

The Social Construction of Race

Race is a social fiction imposed by the powerful on those they wish to control.

by [Brian Jones](#)



A 1999 protest against the NYPD murder of Amadou Diallo. Elvert Barnes / Flickr

The first friend I ever had was a little boy named Matt. We were maybe four or five years old. Matt came to me one day with a very serious look on his face and gave me a little talking-to. He explained to me: “Brian, you’re brown. And I’m peach.”

I don’t remember saying anything back, but I think in my mind I was like “Okay. . . ? Well these Legos aren’t going to build themselves.”

Matt was trying to do me a favor. He was trying to introduce me to the very bizarre and peculiar rules that we all know as grownups — very important things to understand. If you didn’t understand them, you’d find American life and society very strange. You’d do things you shouldn’t do, go places you shouldn’t go. You’d mess up if you didn’t understand the particular rules that govern the ideology of race in the United States.

Sometimes when you go outside of the American context you begin to appreciate how particular and unique these rules are. I remember reading about a (probably apocryphal) interview with the former dictator of Haiti, [Papa Doc Duvalier](#), who referred to the “white majority population” of Haiti. The American journalist interviewing him didn’t understand, so they had to define to each other what makes somebody white or black. The American journalist explained that in the US, one metaphorical drop of black blood designates someone as black. And Duvalier replied, “Well, that’s our definition of white.”

The whole idea of this talk — if you take away nothing else — is this: the whole thing is made up. That’s it. And you can make it up different ways; and people have and do. And it changes. And it has nothing to do with biology or genetics. There’s a study of several decades of census records that found that twice as many people who call themselves white have recent African ancestry as people who call themselves black.

This is not just a matter of folksy beliefs, or prejudice, or wrong ideas, though those things are all in the mix. This is a matter of law.

How a Lie Becomes a Law

The [Naturalization Act of 1790](#) determined who got to call themselves an American citizen. It restricted citizenship to persons who resided in the United States for two years, who could establish their good character in court, and who were white. To jump ahead, the [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) case of 1896 reaffirmed the legitimacy of having separate railroad cars for black people and white people.

One thing we often forget about that case is that Homer Plessy’s argument was that he was white! He got bounced from the white section because the conductor said he was black. The question wasn’t that all train passengers should be able to sit together, rather Plessy said, “No, I’m a white person, actually.” The court admitted that it was very important to be able to determine who was white and who was not, and that having the ability to be white is a form of property, that it’s valuable, extremely valuable, in 1896.

The court said in its decision that “if he be a white man, and be assigned to the color coach, he may have his action for damages from the company, for being deprived of his so-called property. If he be a colored man and be so assigned, he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man.”

People sued over this. Native Americans and others were going to the courts and, saying “no, I won’t be treated as I’m being treated” and demanding the property interest in the reputation of being a white person. So in 1921 the powers-that-be decided they needed a definition of a white person.

Here’s what they [came up with](#):

A White person has been held to include an Armenian born in Asiatic Turkey, a person of but one-sixteenth Indian blood, and a Syrian, but not to include Afghans, American Indians, Chinese,

Filipinos, Hawaiians, Hindus, Japanese, Koreans, negroes; nor does white person include a person having one fourth of African blood, a person in whom Malay blood predominates, a person whose father was a German and whose mother was a Japanese, a person whose father was a white Canadian and whose mother was an Indian woman, or a person whose mother was a Chinese and whose father was the son of a Portuguese father and a Chinese mother.

You know . . . white people!

So when I say it's all made up, I mean it. It's made up.

But that's not to say it's not real. It's very real. It's real in the same way that Wednesday is real. But it's also made up in the same way that Wednesday is made up.

Human beings that look the way we do evolved around two hundred thousand years ago in the African continent and began leaving it around seventy-five to fifty thousand years ago. They settled in various parts of the globe and in bands of people that were, for the most part, cut off from each other.

