

1 Knowing 'race'

I start by mapping out the basic conceptual territory of race, providing a guide to what kind of phenomena we, as anthropologists, and others are talking about when we use this term. This proves more complicated than we might have imagined, because race is a concept that has been used in varied ways at different times, in different places and by different people.

Before I start sketching out the territory associated with the concept, it is interesting to try a small experiment, to see what the term means to you.

DEFINING 'RACE'

This exercise is best done collectively, in a classroom or seminar context, but you can also do it individually.

Write down a definition of 'race', in terms of what you understand by the concept. What does something have to be, or to have, for you to apply the word 'race' or 'racial' to it?

What about the word 'racist'? Is this different and if so, how?

When I try this exercise with students in Britain, there is no consensus about these terms. Some people talk in terms of origins, nationality and cultural background; some mention religion; others mention physical appearance, referring, when pushed, to skin colour and perhaps type of hair. Occasionally, people will mention 'blood' or parentage. Being 'racist' is usually said to mean discriminating against someone – excluding them, insulting them – on the basis of these characteristics.

Already we can see that the term race covers a broad area, including terms – such as culture, nationality and religion – that might be seen as conceptually different from race. When we look at contexts where race is part of a public, official discourse and we might expect clarity about what it means, this looseness of meaning is reaffirmed. For example, Britain's Race Relations Act (1976) says race in its name, but actually defines 'racial grounds' of discrimination as including 'colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins'. Legislators were not trying to produce a coherent conceptual definition of race for the analytic purposes of social science, but their definition is indicative of the vagueness of the term. It also indicates a tendency to simply avoid a clear definition: 'racial grounds' includes 'race', which remains undefined, as if everyone already knows what it is.

In the United States, the Bureau of the Census regularly counts people on the basis of race. Answering the question 'What is race?', their website says

The racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of the race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. (US Bureau of the Census 2013c)

Regulations in the United States specify at least five racial categories: White, Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In this case, then, 'race' refers to a specific set of categories, which themselves apparently refer to colour, ancestral origin and current geographical (regional, national) location. The categories are already 'socially recognized', but the Bureau also defines them in terms of 'origins': a White is 'a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa', while a Black or African American is 'a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa'. Ancestral origin is clearly the main criterion here (although, as in the British case, tautology or circularity slips in – race refers to origins in a 'racial group', at least for Blacks). It is worth noting that the categories have also varied over time: for example, in 1930 the main categories were White, Negro, Mexican, American Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu and Korean.

Brazil is one of the few Latin American countries to officially use the term race in its governance procedures: the census has had a question on *cor* (colour) since 1872, with occasional exceptions. The word *raça* (race) made an irregular appearance in the census over this period, but has been present again since 1991 in a question that asks people to identify their 'colour or race'. As well, recent legislation on affirmative action in favour of 'black' people (*negros*) makes reference to 'racial quotas' for university places and in 2010 a Statute on Racial Equality was passed. In this context race is generally understood as synonymous with colour, and the latter refers to a specific set of categories – white, brown, black and yellow – to which people are asked to assign themselves. Here, skin colour is the main criterion for defining race and, not surprisingly given the infinite variety of skin tones, no attempt is made to define these categories – they are assumed to be, to use the words of the US Bureau of the Census, 'socially recognized', even if there is not a social consensus on where the boundary lies between, say, brown (*pardo*) and black (*preto*).

If 'race' remains frustratingly vague and taken for granted, the term 'racist', by extension, is also hard to pin down. Few people today will admit to being a racist, yet accusations of racism abound. But what kind of discrimination do such accusations refer to? Apparently that based on race – but as we have seen for Britain, 'racial grounds' embraces colour, race, nationality or ethnic and national origins, a formulation reproduced, with the additional criterion of 'descent', in Australian and Hong Kong laws. Beyond the remit of the law, anti-Muslim attitudes in Britain are frequently branded as 'racist', even though strictly speaking they are based on religious criteria. The US Civil Rights Act of 1964 bans discrimination on the basis of 'race, color, religion, or national origin', but does not define race or specify how it is different from colour; presumably race refers to membership of one of the racial categories that are 'socially recognized' in the United States.

