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978-0-521-14479-7 - Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States

Richard Williams

Excerpt

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1 Race and ethnicity: forms of vertical classification

This book is a study of one form through which social values become attached to individuals, resulting in the development of a group identity. The text will explain the existence of inequality within social systems and will focus specifically on the historical conditions that allowed social values to become attached to two particular sectors of the population, Blacks and the Irish within the United States. The conceptual context of these processes is the European world system (with Ireland, England, West Africa, and the United States as interconnected units), whereas the United States, including its formation and development, is the specific state structure within which the development of group identities is analyzed.

By extension, this work is premised upon questioning the sociological usefulness of *race* and *ethnic* categories as they are presently conceived. Such is the case because, as this book attempts to demonstrate, they distort historical and social realities. To the extent that they distort, they are dysfunctional as conceptual guides for sociological work. The concern here, however, is not with replacing those terms. I will in fact utilize them as indicators of social value and structural place. Rather my concern is simply to call into question their use in an unreflexive manner.

Social value is here used in the Durkheimian sense in which value is socially attached to groups as well as to structural positions via status duality (good or bad) and spatial duality (high or low). In this sense the sacred (good status, high structure) and the profane (bad status, low structure) are the two levels of value duality within a system of vertical classification. All individuals and groups are then placed in either the sacred or the profane position. Theoretically, they are mutually exclusive categories. From this perspective, vertical classification is conceived of as the rigid segregation of human beings into categories of good or bad and high or low (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963; Schwartz, 1981).¹

My formulation of the issue takes the rigid segregation, suggested by Schwartz (1981) in the sacred/profane split, as one historical moment in the attachment of social value. It is a critical moment, but not the totality of the process of social value. If vertical classification is perceived as reflecting a strict demarcation between the sacred and the profane, however, it then only provides us with a single moment of

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Hierarchical structures and social value

human interaction. At that moment divisions are absolute and each entity can be in only one category, hence that absolute perception of vertical classification abstracts people from the flux of their history. Such an abstraction is a frozen moment, however, whereas life is fluid. This point is important because it provides us with another reason to move away from the assumption that racial and ethnic attitudes are reflections of human values that are fixed. At the same time it allows for the possibility of assuming that there are links between changes in attitudes and changes in social systems.

Within the context of this study, skin pigmentation (a natural feature of humans) is one embodiment of the sacred/profane split in the U.S. system of vertical classification.² The combination of skin pigmentation, which is a natural mark, with culture, a social mark, is another embodiment of this split within the vertically classified system of the United States.

In the case of ethnicity the absolute split in a system of rigid vertical classification is replaced by a more ambiguous system of classification. This occurs when one of the segregated entities of the either/or polarity is changed through the development of distinctions within one or both of the polar opposites. When this occurs, we move conceptually from a simple dual polarity (*A* or *B*) to a split within one or both of the polar opposites. Thus the possibilities move from *A* or *B*, to *A* and *A*₁ or *B*, or to *A* or *B* and *B*₁, or to *A* and *A*₁ or *B* and *B*₁. *A*₁ and *B*₁ symbolize a split within the simple polar opposites.

In the above manner distinct races, as conceptual ideals, become the classification of human beings into rigidly held segregated categories, such that they appear to be independent groups of people. The conceptual ideal of ethnicity assumes a no less rigid split across the original dualistic boundary, but a less rigid split within one of the independent groups. Thus in the context of racial and ethnic thinking, there can never be one race or ethnic group; they are, by definition, relational concepts based upon the more or less rigid segregation of two or more entities. Rigid segregation (moral and structural) can be viewed as a system of controlled interactions between groups that are assumed to be independent.

In addition to the necessary dualism of race, however, it is also logically clear that ethnicity cannot exist without race. Without race, the structure of ethnicity becomes the same as the race structure (*A* or *B*).³ Race can therefore be seen as logically and socially prior to ethnicity, and ethnicity as logically and socially dependent upon race. Thus the two concepts are fused in logic as well as in the social world. This provides the sense of process that is lacking from the general context of vertical classification (Schwartz, 1981).