And as all travel was by foot, they stayed in the same place for many thousands of years. And by staying in the same place for many thousands of years, these groups actually did evolve to look differently from each other, for reasons that have to do with the various environments in which they found themselves.

So there is a biological basis to the reason people look differently from each other. And if you look at those people before the modern era of tremendous transportation, of people going all over the place for political reasons, of people being carved up geographically into nations — all things that are pretty much brand new in human history — the people that settled around the band of the equator, where they get the most intense direct sunlight, all over the earth, those people have darker complexions. Now why is that?

All human beings, regardless of their complexion, have the ability to produce melanin as a protection from UV radiation. If you are fair skinned and subject to intense direct sunlight for prolonged periods you are likely to develop skin cancer. Skin cancer might not stop you from reproducing (and therefore passing on your genetic material) because in general you're going to develop that when you're older.

But there is evidence that UV radiation interrupts processes associated with folic acid (folate) which can cause birth defects and other problems. So people with darker complexions of course absorb UV radiation, but they are protected not only from skin cancers but also from related interruptions to reproduction.

But if you're one of those people who has been living for thousands of years in regions far from the equator, regions of scarce or indirect sunlight, you have a different problem — the problem of Vitamin D deficiency. The sun is a crucial source of Vitamin D for humans, so you're going to have illnesses associated with Vitamin D deficiency. You actually need to absorb more sunlight, and so paler skin is advantageous in those places.

This is really the only biological basis we can find between people who have different complexions around the world, but that's a far different thing from saying that people with different complexions actually comprise races of people in a biological sense.

This is important because scientists have certainly tried for a long time to prove that there are different races, and it's all been disproven. It's bunk. Today we even understand that there is more genetic diversity within the so-called races than between them.

The anthropologist Carol Mukhopadhyay [writes](#) about how things that we think of as demonstrating a biological basis of "race" are just not true: "In the United States, the sickle cell gene is more common among African Americans than other populations — but it is not a 'racial' gene. The genetic variation that causes it is also found in parts of South Asia, southern Europe, and the Middle East. And it is found in only some areas in Africa."

She also writes about genetic diversity among what we call "black" people:

When we turn to the racial category 'Black', we find enormous geographic and human variability — Africa has deserts, mountains, oceans, tropical areas, and spans a range of latitudes, some distant from the equator. It has hundreds, if not thousands, of linguistically, culturally, politically, and historically distinct populations. Africa is home to the shortest and the tallest people of the world. Other traits vary significantly, including skin color, facial traits (nose, eye shape), overall body shapes, even the frequency of sickle cell and lactose intolerance.

The problem with Americans' folksy way of defining who's who based on skin color, is that skin color is not a discrete trait. There's a spectrum, a gradation, of skin colors, and so marking off at an arbitrary point at which to say somebody paler than this is one thing and somebody darker is another is not a naturally occurring division between people.

There are a few traits that are like that, actually — discrete traits where you either have one thing or the other. Earwax is one of those things, there's only two types; you either have sticky or wet. But we're not likely to see a sticky-earwax civil rights movement anytime soon. Or a Wet Earwax Party for Self Defense.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of the history of the invention of "race." Race is a new development. If human history were a two hundred page book, "race" begins on the last line of the last sentence of the last page. And it starts here, in the United States.

Blackness Was Invented in Virginia

Historians look at the Virginia colonies as the origins of what we call race. At the beginning of the 1620s, European settlers discovered that mining, pillaging, and looking for gold were unsustainable get-rich-quick schemes; instead, they could get rich by growing tobacco. And as historian [Barbara Fields](#) says, nobody ever got rich growing tobacco by democratic means. The most profitable things to do is to press people into the growing of it.

First the European colonists tried to press native people into this labor, but that failed — the native people were on their home turf, they knew the land better, and they could escape. Native Americans were not a reliable source of the kind of intense labor power the Virginia colonists needed. And these Virginia settlers were not producing the tobacco to smoke it, but rather for someone to smoke it that they'd never see. This is production for a world market, at the pace of the world market, for unseen tobacco consumers thousands of miles away. So this is the origin of alienated commodity production on a mass scale.