Brazil's Afonso Arinos Act (1951) banned certain types of discrimination based on 'race or colour prejudice' and its 1988 constitution outlaws discriminatory practices by reason of origin, race or colour, among other things. In Bolivia's 2010 Law Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination, racial discrimination is defined as discrimination on the basis of 'race, colour, ancestry or national or ethnic origin', while racism is defined as a 'theory' that values 'biological and/or cultural differences, real or imagined', so as to benefit one group over another.

1.1 Chronology of race

One way of getting a grip, at least initially, on this ambiguity is to recognise that the concept of race has greatly changed over time and does not have a single meaning. I will explore this in later chapters, but it helps to give a brief timeline at the outset. Scholars disagree on the details of this, but I will outline a fairly standard chronology for the moment – although I will be taking a critical approach to this narrative later on.

The standard history traced by social scientists and historians for the idea of race, in its Western or Euro-American context, has three broad periods. In the first, between about the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, race emerged in embryonic form and gradually developed. During this time the concept of race depended on a mixture of ideas about human nature, environmental influences and culture. Some scholars maintain that the concept of race does not describe thinking about human diversity during much of this period; they argue that the emphasis was more on culture shaped by environment than anything else.

There then followed a second period between about 1800 and the 1940s, when race was consolidated as a central pillar of Western thought and, above all, science. Biology – which became a recognised discipline in the early 1800s – was fundamental to defining racial difference, seen as physical differences that accounted for cultural diversity and moral qualities. For many scholars this is the classical period of the concept of race, when so-called scientific racism became dominant and the discourse of race was clearly about an underlying human biology, which defined a small number of major races and many smaller sub-racial categories. The races were placed in a hierarchy, with whites or 'Caucasians' at the top, their dominant position justified in terms of an allegedly superior biology. For many scholars this period really defines what race is all about.

Then, from roughly the 1920s, challenges emerged to this racial science, eventually discrediting it. A lot of scientific evidence accumulated over time to indicate that (a) human capacities, such as intelligence, were not linked to biological race; and (b) that human biological diversity could not be classified into the entities that had previously been called 'races'. Social scientists therefore concluded that race was not a biological reality, but instead a social category that used a language of biology and physical appearance as criteria for marking differences – race was a 'social construction' (see Chapter 4).

As a corollary of this shift, social scientists have observed that, after World War II (WWII), race has become masked and silenced in comparison to earlier periods. They note that, in many contexts, use of the term race seemed to evoke Nazi ideologies of

white supremacy and other politically controversial racial ideologies, often associated with European colonialism and/or with the stark forms of legalised racial segregation and discrimination that operated in the United States until the 1960s and South Africa, under apartheid, until the 1990s. The term race therefore began to drop out of the public, political vocabulary, becoming an almost taboo word in some places (e.g. France, Germany), its very use smacking of racism. It was often replaced by the term ethnicity, understood to imply only cultural difference, or by some reference to 'cultural minorities'. As I noted above, students would often respond with the term 'culture' when I asked about 'race'.

Race might continue to be part of official discourse in some countries – such as Britain, the United States or Brazil – but even then it is often merged with ideas about ethnic (read cultural) and national differences. In South Africa, for example, after the fall of apartheid, Black Economic Empowerment policies continued to target 'black' people as a category, while the state statistics office decided that 'race' should be replaced by 'population group' as the preferred census term, defined as a group with 'common characteristics (in terms of descent and history)' (Statistics South Africa 2004: 12): here history is as important as biology in defining the group. Also, scholars observed that, even in the United States, where the term race remained current and was defined in the census in terms of origins, many people – especially but not only whites – adopted a 'race-evasive' discourse or acted 'colour-blind', trying to avoid talking about racial differences at all, as if these did not matter because 'we are all the same' (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993). Talking overtly about race and colour seemed to carry the danger that people might see you as racist.

