the meaning of these phenomena is politically contested.

### Contesting the social meaning of race

Once we understand that race overflows the boundaries of skin color, superexploitation, social stratification, discrimination and prejudice, cultural domination and cultural resistance, state policy (or of 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*. This recognition is hard-won; there is a continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete and objective, as (for example) one of the categories just enumerated. And there is also an opposite temptation: to see it as a mere illusion, which an ideal social order would eliminate.

In our view it is crucial to break with these habits of thought. The effort must be made to understand race as an *unstable* and “*decentered*” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. It is imperative that we achieve this understanding for two reasons. First, because today as in the past racial minorities pay a heavy price in human suffering as a result of their categorization as “other” by the dominant racial ideology; this is true not only in the United States, but across the world. Second, because racial politics are emblematic, we believe, of a new stage of

US politics as a whole, a new *socially based* politics.<sup>38</sup>

The crucial task, then, is to suggest how the widely disparate circumstances of individual and group racial identities, and of the racial institutions and social practices with which these identities are intertwined, are formed and transformed over time. This takes place, we argue, through *political contestation over racial meanings*. Such contestation occurs today throughout American society: it takes place at the level of “personal” relationships (indeed it arises *within* individuals whose very identities and racial “beliefs” are necessarily contradictory); it exists in “objective” relationships such as work or political activity; and it occurs in cultural representation.

The racial dimensions of a particular relationship or social practice are never given automatically. If they appear obvious, this only means that they are already contextualized in racial ideologies familiar to their subjects. Of course, it is often the case that the racial dynamics of a given relationship go unnoticed: far from being sources of conflict or of difficult decisions, they are “nonevents,” giving rise to “nondecisions.”<sup>39</sup>

Frequently, though, especially in recent decades, racial dynamics are quite visible in social life. They cause uncertainty in the minds of individuals subject to them (“Is this far?” “Am I being recognized?” “How do I ‘work’ this?”). They confront institutions, local communities and families with deep-seated conflicts and agonizing dilemmas. They structure large-scale policy debates. They inspire movements. These individuals, groups, institutions and movements are moved – in our view by the efforts of “intellectuals” – to make new interpretations of racial meanings, to understand the meaning of race and racial identity in new ways. Once reinterpreted, *rearticulated*, racial meanings are disrupted and space for political contestation is opened.

Racial debate, the interpretation of race – which in previous periods of US history was relatively less problematic, often a matter of “common sense” or “human nature” – has taken up what seems to be long-term residence on the social terrain of everyday life, where people must reconcile the conflicts in their lives, or live with their inability to reconcile them. It is to this terrain that, since World War II, racial theory and racial ideology – both mainstream and radical – have been addressed. In the postwar United States, racial meanings have been most centrally (re)interpreted by social movements and most definitively institutionalized by the state.