The settlers also tried to press fellow Englishmen into this labor, creating indentured servitude, sometimes even kidnapping people. And of course indentured servants were essentially property: they could be bought and sold, traded, they could be put up for stakes in card games, they could be whipped or even murdered.

But this system too had problems and limitations, mostly because the labor supply is drawn from the home country; if you drag indentured workers all the way down to the condition of abject slavery, you ratchet up the class struggle at home. The other problem is that it's a temporary servitude and if they survived (they didn't always), formerly indentured laborers become landowners and therefore competitors to their former owners.

So the settlers finally hit upon the idea of kidnapping people from Africa and bringing them to Virginia. But that was not systematic at first, and because it wasn't systematic there was no coherent set of ideas about those Africans.

Africans existed in many different conditions in the colonies. Some Africans were free; there are even instances of Africans bringing lawsuits against Europeans — then called “Christians” — and winning. There are records of Africans adopting Christian babies. It's only later that language changes from “free” and “slave” (or “African” and “Christian”) to “white” and “black.” Africans were available for enslavement in ways that other people were not.

For the first time in human history, the color of one's skin had a political significance. It never had a political significance before. Now there was a reason to assign a political significance to dark skin — it's an ingenious way to brand someone as a slave. It's a brand that they can never wash off, that they can never erase, that they can never run away from. There's no way out. That's the ingeniousness of using skin color as a mark of degradation, as a mark of slavery.

But it's not until you have systematic African slavery, until the cost of an African slave dips below the cost of an indentured servant, that you get the rush of African kidnappings and the development of mass African enslavement and the ideas to justify it.

There are some crucial turning points in this history, such as [Bacon's Rebellion](#) in 1676. Bacon's Rebellion was a massive insurrectionary rebellion of slaves and indentured servants; in 1676 they deposed the governor of Virginia, burned down plantations, and, several hundred strong, defended themselves against the planter militias for several months. It marks an important turning point because it represents what we would now call “white” and “black” people banding together against the planters.

Of course, it's crucial to understand this is not an uncomplicated history. This was not a socialist revolution — one of the insurgents' principal grievances was that the governor wasn't killing Indians and clearing land fast enough! But the fact that the planters faced a united opposition from laboring people shows that the ideology of race was not natural or automatic.

After suppressing the rebellion, the planters moved more decisively to put divisions into law and to categorize people. So white people were then allowed to own property, own guns, participate in juries, serve on militias, and do all kinds of things that were to be forever off-limits to black people. It's important to understand that black people were not systematically barred from these things before.

While this color line was being drawn very decisively in the United States — and I should point out, for a very practical reason, because it made it easier for the planter elite to divide and control both camps — the color line was being drawn differently in other places that used African slaves. This occurred for a simple reason — in other slave societies, specifically in the Caribbean, there were not enough “white” people to govern the black slaves.

Planters had to recruit from among the Africans to help govern them, and so they had to draw the color line in a different way. And so while the ideas of full-blown white supremacy and African inferiority came to be the general ideas of the North American slave context, they have [different variations](#) in different places because of the different outcomes of the political situation.

Barbara Fields argues that the American Revolution was another crucial turning point in this development because it's the first time in human history that a nation declared that all people are equal. Before 1776, inequality was not something that nations decried; no other nation ever stated that all people are equal. America wore that badge on its chest. But of course they had the rattling of chains right there behind them while they were writing the document.

Fields argues that when self-evident laws of nature guarantee freedom, then only equally self-evident laws of nature can account for its denial. Hence the intensity of the ideology of white supremacy in the founding of the United States, the need for a scientific, biological explanation for why these Africans are inferior.

What I've presented here is just a thumbnail sketch of the history of how white supremacy came to be. There are some other important things to read and discuss; I want to name a few.