Still, racism remained in so far as the categories of people who previously would have been, or still were, identified as racial groups continued to suffer discrimination: the 'population groups' of post-apartheid South Africa were the same as the 'races' defined by the apartheid-era Office for Race Classification. Social scientists therefore began to talk in terms of 'cultural racism', 'neo-racism' and 'new racism', in which an explicit discourse of race was absent, biology and even colour were not mentioned, and the talk was instead in terms of cultural difference (Barker 1981; Goldberg 2008: 216; Hale 2006: 144; Lentin and Titley 2011; Taguieff 1990; Winant 2002).

1.2 Is race defined by appearance, biology and nature?

Given that the meaning of race has changed so much over time, but faced still with the perceived need to define what race is as an object of study, social scientists have tried to give it a more specific meaning. They see race as one particular way of classifying people, among other ways. The idea is that people classify people on the basis of perceived differences of many kinds and divide them up in lots of ways – what gender they are, how they behave (often called 'culture'), how wealthy they are, where they come from, where they live, how old they are, what they look like, what gods or spirits they recognise and worship, what football team they support, and so on. Frequently, classifications are deployed to include certain individuals or groups and exclude others. Such exclusions may not have important material consequences – if you're not in one group of football supporters,

you can likely be in another – but often they are part of hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination that shape people's access to resources, their freedoms and their life chances. It therefore becomes particularly important to understand the ways in which people classify people and what the consequences are.

Racial modes of classification are often said by social scientists to focus on 'biological', 'physical' or sometimes 'phenotypical' differences (phenotype is the entire physical organism, but often refers to physical appearance). One anthropologist (Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 20) says that 'race is about outward physical appearance or phenotype'. Sociologists Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992: 2) contend that racial differences are those constructed on 'the basis of an immutable biological or physiognomic difference ... grounded on the separation of human populations by some notion of stock or collective heredity of traits'. Goldberg states that race 'has always had to do ... with the set of views, dispositions and predilections concerning culture, or more accurately of culture tied to colour, of being to body, of "blood" to behaviour' (2008: 175). The emphasis is on colour, bodies and 'blood', and Goldberg highlights that race links these physical traits to culture, being and behaviour, which are thus made to seem natural.

These definitions in terms of physical appearance and biology are very common, but not everyone is happy with this emphasis. In an earlier formulation Goldberg took a slightly different line, seeing talk only of biology and appearance as too narrow. He disagreed that 'ideas about race are inherently committed to claims about biological inheritance'. Instead, race itself 'does not concern biological but naturalised group relations' (1993: 72, 81): a racial classification is one that sees differences between people or groups as 'natural' in some way, without these necessarily being understood as biological (for example, they may be seen as God-given, determined by the environment or 'the stars', or simply seen as 'the way of the world'). The focus on naturalisation is broader than that on biology.

Shanklin also takes a more open approach, defining racism as a kind of prejudice 'directed against those who are thought to possess biologically or *socially* inherited characteristics that set them apart' (1994: 105, emphasis added). Going further still, Hartigan simply says that race is 'a system of classifying people into groups, either explicitly or implicitly promoting the notion that these groups are ranked in terms of superiority or inferiority' (2010: 211). Hartigan avoids specifying what a racial classification is, as distinct from any other hierarchical classification.

These moves away from a focus on biology clearly reflect changes that social scientists have detected in the concept of race since WWII, as outlined above. If we are now in an era of 'cultural racism', when references to biology tend to be more hidden and when even overt reference to aspects of physical appearance, such as colour, may be evaded because people fear it smacks of racism, then we cannot limit our definition of race to biological criteria. We still intuitively want to include certain phenomena in the field of race and racism, even though there is no overt mention of physical appearance or biology. This is what lies behind Goldberg's focus on naturalisation. In cultural racism differences of culture could be naturalised, as if they were an almost innate and essential part of the person or group: tastes for certain foods and their smells, particular forms of family life

and values, religious beliefs and practices could all be associated with specific categories of people in this naturalising and 'essentialist' way (a way that made these characteristics seem an essential part of a person or a group; see Chapter 5 for more detail). Gilroy argued that, in Britain, 'culture [is] almost biologised by its proximity to "race"' (1987: 61). When culture is naturalised in this way, cultural racism contends that it is 'only natural' for people to want to live with others who are culturally like them.