Cambridge University Press

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Race and ethnicity

3

By concentrating upon one way in which social values are attached to individuals in the process of group formation, we are concentrating upon one way in which race and ethnicity – both requiring classification along structural and moral lines – are created in society. In relying upon the notion of vertical classifications, we can see that their creation embodies the internalization of moral values by all members of society based on a specific feature of the human body (e.g., skin pigmentation) that is linked to natural distinctions (e.g., dark and light).

In addition to the general acceptance of moral values, there is also a link between natural features and the structural position of the distinct groups in the social system. Thus, in the United States the natural features are seen as linked both to moral value and to structural position.

The relational basis of race and ethnic identity gets lost

The creation of ethnicity and race affects all members of a given social system, because this creation results from the formation of a vertical polarity to represent a relationship based upon economic, moral, and social inequality within a specific social system. This is an extension of the notion that there can never be just one race or ethnic group. When social groups are conceived as having developed independently, however, the assumption is that there can be only one race or only one ethnic group (i.e., vertical polarity as a relationship based upon structured inequality is ignored). This is the complete manner by which individual populations are assumed to exist as natural categories and are experienced as polar opposite categories of human beings.

The assumption that a specific social classification of human beings forms a natural category can easily occur when the natural features used as the basis for grouping individuals becomes transformed into the label for the moral and structural value of all individuals with that natural attribute (Needham, 1979). For instance, in the United States when reference is made to the race question or the race problem, it is generally acknowledged that race is a code word for Black. This formulation does not acknowledge the fact that the question or the problem is related to the entire range of those classified by race (i.e., all members of the society). In this specific example, the issue becomes what to do with the morally low and socially down group that is assumed to exist, independently, in the midst of the “normal” population. The morally low and socially down are referred to as a race in a non-relational manner, whereas the majority is composed of people in some generic sense. This type of thinking clearly illustrates the generally accepted assumption of the primordial existence of race (i.e., its independent existence).⁴

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978-0-521-14479-7 - Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States

Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Hierarchical structures and social value

But the sense of the natural/primordial (i.e., structural and moral values resulting from nature rather than being socially constructed) can persist in general thinking even when at least two races are acknowledged. Such is the case when racial names become substitutes for the existence of structural inequality as a fundamental feature of society. In this instance one sees structural inequality as a consequence of the existence of distinct races, rather than recognizing that race is a reflection of existing structural inequality.⁵ The Kerner Commission Report (U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1969), for example, talks about the danger to the United States of becoming two societies, one White and well off, the other Black and poor. Confusion is generated here by the use of racial names because it implies that if the society were all White there would be no poor. This could only be the case, however, if the structure of the social system itself were nonhierarchical. Even within the context of a segregated society, however, stratification still exists for those who are White. The use of race names does not invite an investigation of these structural issues. This has been the case, although the literature on stratification clearly indicates that both the larger society and the White subcategory is hierarchically arranged (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Kanter, 1977; Baron, 1984).⁶

It is therefore at least partially understandable how the social nature of ethnicity and race, like other socially defined designations of vertical classification, can get lost in our daily lives. This loss is manifested in the notion that racial and ethnic groups are composed of homogenous individuals classified by a natural mark.⁷ Homogeneity here means that all individuals in any one group are morally and structurally more similar to each other than to any individual in the polar opposite group. This latter representation can also be seen in the Kerner Commission Report. The report conveys an image of Whites who are all well off and Blacks who are all poor. There is no room in this formulation for poor Whites or well-off Blacks. In addition, there is no room in it for Native Americans or Asians and quite a few other populations.

The representation of ethnic and racial groups as homogeneous is important in generating the sense of polar opposites between social groups. What is vital for our purposes is the way in which the establishment of those opposites serves to distort social facts by attempting to represent the human group as a series of separate categories that are internally homogenous. The use of attributes from nature as the mark of those groups provides the logic for this transformation. Behind the marks from nature, however, differential power relations assign individuals to specific structural positions within the stratified social system.⁸

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Race and ethnicity

5

Social systems in the making: the context of vertical classification

The ideal context for the analysis of the creation of ethnicity and race and of their impact upon all members of a social system is a social system in the making. Durkheim (Schwartz 1981:16) states that:

society builds a framework of knowledge only at its inception, for only in the most primitive stages of social life are group boundaries clear and compelling enough to serve as a model for mental categories.

