

# RACIAL CATEGORIES IN THREE NATIONS: AUSTRALIA, SOUTH AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

It is now widely accepted that race is a social construction, having different meanings in different parts of the world. Racial formation theory argues that race is a process of racial formation, where the meanings associated with race need to be viewed as changeable and situated in time and space. This paper compares racial categories in the United States, South Africa and Australia. I argue that current racial categories in all three nations have been strongly influenced by colonization and the ideology of white supremacy. These have led to racial hierarchies in each where whites are at the top and blacks at the bottom. However the people included by each country in their black and white racial categories differ, revealing important variations in racial formation processes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Race is a social construction and fundamentally about appearance, what one looks like. It is related to ethnicity (shared cultural background) in that people who share ethnicity are often similar in hue, the race is separate from ethnicity. When we look at another and decide their race, we generally do not know their ethnic background. We make our decision about what race they are based purely on what they look like. So in defining race, unrelated others are important: the act of doing race, determining another's race and making assumptions based on that determination, is social.

Racial terminology reflects its basis in appearance: "black", "white", "yellow", "red". These racial terms themselves are contested and have different meanings in different parts of the world. In this paper I examine racial formations in three countries: the USA, South Africa and Australia. Race in all three countries has been profoundly shaped by European, particularly British, colonialism, however current racial categories in each, while using similar terminology, carry different meanings for local residents.

I start by discussing race as an ideological process of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994: 14-15), arguing this approach enables us to highlight the contested nature of racial categories. I then discuss racial categories and hierarchies in the United States, South Africa and Australia, highlighting similarities and differences in each country's racial categories. I conclude by arguing that while all three countries have been strongly influenced by European colonialism and the ideology of white supremacy, current racial formations in each uniquely reflect each nation's particular history.

### 1.1 RACIAL FORMATION

Racial formation theory argues that race is a contested process (Omi & Winant, 1994). It is widely accepted within sociology that racial categories are socially constructed. Racial formation theory provides an explanation for how this occurs. In particular, it argues that "racial legacies of the past ... continue to shape the present" (Omi & Winant, 1994: 53).

Racial formation is the process of how racial categories come about and how they change over time (Omi & Winant, 1994). Looking at race as a process of racial formation highlights its changeable nature. It also suggests that different social locations, different nations, will have different racial formations because they have different histories. It further suggests that racial understandings will vary cross-nationally.

Racial formation is an ideological process. The types of racial categories and who is included in each is strongly influenced by dominant ideologies and who is in charge. In all three nations the racial ideology of white supremacy has been very influential. Even in current times when beliefs about the rightness of racial hierarchies have been challenged, researchers shown that whites have managed to maintain their position at the top of the racial hierarchy (Brown et al., 2003; Lipsitz, 2006). This paper will show that in all three nations 'whites' are at the top and 'blacks' are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, even though who is included in those categories differs, thereby revealing important differences in processes of racial formation.

## **1.2 THE UNITED STATES**

Race in the United States centres around five main categories: white, black/African-American, Native American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian. Several key historical events have shaped this current racial formation including: colonization, slavery, the US Civil War, Jim Crow laws, and the US Civil Rights Movement. I will discuss these events and how they influenced race in the United States.

Colonisation initially established a divide between British settlers and Native Americans. Later, when there came a need to distinguish between the two groups, this difference became expressed racially, with settlers being called 'white' and Native Americans being called 'Indian'. Slavery, where dark-skinned Africans were imported and used as labourers, was important in further solidifying racial difference. During slavery, any child born to a slave was considered a slave regardless of whether or not one parent was white. All slaves were considered black, and over time, free people of mixed African-white race also came to be defined black (Davis, 1991). Known as the one-drop rule was the policy anyone with 'one drop' of 'black blood' was considered to be black. Racial difference had underpinning it the ideology of white supremacy, where whites were believed to be superior and blacks inferior (Marx, 1998).

Somewhat ironically, the US Civil War in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century between the northern and southern states, the war which brought about the official end of slavery, also solidified the black-white divide. According to Anthony Marx,

To hold together the nation-state, preserving stability needed for [economic] growth, whites were unified across class by race in South Africa and the United States. Economic interests were subordinated to white racial unity, with the class compromise made explicit and enforced by state policy. (Marx, 1998: 14-15)

In the aftermath of the Civil War whites united, at the expense of blacks (Marx, 1998).

Even after slavery ended, the divide between whites and blacks remained important. Jim Crow laws in the southern states provided a continued legal basis for racial separation and hierarchy. These laws prevented miscegenation, fraternization, even shared education between the races. Under Jim Crow one's racial category determined one's life chances. Jim Crow laws existed until the middle of the twentieth century.

The final key event was the US Civil Rights movement. During this movement Jim Crow was challenged and black rights asserted. By the 1970s policies were developed that aimed to give blacks equal opportunities. This helped to maintain the importance of racial classification, because if progress was to be measured, race needed to be tracked.