Read, for example, [Ta-Nehisi Coates' piece](#) in the *Atlantic* — he goes through Jim Crow, housing segregation, all of the ways that people have been legally robbed in this country. Also [Michelle Alexander's argument](#) in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* is very compelling. She argues that today, without using the language of “white” and “black,” there's a new system of trapping people with felony convictions, which disenfranchise black people on a mass scale.

“They Shot Him Because He's Black”

In their book [*Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*](#), Barbara and Karen Fields raise some really provocative arguments that I think are important for us to grapple with. One is the idea that people often use the term “race” when what they really want to talk about is racism. When commentators emphasize “race consciousness” or “race relations,” they make something that’s about oppression into something about identity.

A classic example is the tragically common refrain, “They shot him because he’s black.” We all know what that means, but actually, the sentence doesn’t make sense. Black skin doesn’t attract bullets. The color of someone’s skin does not cause them to be shot. That’s oppression that causes that to happen. That’s racism, not race.

Barbara and Karen Fields use the term “racecraft,” evoking witchcraft, to describe an ideological fog, a pervasive mental terrain, in which all of this operates. One of their most provocative arguments is that well-meaning people often end up recreating the ideas of race in their attempts to be anti-racist. For example, by trying to find in ideas of race something to do with culture, or something to do with identity. But Barbara and Karen Fields point to the example of [Amadou Diallo](#), an immigrant from West Africa who was gunned down by New York City police in 1999.

If the police had known that he was an African immigrant, and not an African-American, would they have thought he was the same kind of threat?

Amadou Diallo didn’t get to define himself in America. They define you. Black is something imposed on you in this country. It’s not a self-definition. Look at all those court cases of people trying to define themselves and being told, “No, you’re not that.” Native American tribes have gone before United States courts for generations, explaining that they define tribal membership socially (that is, as people who live on tribal sites and perform tribal practices), not genealogically. But time and time again, the court insists that bloodline is what matters.

It’s hard to say that race is identity when it’s something they put on you. And many, like Amadou Diallo, are subject to this preemptory imposition of racial identity in highly deadly ways.

This talk has focused on people of African descent in the United States. But once it became the dominant idea in the US, racism proved to be a highly useful ideology. Racism allows you to carve up the entire world into so-called races.

And then it becomes available as an ideological framework to explain and justify wars, and to explain and justify the subjugation of all kinds of people — [so-called immigrants](#) from Mexico, for example — or to describe what the United States continues to do to its native population. And all of those racisms have particular features, dynamics, and politics that are unique to those struggles and to those contexts. It’s a highly malleable set of ideas.

What Can We Do?

I want to end with a discussion of how to best confront racism today. I think fighting racism in our context has certain unique challenges. One of the challenges is that we are living on the heels

on a tremendous antiracist struggle — the Civil Rights and Black Power movements — and now nearly every institution in our society swears up and down that it doesn't discriminate.

The official stance of every institution is antiracist and in favor of “diversity” and so on. But we know at the same time that all of these institutions — every university, every school, every prison — has a tremendous pattern of racial disparities: who gets punished and who gets rewarded, who gets opportunities and who doesn't. These tremendous patterns happen at the same time as a high level of official denial. And the court has ruled again and again that the pattern isn't enough, you have to show intent to demonstrate racism.

So there's a kind of obsessive hunt for individual intent in racism. I recall journalists pouring over 911 transcripts after the murder of [Trayvon Martin](#), trying to determine if George Zimmerman did in fact say “nigger” before he gunned down the black seventeen-year-old on the sidewalk close to his home. But it doesn't matter what came out of his mouth. It matters what came out of his gun!

Racism is most obvious when people are dumb enough to voice it aloud. Like that [rancher](#) and [basketball team owner](#) — if they slip up and say something racist then there's a big hoopla. But the day in and day out racist degradation and denial of opportunities are ignored.

There's another challenge. The whole history is elites using racism to divide and control the working population. Now there's a new twist in which they use a kind of fake anti-racism to divide and control us. I'm thinking of the recent struggles in education, where they use a fake anti-racism to divide parents, teachers, and students; like the [recent lawsuit](#) against teacher tenure, which they wrap up in the ropes of [Brown v. Board of Education](#) and the Civil Rights Movement. So that presents a challenge for us.