1.3 Culture, appearance and biology revisited

These ideas about biology and culture as the defining features of race are very helpful, but they suffer from a number of problems. First, if we focus on culture, social characteristics and superiority/inferiority, trying to connect with the tendencies of post-WWII 'cultural racism', then we begin to lose a grasp of what makes race different from other classifications and rankings, which may take nationality, culture, wealth, education or other such criteria as their basis. Surely we need some kind of specificity here? How can we tell if we are confronting *racism* here, rather than nationalism, xenophobia (fear of the foreign) or ethnocentrism (belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture)? Many scholars do not address this question directly, instead assuming that everyone will know what counts as 'racial'. But, implicit or explicit, the answer is that (a) cultural racism is directed at groups and individuals who previously would have been subject to a more explicitly racial discourse (in terms of biology, appearance, etc.); and (b) cultural racism depends on naturalisation and/or tacit references to physical appearance or biology. We are brought back to these defining criteria.

Second, then, if we do plump for appearance, biology and nature as the defining features of race, we immediately encounter the problem that all these are terms that include a host of possible human differences, most notably gender differences. Ideas about the differences between men and women have generally made much of actual and imagined differences in appearance, biology and underlying nature. Ideas about the difference between young and old people also often depend on notions of biology and nature. But clearly we do not want to confuse race with gender and age.

Linked to this is the fact that plenty of differences in physical appearance among people are not understood as relevant to 'race'. It is specific aspects of physical appearance – typically skin colour, hair type and certain features of the face and head – that are understood by social scientists to indicate when a 'racial' classification is at work. Other aspects, such as height, wrinkliness, double-jointedness, length of fingers, fatness, thinness and so on, are rarely seen to have meaning as 'racial' traits.

We can make explicit what is usually kept implicit in the definitions cited above and say that, in general terms, the physical differences that have generally become part of racial classifications are the ones associated with the geographical diversity of humans that has emerged through evolutionary history as they have spread across the globe. People have adapted to their environment in ways that are reflected in aspects of phenotype, which also tend to be passed on in hereditary fashion, such that human phenotypical variation has, over time, come to have a very broad association with geographical environment – although that

association is complex and variable, not neatly parcelled into clear categories. This type of phenotypical difference still includes a huge variety of possible traits, but certain ones may be selected out by people as significant markers to make distinctions. I say 'may be' because, as we will see later on, the differences that are made to count, by those doing the classifying, vary a great deal according to context. Physical differences that might seem important given the course of history, such as skin colour, have not always been seen as very significant. The important point here is that, in order to understand how appearance figures in racial thinking, we have to understand specific histories, which are generally histories of human encounters and, frequently, ones involving power, domination, subordination and conquest. Appearance is not a simple objective defining feature that can be taken for granted. A definition of race as ideas that refer to physical appearance raises as many questions as it answers: which physical differences are perceived as significant, why and with what effects? Those questions have to be addressed by looking at particular historical contexts.

The question of appearance indicates a third issue, which is that terms such as nature, heredity and biology are highly complex concepts, with varied meanings. If appearance turns out to be more complicated than it seemed at first sight, 'nature' is even more so: anthropological and historical studies show that what counts as 'natural' in humans and what is implied by something being 'natural' in humans has varied over time and place according to people's concepts of how the world works. For example, in the West nowadays we tend to operate with a view of human nature as a kind of underlying biological reality, on top of which is plastered all the 'culture' we acquire as we grow up. In previous eras – for example, in the eighteenth century and before – this distinction was a lot less clear; things that we now might see as cultural (e.g. a person's moral qualities) might be seen as part of his or her physical constitution, which could also be passed on 'in the blood'. If race is defined by its reference to 'nature', then recognising when nature is being invoked and understanding its significance involves grasping what nature means in a given time and place.

