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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

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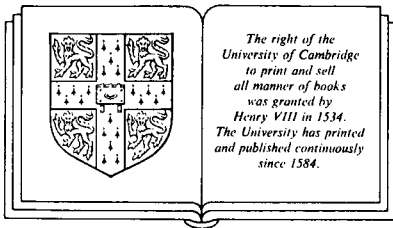
# Hierarchical structures and social value

## The creation of Black and Irish identities in the United States

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**To my mother  
Albertha Smalls-Williams  
and in memory of my brother  
Dan Williams (1934–1990)**

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## Preface

In this book I investigate the historical processes that created the marks of *race* and *ethnicity* in the United States. I concentrate upon two situations, the processes through which those who became the *Black* race and those who became the *Irish* ethnic group were incorporated into the United States with specific social values. (I have italicized these terms to emphasize the fact that they are social constructs, rather than primordial or ahistorical categories.)

I intend to establish a relationship between social structures and the social value of what are characterized as racial and ethnic groups by starting with the assumption that the Black race and Irish ethnic group are sociohistorical creations. Thus, their identities can be established in a more general manner than if race and ethnicity are taken as given presocial groups that are merely contained by social systems. In so doing we can relate what has been characterized as race and ethnicity in the abstract to the existence of hierarchically stratified social systems.

My point of departure therefore is the notion that race and ethnicity are social designations rather than natural categories. However, I am not as concerned with proving their social basis as I am with clarifying the macrophenomena that provided the context in which these constructs have been transformed into *natural* phenomena.

My conscious choice of categories for this analysis are the Blacks and the Irish. Within the logic of the argument, *White* and *American* also of necessity enter the discussion. The choice of the Blacks and the Irish however, is not arbitrary. In keeping with my reliance on Durkheim's insistence upon "the importance of frameworks of knowledge being built at the inception of a society," the Black/White dichotomy represents the fundamental racial distinction that eventually became embodied through law in the early stages of the development of the United States (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963; Schwartz, 1981).

Similarly, the Irish/American dichotomy represents the association of one of the largest groups (composed of sectors of the Irish population) with an ethnic distinction that migrated to the United States during the nineteenth century. Of equal importance is the fact that the population that became characterized as the Irish consisted of the first mass migration of a population to the United States primarily as wage laborers. The cases of the Blacks and the Irish are therefore of sufficient historical importance to help us understand how race and ethnicity became social

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realities in the society while taking the form of mystified natural categories in our minds.

My objective is thus to describe and analyze the processes that merged structural and moral inequality within hierarchically stratified societies, rather than to make comparisons between Blacks and the Irish in the United States. I have chosen *ethnicity* and *race* as the specific forms of classification that represent those inequalities, while the dichotomies Black/White and Irish/American are the real world embodiments of those instances.

Although the theoretical implications of this work are clearly intended to apply to ethnicity and race, that is by no means its sole focus. My larger intention is to give further insights into the manifestation of marks of vertical classification as a means of understanding how inequality generally impacts upon human beings in social systems. To do so, I rely primarily upon secondary historical sources as illustrations rather than as proof of these ideas. This enterprise, therefore, consists of descriptions and analyses of social processes that fundamentally affect our identities, attitudes, and, most important, our life chances.

In Chapter 1 I introduce the notion of vertical classification and discuss how it generally functions within stratified social systems. Race and ethnicity are introduced as specific instances of marks of vertical classification. I also discuss some differences between viewing race and ethnicity within this theoretical framework as opposed to how these phenomena are viewed within the sociological tradition. Chapter 2 discusses the European world system, England, West Africa, and Ireland in relationship to vertical classification. In addition, seventeenth- through nineteenth-century England, Africa, Ireland, and the United States are located within the context of the world system. These social systems are the contexts for the racial and ethnic categories that concern us.

In Chapter 3 I analyze the English search for an empire and its eventual impact upon the settlement of the Virginia colony. This analysis provides information about the hierarchical context within which the United States was born. In Chapter 4 I discuss how the social structure of the United States was initially created. There I show that, contrary to popular belief, the United States was from its inception a hierarchically structured social system. In Chapter 5 I discuss West African social structures to demonstrate that there were hierarchically stratified societies in West Africa prior to European contact. This provides an arena in which to discuss possible group conflicts within some of those societies. In Chapter 6 I analyze the internal features of those societies. Within the context of hierarchically stratified social systems, I discuss the logic of sectors of the elite in West Africa engaging in the trading of surplus nonelite members of their social system. Having laid out the context that

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provided the conditions for the supply of a labor force from Africa, I move back to the United States during the seventeenth century in Chapter 7. There I discuss the creation of the slave labor slot in Virginia and demonstrate that the colony's unfree labor needs were structural rather than inherently attached to Africans.

In Chapter 8 I turn to the Irish case, first discussing the social structure of the United States prior to the mass migration from Ireland during the nineteenth century. I then show how the need for cheap unskilled labor in the United States made mass migration a social necessity during that period. In Chapter 9 I turn to the counterpart of this historical process by analyzing the historical circumstances through which Ireland became a peripheral sector of the seventeenth-century European world economy. During that period, the stage was set for fundamental transformations in the relations between Ireland and England as well as between social groups within those societies. In Chapter 10 I look at the specific details of the political and economic responses to the potato blight in nineteenth-century Ireland. There I view the resulting emigration as a structural conflict rather than a religious conflict or a response to natural phenomena. Finally, in Chapter 11 I present a theoretical review and a further historical discussion of how race and ethnicity have been transformed in the collective consciousness of the people of the United States. This discussion centers around the significance of the insights gained from the analysis of the creation of ethnicity and race as specific forms of vertical classification within our general understanding of hierarchically stratified social structures.

Without the intellectual and general help of Eviatar Zerubavel and my wife Sonia Ospina, this project would never have been accomplished. Their support can never be repaid. Philip McMichael has been an intellectual supporter for many years. Despite some differences, his sense of the world is also expressed in this final product. Terence K. Hopkins provided his time at critical moments. My thanks also to Phil Alkana, whose copyediting made this a more polished product.



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