One item of continuity between these different eras is pervasive attempt to pathologize people of African descent. Even Barack Obama has frequently played into this by talking about the parenting practices of black parents; the very fact he can do that shows the pervasiveness of the idea — it's become common sense that there is something pathologically wrong with the [culture of black people](#) in this country.

Contrast that with what happens when people of a different complexion [shoot up](#) a school (nearly every week in this country, it seems). Obama wouldn't get on TV and say, “Tsk, tsk . . . white parents — c'mon white parents!” Obama would never do that because our society does not say that there's something pathologically wrong with white people in the same way.

Many African-Americans thinkers and left-wing intellectuals are actively engaged in thinking through how to deal with this. And there's some debate — for example about affirmative action.

On the one hand you have people like Cheryl Harris. In an article called “[The Property Interest in Whiteness](#),” Harris describes some of the things I mentioned about the ways in which the courts have upheld whiteness as an identity that is worth something — it has real material value. And she argues that affirmative action undermines that property interest in whiteness by giving certain advantages to people of color.

Coates argues something similar, that the question of reparations is important, and affirmative action is a part of that, and he says we have to be honest — giving a slot at a university to a black kid means that we are therefore not giving something to a white kid, and that's okay because we've been not giving something to black kids for a long time — so how can you cry foul now?

And then on the other side you have people like [Michelle Alexander](#) — read all the way to the end of her book — who has a very different argument about affirmative action. And by the way, I don't think her argument is aimed at the Left as much as it's aimed at the liberal legal and civil rights establishment; they've been focused on affirmative action and diversity, she argues, while mass incarceration has unfolded under their noses. She makes an interesting observation: “Whereas black success stories undermined the logic of Jim Crow, they actually reinforce the system of mass incarceration.”

Think about that for a minute. Because under the old Jim Crow, the idea was that black people couldn't do anything; if you were black, you couldn't be a doctor, couldn't be a lawyer, and certainly couldn't be president. And so we cheered for every black doctor or black lawyer, because that challenged the logic of the old Jim Crow.

But the ideology of the new Jim Crow, is to pump up the few black success stories in order to denigrate everybody else, in order to further pathologize black people, as if to say, “If you're not the president, then what the eff is wrong with you?” And so she argues that affirmative action (“now we're admitting 8 black people to Harvard . . . see?”) is part of the structure of blame for everybody else. And that's important.

Similarly, the Fields sisters argue that there's a way in which this line of defense for affirmative action recreates race; it substitutes diversity efforts for genuine justice and short-circuits, they argue, a real conversation about inequality in general.

They ask, “Why are we saying it's okay to just insert a few more black people into that college,” for instance, by which we sidestep the conversation about why college isn't available to all. That assumes that there's scarcity of college, or of jobs — that that shortage is a [natural state of affairs](#) — and leaves us with no language to talk about inequality in general.

Now the caveat to all this is that the few Neanderthals who did survive from fifty thousand years ago are all on the Supreme Court. Their attack on affirmative action from the Right has nothing in common with these critiques from the Left. And we're in a context in which those real gains (meager as they may be) are under constant attack from the Right. They're under attack from those who use the logic of colorblindness to say, if you're not succeeding, what's wrong with you? That kind of colorblindness is instrumental to the new racism.

I won't pronounce a winner in this debate, but it seems to me we can take a stance that is not either-or but both-and. We want to fight for anything that is reparations-like in a way that does not assume the scarcity of opportunity to be natural, but rather calls it out as historical and artificial scarcity.

There's got to be a way to fight for specific reparations while also aiming our arrows at the fundamental inequality that underlies all of American life. And I think that is the spirit the socialist movement should take from here. Thank you.

Adapted from a talk delivered at the [Socialism 2014 Conference](#) in Chicago.