The same argument applies to the term heredity. We have seen that appearance and heredity are closely linked, in that the aspects of appearance that become racial markers are usually ones that, because of hereditary transmission between generations, have some continuity over time at a group level (which is not to say that all hereditary traits of appearance become racial markers). Heredity is key to racial thinking, because it provides a way of thinking about connections between some internal essence (such as 'blood'), outward appearance and behaviour. Each member of a perceived group or category has some of this essence and passes it on to offspring through sexual reproduction. The essence is usually thought to express itself in physical appearance (although it may be seen as hidden 'inside' and thus invisible) and in behaviour. But, like nature, human heredity is a concept that varies a lot according to historical and cultural context. Today we understand this in terms of the transmission of genes. Although parental genes get mixed up in the process of sexual reproduction, the genes themselves do not change. Pre-genetic concepts of heredity in the West generally thought that people (and animals) could pass on to their offspring traits that they had acquired during their lifetime, making heredity a much more malleable process than genetics decrees.

A similar point can be made about biology, especially as the word did not exist until the early 1800s; if we are talking about race before that time, we will not find explicit references to biology as such. The very term biology indicates a way of thinking about humanity (and the world) in which the natural, biological realm can be clearly separated from everything else (culture, morality, gods).

For all three terms, nature, heredity and biology, there is a common tendency to assume they connote permanence and fixity in relation to humans. If something is 'in the blood', natural or biological, it is said to be fixed and hard to change; it is 'human nature'. Many definitions of race note that grounding human differences in biology or nature lends them a fixity: 'race gives to social relations a veneer of fixedness' (Goldberg 1993: 81); the attribution of social meanings to physical variations is based on 'a notion of heredity and permanence' (Smedley 1998: 693). But if ideas about physical variation and nature vary according to time and place, it may also be that the fixity we attribute to biology is not necessarily present in other contexts.

Related to this, we often make restrictive assumptions about what constitutes a 'physical difference' in appearance, limiting this to fixed phenotypical differences. At other times and in other places important differences in appearance might include hairstyles, body decorations and modifications (e.g. piercings) and also clothes. These are things that we in the West today might see as simply 'cultural', but in other contexts might be seen as a more inherent or 'natural' part of the person or group and that might be deployed in classifications that seem to be 'racial'. Overall, it is important not to take terms such as physical appearance, nature and biology for granted, even if we do want to use them in our definition of race.

1.4 Race, comparatively and historically

We have seen that the way the term race is used today – for example, in official policy and legislation – is very loose: it often goes undefined, as if everyone knew what it meant, and it is often deployed alongside related terms such as ethnicity, origins, nationality, culture, with little clue as to what all these terms mean and how they relate to each other. Social scientists try to inject some rigour into this, by saying that race is a way of classifying people that generally uses perceived or imagined differences of physical appearance, biology or human nature as criteria for the categorisation. Culture, behaviour and modes of being are classified too, but the defining basis for the classification is 'colour, bodies and "blood"'. This is usually said to have the effect of making the classification seem natural and durable.

This is a big step forward, but we need to be careful about assuming that *any* reference to biology, nature or physical appearance automatically signals 'race'. If it is only *some* such references that signal 'race' then we need to know why these ones, and how they come to play this role when other biological criteria signal other things (gender, age, etc.). We also need to be careful not to assume that we automatically know what is at stake when a given mode of classification refers to nature, appearance or biology: fixedness may well be an effect, but we need to be alive to other effects too ('nature' might be malleable, such that a person's 'race' could change or could alter its meanings).

A further difficulty emerges when social scientists are faced with 'cultural racism' because then a phenomenon that we want intuitively to include in the domain of race and racism seems to lose – or at least hide from clear view – the key features that are often said to define race, that is, biology, heredity, physical appearance and naturalisation. Why should we continue to talk about race and racism in these circumstances? Is it because the categories of people suffering or practising cultural racism are often the same as before: blacks, whites, Asians, Native Americans, Aborigines, coloured people, etc.? Or is it because the cultural differences at issue become naturalised and essentialised? Both these questions suggest relevant answers, but it is not a simple matter.

The best way to approach this is (a) comparatively and (b) historically. The first step is to place racial classifications – understood broadly, without a restrictive definition at this point – alongside other ways in which people classify or have classified people, which seem to share some characteristics with what we think of as race, such as an emphasis on physical appearance or bodies. This poses the question of how widespread racial thinking is and what we want to include in the category 'race'. The second and related step is to ask if we want to see race as having a specific history that is rooted in 'the West', whether that begins with the appearance of the word in various European languages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or rather begins with European colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century, or perhaps only properly emerges as late as the nineteenth century when European science enshrined race as a key explanatory concept for understanding human difference.