Although Durkheim is here making reference to a very early time in human history, Douglas (1982), and Schwartz (1981) have argued persuasively that the logic Durkheim derived from those early societies is applicable to human existence generally. This is not to imply that all of Durkheim's proposals are valid, but to the extent that his propositions are valid, they are general, rather than time-and-space-specific, notions.

The concern here is with two social systems in the making, the modern world system and that of the United States. I contend that the creation and re-creation of the modern world system through the absorption of distinct geographical regions of the world and the creation of the United States provide excellent contexts for the analysis of the building of those frameworks of knowledge characterized as ethnicity and race. The analysis of the creation of the United States as a social system includes its absorption into the modern world system through the utilizing of land from one region of the world and of people from many regions of the world.

Although the concern is generally with the world system and the United States in the making, the focus of the creation of ethnicity and race within those contexts forces us to concentrate upon specific entities within them. Therefore, this work looks at the creation of the Black and the White races, which are manifested in low versus high moral values and low versus high structural positions. It also looks at the creation of the Irish and the American ethnic groups, which are also manifested in low versus high moral values as well as structural positions.

With the world system as the frame of reference, West Africa (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), England (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), and the United States (seventeenth century to the present) are the areas with which we will be concerned when looking at race creation. Ethnicity creation will be looked at in the areas of Ireland (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries), England (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries), and the United States (from the nineteenth century to the present). With the United States as the frame of reference

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Hierarchical structures and social value

race creation will be looked at with Blacks and Whites as categories from the seventeenth century to the present. Ethnicity creation will be looked at with Irish and American as categories from the nineteenth century to the present. Though conceptually distinct here, it is assumed, as indicated above, that there is a great deal of overlap between ethnicity and race creation within the frames of reference.

Vertical classification: power, trauma, and the creation of group identity

Vertical classification implies that moral value and structural position correlate so that a specific spatial position implies a specific moral position and vice versa. The dualistic relationship must therefore be looked at in relationship to power if a full understanding of race and ethnicity is to be achieved. Power is here viewed as a physical as well as a moral (or social) force. It is thus important to note that the dualism that operates as vertical polarity exists as an integral component of power. Although power exists as a physical force that one group uses to dominate another group, it also exists as the ability to get others to adhere to one's will through moral suasion. In the latter case, there is no overt show of force (Lukes, 1974; Weber 1978).

Thus, the use of power generates the conditions for structural inequality (the assignment of individuals to unequal structural positions within a social system). The use of power as a form of ideological manipulation is not, however, seen as the fundamental mechanism by which the process of legitimating structural inequality is accomplished. Rather, the existence of groups of individuals with similar natural marks (having been assigned specific social values) and in similar structural positions (those positions having been assigned specific social values) serves as a daily reminder of the link among marks, specific social values, and structural positions. Power thus remains in the background, although it is a critical feature in the maintenance of vertically classified social systems that are spatially and morally coherent (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Lukes, 1974; Schwartz, 1981).

We can see significant instances of the use of power in the specific instance of the creation of race and ethnicity as forms of vertical polarities in the world system and in the United States. For instance, when English adventurers connected to the Crown took the land of the aboriginal population of North America as well as the land of the Catholic population of Ireland, power was utilized to bring new lands into the European world system. In addition, power was utilized when sectors of the West African population were captured and shipped to North America to labor upon the land. It was also utilized when sectors of the

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Race and ethnicity

7

Irish population were pushed from that country in the midst of starvation and disease. Those uses of power set the conditions for the creation of race and ethnicity in the United States, but they also were essential for the expansion of the European world system and the creation of the United States. Thus, the creation of race and ethnicity and the creation of the stratified world and U.S. social systems occurred at the same time. Unequal access and use of power were critical to the creation of the stratified social systems. Similarly, they were critical to the assignment of sectors of older stratified social systems (societies of West Africa and Ireland prior to their incorporation into the world system) into the lower structural position of the newly created nation-state and world systems.

