

# Race

## An Introduction

Taking a comparative approach, this textbook is a concise introduction to race. Illustrated with detailed examples from around the world, it is organised into two parts. Part I explores the historical changes in ideas about race from the ancient world to the present day, in different corners of the globe. Part II outlines the ways in which racial difference and inequality are perceived and enacted in selected regions of the world. Numerous case studies, photos, figures and tables help students to appreciate the different meaning of race in varied contexts. End-of-chapter research tasks provide further support for student learning.

Suitable for courses focusing on the study of race and ethnicity, this textbook leads students through the formal structures, historical movements and everyday manifestations of race.

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## PREFACE

Despite the many years I have spent pondering and reading about the subject of race, I still feel a deeply rooted uncertainty about exactly what ‘it’ is and how to approach ‘it’. This, I think, is no bad thing and guards against the oversimplification of something that, rather than being a single object, is a mercurial, shape-shifting and slippery set of ideas and associated practices, which exist always in relation to other phenomena. On the one hand, I have long been dissatisfied with approaches that side-step an effective definition of race, such that any specificity is submerged into general ideas about inequality and difference. This seems to lose a grip on something that is characteristic of racial concepts, despite their diverse and changing manifestations, which makes them different from other forms of distinction. On the other hand, I have also been uncomfortable with approaches that are overly specific and define race in terms of ‘biology’, ‘colour’ or even broader terms such as ‘naturalisation’. These approaches tend to take for granted what all these terms mean and how their meanings change over time and space. My own reaction to this dilemma is outlined in the first chapter, in which I seek to pin race down, but in a way that acknowledges the precariousness and impermanence of the exercise, given that race is always on the move, is always embedded in a specific historical context and always exists in relation to other social connections and categories. These features undo an attempt to characterise race as a coherent object and point towards the existence of multiple processes of racialisation, in which very diverse social phenomena are freighted with racial meanings, which are still nevertheless recognisable as *racial* meanings, with their particular historical baggages and entailments.

My aim in this book is to place the concept of race in a very broad historical and geographical context, with a view to showing its affinities to other modes of social differentiation, which overlap with it, while also trying to grasp certain specificities and continuities. The limits on the length of the book have meant that the geographical range has not been as broad as I would have liked – more on race today in Asia and the Middle East would have been useful, for example – but it also seemed to me important to use detailed ethnographic data to show how categories and practices related to race actually work on the ground in the contexts that I do examine in detail. On the other hand, I felt it was important to spend time giving a broad historical overview, in order to grasp the very different things race has meant over the centuries, while also avoiding a narrative in which the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries become the inevitable frame for thinking about what race is and what it does.

By training and by inclination I am an anthropologist, but I have purposely avoided putting the word anthropology in the title of the book, because race has to be addressed in a cross-disciplinary way. To deal only with the way anthropologists have engaged with the topic – from their participation in the science of racial (and racist) classification in the nineteenth century, through their pioneering role in dismantling this science and attempting to rigorously separate ‘biology’ from ‘culture’ in the mid-twentieth century, to their embarrassed avoidance of the topic after World War II, and finally their re-engagement with it in the last few decades – would be to produce a partial story. History is absolutely fundamental, to start with, while the insights from philosophy, sociology, geography, law and cultural studies have been central to the development of scholarship on the topic. In Part II of the book I have privileged ethnographic data, much – but not all – of it produced by anthropologists. This is because I want to give a grounded view of race in everyday practice, and anthropology specialises in ethnographic approaches. However, I also believe that anthropology is particularly well oriented to the relativising perspective I adopt here, which, by taking a broad historical and geographical view, questions concepts that may become taken for granted, such as nature, biology, colour and, of course, race itself.

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