1.5 Comparisons

Anthropological and historical studies allow us to look at a number of ways in which humans classify humans, in ways that seem to share some of the features that, with qualifications, we have noted as relevant to race: physical appearance, heredity, nature, biology, essence – all linked to culture and behaviour. We will see that there are examples of classificatory practices that essentialise, naturalise and locate difference in or on bodies. The question is whether we want to include these as examples of racial classification; is it analytically useful to do so? The following examples look at caste in India, *zu* and *zhong* in China and alterity (otherness) in indigenous Amazon societies. These – especially the first and the last – are all contexts with an abundant literature, which I draw on very selectively to make the comparative argument that concerns us here.

Caste in India

Caste has proved an interesting place to make comparisons with race. Simple comparisons are complicated by the fact that caste, like race, is not a single thing or abstract system, but instead a very varied set of ideas and practices that have changed over time in South Asia (and in the South Asian diaspora). The attraction of caste as a point of comparison lies in the fact that, as a practice of classification, it involves dividing up people into ranked groups, which, at least in principle, share bodily substances that

are seen as heritable and that define certain key aspects of the person, for example in terms of 'purity' and 'impurity'. A person may be defiled by touching people of lower caste status, sharing food with them, being touched by their saliva, or even their shadow. Accordingly, castes are supposed to be mainly endogamous, although in practice all sorts of accommodations may be made. Castes are also linked to occupations in a society-wide division of labour, with certain tasks seen as low caste (e.g. service, labouring, waste removal) and others seen as high caste (e.g. priesthood, scholarship, the law).

Bodily substance may be conceived of in terms of 'blood', which can suggest ideas of biological heredity and essentialism to outside observers. But it is important to grasp that bodies are thought of in terms of multiple substances (saliva, bile, phlegm, maleness, femaleness). In any case, bodily substances and their purity are influenced by food, contact, behaviour and interaction with innumerable other substances in the people and things around one, all of which have to be carefully regulated to maintain balance and minimise defilements, which have to be corrected through ritual purifications (Barnett 1976; Daniel 1987). Thus bodily substance is quite a malleable thing: because something is 'in the blood' or 'in the body' does not make it fixed. On the contrary, bodies and their substances have to be continuously regulated and cared for.

Physical appearance does not play a major role in defining caste status. There are thousands of *jatis* or castes in India, so physical appearance can hardly be a clear criterion. However, lightness of skin is socially valued and nowadays there is a big market in skin-lightening treatments in India. There is a broad correlation between status and darkness of skin. In ancient India colour was associated, probably symbolically, with the four major *varna* or original castes defined by the ancient Hindu scriptures: Brahmans (priests and scholars, coloured white); Kshatriya (kings, governors and soldiers, coloured red); Vaishyas (cattle herders, agriculturists, artisans, merchants, coloured brown); and Shudras (labourers and service providers, coloured black). There was also a category for foreigners or 'barbarians', *mlecchas*, but this does not seem to have been associated with a colour (Brockington 1995).

Skin colour aside, other aspects of caste do seem to resonate with race: categories ranked in terms of status and power, heritable substance or essence associated with certain behaviours and restrictions on marriage. Caste involves naturalisation, in the sense that the order is seen, at some level, as ordained by gods and is based on a concept of bodily heritable substance. Whether one wants to call that 'biology' or not is a moot point, as it depends on when such a concept entered Indian ways of thinking about the body, and especially on whether the assumption is that 'biology' connotes fixity.

A judgement as to whether caste is like race or not has to contend with the fact that European ideas of race had a major impact on India during the colonial period, and especially in the nineteenth century, as European scholars and administrators interpreted Indian social structures through the optic of their theories about human diversity, which at the time used race as a central and highly elaborated concept. In an important sense, British rule consolidated and rigidified the caste 'system' – with the help of certain groups of Indians who saw this as a useful development – while also injecting an explicit language