The sociology of ethnicity and race: the view of vertical classification

The concern here is with how race and ethnicity are conceptualized (i.e., how their existence as an important feature of the social world is understood). Placing the literature into categories such as the assimilationist model, or the class model, or the internal colonial model is therefore here less important than considering to what degree do those utilizing the categories of race and ethnicity conceive of them as social facts. Within this context, there are two sociological perspectives that distinguish the understanding of ethnicity and race as entities in the contemporary United States.

One perspective, implicitly or explicitly, assumes that the social values attributed to marks by which individuals are classified into groups existed out there in the world prior to the constitution of social systems by populations with different degrees of power (see Jordan, 1968). Beyond Jordan, however, there exists an implicit belief among some scholars that antagonism toward those who are different is a natural feature of human existence (see Warner and Lunt, 1941; Myrdal, 1962; Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Farley, 1984; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Farley and Allen, 1987). Farley (1984), Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985), and Farley and Allen (1987) are interesting contemporary reflections of the notion of inherent conflict. They merely report the outcome of the opinions of individuals who have accepted their racial identity without any discussion of the social basis of that identity, thus implying that they take those opinions to be inherent to individuals rather than socially constructed.

The other perspective, implicitly or explicitly, assumes that although racial and ethnic differences exist in the world, they only become manifest through the use of power in a stratified social system.⁹ Park's (1950)

Cambridge University Press

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Hierarchical structures and social value

conception of intergroup contacts as moving through a “race relations cycle” of “contact, competition, accommodation and assimilation” sets the tone for this perspective. According to him, each of the four stages of the cycle results in the social definition of race relations. Cox (1948), Patterson (1967, 1982), Van den Berghe (1967), Gordon (1971), Geschwender (1978), Wilson (1978, 1987), and Bonacich (1980) also reflect Park’s social change perspective. Students of race, but less so of ethnicity, have moved away from the assimilation perspective, while maintaining the notion that change in relations is inherent to the interactions of the groups that have been assumed to exist prior to contact. Thus, the Jordan perspective can be characterized as the natural approach to race and ethnicity, whereas the Park perspective can generally be characterized as the social construction (structural) approach.

In essence, however, in both the structural approach and the natural approach research is carried out in a similar way (Geschwender, 1978; Wilson, 1978, 1987). This occurs when the structural approach takes a one-dimensional (noncomparative) perspective and thus becomes satisfied with asserting that race and ethnicity are social constructs, but does not then carry that assertion to its logical conclusion by questioning the extent to which ethnic and racial marks are themselves arbitrary.

However, the gap between the accepted truth of race and ethnicity as social categories and their use in practice does not appear to result from a lack of sincerity or from a lack of effort. Rather, it appears to result from the insufficient reexamination of the historical facts out of which those categories arose. What is at issue then is not merely placing groups in their historical contexts, but analyzing how group names, while providing the appearances of continuity and homogeneity within the thereby fractured entity of human beings, are in fact neither continuous nor homogenous (Weber, 1978). This can only be established by moving back in time and seriously grappling with the manner by which the categories of race and ethnicity became reflections of the inequality of social systems in general. Notice that this is distinct from saying that these categories are merely instances of unfairness or oppression based upon physical and cultural distinctions within otherwise fair social systems.¹⁰

My position is distinct from both the natural and structural perspectives. This third position, like the structural approach, stresses the power basis of race and ethnicity, but also calls attention to the fact that physical and cultural differences are two marks among many possible marks that exist among human beings. Such being the case, physical and cultural variations can be seen as similar to many other variations among human beings that carry no social significance.

This third position, therefore, not only points out the social basis of race and ethnicity, but it also stresses the need to comprehend fully the

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Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Race and ethnicity

9

extent to which race and ethnicity are reflections of the unequal structure of societies, as opposed to responses to particular marks that are natural to all human beings. In this sense it is possible to suggest that social systems not only teach their citizens how to respond to existing identities (or groups), but rather that those identities are being created at the same time that citizens are being taught how to respond to them.