There are other racial groups that are regularly measured in the US: Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander (US Census Bureau, 2007). However the main racial divide remains that between blacks and whites. The racial hierarchy is such that whites are at the top, blacks at the bottom (Marx, 1998; Waters, 1990), and other groups in the middle.

The white category in the US is quite broad, encompassing people of European and Middle Eastern descent. The "black" category includes people of mixed race. A person who appears white might be classified as black, and most American blacks are racially mixed (Davis, 1991: 166). In the US, "The nation's answer to that question 'who is black?' has long been that a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry" (Davis, 1991: 5). In this way, blackness is seen as a sort of contaminant: a person who is white need only have a drop of "black blood" to be considered black. Their many drops of "white blood" cannot overcome the stain of blackness.

### **1.3 SOUTH AFRICA**

South Africa's racial formation has also been strongly influenced by colonization. Other key historical events include the Anglo-Boer War, apartheid, and the anti-apartheid movement. There are many parallels between the United States and South Africa, particularly in terms of the importance of the racial ideology of white supremacy as a unifying ideology for the economically dominant white population and legalized racism in Jim Crow and apartheid. However there are also some key differences, including the fact that whereas whites are the majority in the US, they are a minority in South Africa.

South Africa was initially colonized by the Dutch (also known as Boers or Afrikaners) in the 1600s, with British settlers arriving in 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because of their small numbers, the Dutch both imported slaves, mainly from Indonesia, and forced local Africans to work for them. From quite early on, there was a 'coloured' racial category for people of mixed race. The black category was reserved for Africans, and the white category referred to the Dutch and British.

The British instituted some reforms when they took power, including emancipation of slaves without compensation to the owners. Although both white groups were in agreement regarding white superiority, they disagreed on how many privileges were appropriate for blacks (Marx, 1998). The Afrikaners were thus not welcoming when the British arrived and encroached on their territory, and much of the nineteenth century in South Africa was characterized by conflict between these groups.

Tensions between the British and Afrikaners came to a head in the very bloody Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British won the war, and afterwards made peace with the Afrikaners. By this time South Africa's racial formation already had its main racial categories: black, white, coloured and Asian (Indian). Non-white groups provided support for the British, likely in hopes that their situations would improve with a British win (Marx, 1998). In the aftermath of the Boer War their hopes were betrayed with the British making concessions to the Afrikaners. According to Marx, "The real losers in the peace were the coloureds, the Asians, and the African majority, whose expectations of British-imposed reforms were swept aside by the very terms of the Afrikaners' surrender" (Marx, 1998: 90). Laws restricting various freedoms by race were put in place shortly after the war. The existing racial categories and the racial hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks/Africans at the bottom were solidified.

The Afrikaner National Party won government in 1948 on a platform of apartheid, or racial separation, and instituted a series of reforms. Apartheid laws dictated where people could live, work, and socialize. All aspects of one's life were determined by one's racial classification, so race was very important and bureaucracy developed to manage it. There were also means by which one could change one's racial classification if one could show they were classified incorrectly. This was particularly salient for the intermediate racial group, the coloureds. Coloured people are people of mixed racial background.

Whereas in the US they would be classified as 'black', in South Africa they are a separate category. The South African black category generally refers to ethnic Africans (although the anti-apartheid movement sought to unify non-whites under the black label, many resisted this). The white category includes people of European descent.

The anti-apartheid movement challenged racial thinking in South Africa by being organized around an ideology of non-racialism: the belief that race is not, and should not be, an important social category. With the end of apartheid in 1994, non-racialism became the official state racial policy. However apartheid has had lasting effects in South Africa, and race remains important. Its main racial categories remain the same (Statistics South Africa, 2007).

## **1.4 AUSTRALIA**

Australia's current racial formation strongly reflects its colonial history. When white settlement occurred in the 1700s, Australia was a penal colony. So from the start it was colonized differently from either the United States or South Africa.

When whites arrived in Australia, they declared that the land was *terra nullius* or unoccupied and therefore free for the taking (Markus, 1994). This was despite the presence of Aboriginal people. The declaration of the land as *terra nullius* was a critical key event in shaping Australia's current racial formation. It set the stage for Australia to be conceptualized as a white nation. There were several key events that have further shaped Australia's current racial formation: the White Australia Policy, postwar European migration, and multiculturalism policies since the 1970s.

The racial ideology was important in colonial Australia as it was in the other two nations. Ideas of racial superiority strongly influenced policies towards Aboriginal people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Marx argues that the desire for capital strongly influenced the development and consolidation of whiteness in South Africa and the United States (Marx, 1998). Similarly, Markus argues that reasons underlying Aboriginal dispossession were economic (Markus, 1994). He says, 'The starting point was economic need, but it occurred in a context of a consciousness of difference, of a European sense of superiority' (Markus, 1994: 54). Aboriginal people were considered primitive and inferior, and this justified their domination.

The White Australia Policy helped to ensure that Australia became and remained a white dominated nation. White Australia began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the implementation of laws that prevented people from Africa, Asia or the Pacific Islands from migrating there. Immigration was further restricted in 1901 when a dictation test for migrants was prescribed. This dictation test could be in any European language, and served to further limit migration to those considered white.

As the twentieth century progressed Australia needed more labour, and after World War II a migration program to attract British and other European migrants was put in place. During this time many migrants from Southern Europe arrived. Upon arrival these non-Anglo migrants were not considered white. Race in Australia for much of the twentieth century was largely biracial, white and black/Aboriginal, due to success of the White Australia Policy in keeping other groups out. It is interesting that while European migrants were not considered entirely white, they were considered white enough to be able to assimilate.

The White Australia Policy was in effect until the late 1960s. Markus identifies several key events that happened after that time: the Aboriginal rights movement in the 1960s and changes to Asian migration rules; the official end of racial migration policies and the adoption of multiculturalism as state policy in the 1970s, a backlash in the early 1980s that saw a brief return to migration policies that favoured Europeans; and a return to anti-racist views at the end of the 1980s (Markus, 1994: 174-222). Currently Australia

has a policy of multiculturalism, though this has been recently downplayed by the Howard government.

These events have led to Australia having a racial formation where the white category is narrower than in either the United States or South Africa. For many years Australia has had a biracial outlook: white and black, where whites are people of European descent and blacks are Aboriginal. However within the white category some are more white than others. People of Anglo-Celtic and northern European backgrounds are definitely white. People of southern European backgrounds, such as Italians or Greeks, are not quite considered white. Rather, many of them are considered 'ethnic-looking', another racial category. The ethnic-looking category is broad and includes people who are brown. They might be Greek, Italian, Lebanese, or 'of Middle-Eastern appearance.' Ethnic-looking is a racial category because it is based on appearance. It does not have to do with one's actual ethnicity, inclusion is determined by what a person looks like.

Currently in Australia the black category includes Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, and people of African and African-American descent. There is also an Asian category, and arguably, a separate Indian category. Unlike either South Africa or the United States, Australia does not collect population data by race except for those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It does collect information on ethnicity, highlighting the relative importance of ethnicity in that context.

## **2 DISCUSSION**

Each nation has a racial hierarchy where whites are at the top and blacks are at the bottom. I have argued that this is due to the legacy of European, particularly British, colonialism and the strong impact of the racial ideology of white supremacy. In all three nations whites also cohered around the need to maintain economic dominance.

However, despite the similarities current racial formations in each nation are strikingly different. The racial categories employed in each nation are different, and where the same racial terms are used, who was included as part of those categories is different. I have shown that these differences are due to key events in each nation as shaped by their racial formation processes.

In South Africa and the United States, the white category is quite broad, including all Europeans, Jews and Middle Easterners, although this may be shifting in the post-9/11 world. In Australia, because of the White Australia Policy and postwar migration program, the white category is narrower, with many Australians considering only those of Anglo-Celtic and northern European heritage as white.

The black category is also different in all three nations. In the United States, blacks are usually African-Americans or migrants with African descent. Because of the one-drop rule, many people of mixed race with quite light-skin are considered and consider themselves black. In South Africa, the black category usually refers only to ethnic Africans. Although under apartheid there were attempts to unite all those who were not white under an umbrella of blackness, black and African are almost synonymous categories. South Africa has a separate category for people of mixed race: the coloured category. People who are racially mixed are not included in the black category. Most African-Americans are of mixed race. In South Africa they would be considered coloured, not black. In Australia the black category is different again: it mostly refers to Indigenous people. There are other black people here, including African migrants and refugees, but in the public psyche, black people are Aboriginal.

The ethnic-looking category is a racial descriptor for people who are not clearly white in Australia. It is possible that in the post 9/11 world a related category, 'of Middle-Eastern appearance', is being used around the world to describe people who are not quite white. It will be interesting to see how this category develops and who it targets.

This three-way comparison highlights the way in which race is socially constructed. It also illuminates the processes by which racial categories emerge and racial formations change.

What all the countries have in common is that there is a hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. Although those included in the "white" and "black" categories include people of different ethnic backgrounds, it is the characterization of a group as either white or black that determines their place in the racial hierarchy. As Lipsitz and Marx have argued, whites benefit from this hierarchy and seek to protect it (Lipsitz, 2006; Marx, 1998). In all three nations white supremacy remained codified in law until social movements of blacks effectively challenged the situation. Even as laws change, however, racial hierarchies remain central to the societies.

### **3 CONCLUSION**

This paper has necessarily been an abbreviated account of historical factors that influence racial formations in South Africa, Australia and the United States. Nevertheless, it has shown that even though the three countries have similar racial categories, particularly the categories of white and black, the meanings associated with those categories are different. I have argued that this is due to historical factors specific to each nation. Importantly, though, the racial hierarchies in all three countries reflect the legacy of the ideology of white supremacy, with whites maintaining their position at the top of the racial hierarchy and blacks at the bottom in all three countries.

### **4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to Tim Marjoribanks for discussing these ideas with me over the years.

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