What is at issue in this third position is the context in which race and ethnicity, once accepted as natural entities, become substitutes for inequalities within the social structure. Also at issue is the extent to which socially determined distinctions (premised upon high and low social value) among the entire human group are inevitable within hierarchically stratified social systems. Those distinctions also become accepted as real when those categories used as group labels are utilized without an elaboration of the extent to which those labels already reflect the fracturing of the human group (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963).

Under this formulation of the social construction of race and ethnicity, all sectors of a social system are affected by the existence of race and ethnicity. However, most studies of those entities do not consistently take this into account. Rather, the tendency, whether from a natural or a structural perspective, is to slip into the usage of those categories as if they naturally existed on a different plane from other logical, but less recognized, categories by which human beings are classified.¹¹

In this third approach, race and ethnicity are seen as specific instances of a general social invention that utilizes certain marks to place sectors of people at the bottom of a social system. Powerless and without rights, their labor can then be utilized either entirely without remuneration or at below market remuneration. By extension, other sectors of the human group are in the position to benefit greatly from the disadvantages of the powerless. Weber (1978:386) characterizes this situation as “monopolistic closure.” This use of power in regard to race and ethnic marks is not the only instance in which physical differences among human beings have become social marks within contemporary society. Rather, all socially defined marks (e.g., gender, hair color, eye color, height) can, and clearly have, served a similar role in human society. The critical issue, therefore, is the existence of hierarchial stratification as the basis of social systems, not the specific mark that is ultimately utilized to legitimate social inequality.

I contend that the natural and structural approaches to race and ethnicity have been relegated to the theoretical ghetto of the social sciences precisely because they ignore the extent to which race and ethnicity are specific instances of marks that reflect hierarchically stratified social systems. Their use of ethnic and racial categories imposes severe limitations upon generalizing about the human condition. Their

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978-0-521-14479-7 - Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States

Richard Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Hierarchical structures and social value

use, in essence, has maintained the notion that race and ethnicity are natural categories and that there is no need to look at entire social systems when race or ethnicity are discussed.

This approach explains why the sociological study of ethnicity and race lacks a general theory. This deficiency results partially because the literature accepts ethnicity and race either as natural categories or as the only logical instances of vertical classification. In the first case vertical classification (the form of the stratified social system within which race and ethnic groups interact) is ignored because the assumption is that groups of people in the world are classified by nature. The second case acknowledges vertical classification, but ignores the multitude of instances of possible marks other than skin color by which moral and structural value can be placed upon and internalized by individuals. In both cases, the full extent to which race and ethnic categories reflect the larger social context is diminished.¹²

However, this third position has to be carefully stated. Throughout contemporary society there are clear signs that skin pigmentation and place of ethnic origin have social consequences for individuals in the United States.¹³ This present reality appears to provide strong evidence for the assertion that the social values attached to skin pigmentation and culture in the society are natural. To ask for a discussion of this assertion is like asking for a discussion of why most people are right-handed or why up is the symbol of positive social value and down is the symbol of negative social value (Hertz, 1973; Schwartz, 1981). These attributes – including race and ethnicity – might be considered a waste of time because they appear to be natural attributes rather than attitudes which human beings, at a specific historical moment, developed and continue to reinforce within specific social contexts.

But by looking at human existence with a larger gaze, it becomes clear that skin pigmentation has not always had the significance it presently does as the social and moral mark of inequality.¹⁴ Prior to skin pigmentation taking its place front and center as the measuring rod of human value, there have been and continue to be other measures such as age (adult/child), gender (male/female), culture (civilized/barbarians), religion (saved/damned), and language (ours/foreign) that function in social systems as marks of status (Cox, 1948; Engels, 1968).¹⁵ What these categories have in common is their historical role as labels for the polarities of good/bad, sacred/profane, rich/poor, and value/valueless.

Indeed, skin pigmentation was not a significant measure prior to a specific historical moment (Cox, 1948; Snowden, 1983). Even if Jordan's (1968) position – that prior attitudes influenced later action – holds, it is still the case that skin pigmentation is not an inherent measure of human value. As Snowden (1983:99) states in reference to ancient Greece: