Preface

The Formation of Race

Race is a complex phenomenon, both biological and sociological, involving the development and maintenance of human subgroups. From an evolutionary perspective, all humans belong to a single species, *Homo sapiens*. Over thousands of years of isolation and independent development, different groups of humans evolved to have different physical characteristics, forming the basis of what humans later called "race." Because all humans are the same species, the physical differences between individuals in different "racial" groups are largely superficial physical variations rather than substantial genetic variations. However, amplified through cultural divergence, these minor physical differences in the human body have fueled some of the most influential, destructive, and creative events in human history.[1]

One Species, Many People

Humanity originated in Africa, on the plains and in the scrub forest of the Rift Valley where constant equatorial sun threatened our early ancestors with radiation burns and skin diseases. The earliest humans had darker skin and other physical traits to help protect against this constant radiative bombardment. Between 80,000 and 60,000 years ago, humans began the "Great Migration" that took the species from Africa through Asia and Oceana and then to the rest of the world. Around 40,000 years ago, the first humans colonized Europe. Over thousands of years, populations of humans arriving in new areas began developing different physical characteristics. Lighter skin color, for instance, is believed to have evolved in colder climates as light skin allows the body to absorb more vitamin D from limited solar rays. It is believed that the "light skin" variant of the human species did not develop until as recently as 8500 years ago.[2]

It took tens of thousands of years for humanity to settle the globe, and human communities in different regions developed unique cultural traditions reflecting the particularities of their environments. Over thousands of years, the migration was lost from human memory and cultures in various continents began believing that they had originated from different parts of the world. When the great societies that formed in isolation came face to face with each other again after thousands of years apart, they failed to recognize each other as members of the same species. During the colonial era, as European explorers visited and colonized the New World, Africa, India, and anywhere else local populations lacked the military capability to repel them, colonizers often described the people they encountered as "primitive" or "inferior." These perceptions, the beginnings of a still existent pattern of racial hierarchical categorization, resulted in hundreds of years of persecution and exploitation. Massive populations of indigenous inhabitants on many islands and in the Americas were wiped out by European colonists as they traveled the globe capturing territory for their native monarchies and empires.

The Atlantic Slave Trade from the 1500s to the 1800s was perhaps the ultimate expression of racial conflict. Viewing the native African tribes they encountered as "primitive" or "inferior," European profiteers captured between 9 and 13 million African men, women, and children and shipped them around the world for use as slave laborers. Millions died at sea or through mistreatment by slave traders or slave owners, but the Atlantic African Diaspora resulted in populations of African descendants around the world. As the slave trade came to a close, through the gradual development of ethical and moral opposition to the practice, populations of African descendants continued to face racial discrimination and injustice in a long, arduous struggle toward racial integration and equality.[3]

Race as a Construct

In the twentieth century, sociologists proposed that race was better viewed as a "social construct" rather than a "biological reality."[4] According to this view, concepts of race are created within societies through shared prejudices, fears, and theories about the *meaning* of physical and cultural differences. Most of the races commonly recognized in the twenty-first century differ in skin color. Those with lighter skin have come to be called *white*, while the terms *black*, *colored*, *red*, *brown*, and a variety of other descriptors have been used to describe populations having higher concentrations of melanin and thus having skin that is, on average, darker than the pink-skinned people who initially created existing systems of racial categorization.

In 1950, a now famous research program from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) argued that race was not a biological reality, but a myth created through social and cultural conflict. The UNESCO findings were based on the realization that there appears to be no significant genetic or even genetically linked behavioral differences between humans, despite outward differences in skin color and other superficial physical characteristics.[5] As of 2015, science has not discovered any significant differences between humans of different races or ethnicities that could legitimately be used to prove that any one race, however defined, is superior to any other.

At the level of the society, race and racial concepts are constantly in flux and are refined and altered in each generation. For instance, different "tribes" of white Europeans once saw each other as different races, but these subtle differences have been largely abandoned in the formation of a more generalized European "white race." Racial concepts are deepened through cultural divergence and intentional isolation from other races, even those living in the same area, and also reflect the historical treatment and relative level of economic/social dominance achieved by individuals identified with a specific race. At the level of physical observation, race is about recognizing similarity and difference, and racial divisions are most obvious, lasting, and persistent between populations that look distinctly different.

Defining Racism

Racism, like race, can be defined in a variety of ways. On the most basic level, racism involves a set of beliefs about the significance of racial differences. Racism emerges when these differences are used to assign value and construct racial hierarchies based on prejudice, bias, xenophobia, and dubious observational evidence to create in turn the belief that some types of humans are superior to other types.

For some, race is solely about color, and so some opponents of racism argue that humanity should strive to become "colorblind," ignoring skin tone and other superficial physical differences. Critics of this approach argue that race cannot be reduced to "color" or addressed by promoting "colorblindness." Such a reductive approach may lead to the belief that racism can be seen as isolated incidents in which an individual is subjected to "differential treatment" because of his or her racial identification. However, some sociologists argue that racism is better understood as a system of cultural traditions, norms, stereotypes, and behaviors that serve to maintain a social hierarchy connected to the physical traits and social behaviors lumped together as "racial characteristics." Any behavior, activity, or general philosophy that maintains, deepens, or furthers this hierarchical view of race can therefore be seen as a manifestation of racism. In this view, racism is a long-standing system that encourages people to identify themselves, their families, their cultures, and their place in society in terms of the racial hierarchy. The struggle to defeat racism in society then becomes the struggle to end this *system* rather than the far more superficial effort to treat people "equally" in everyday interactions.[6]

Harmony and Tension

As of 2014, more than 50 percent of the 20 million young children in the United States were members of the nation's racial minorities, meaning that the "white race" of America is rapidly becoming a minority. There are few aspects of American culture that have not benefitted from the melting pot of race and ethnicity in the United States. In the United States, the mixing of "racial" cultures and artistic styles has resulted in unparalleled cultural creativity and innovation. The African slave population in the United States, creating new art forms in, for instance, music and dance, with influences from European traditions as well, developed the seeds of musical and artistic innovations—like jazz and blues music—that have since spread around the world. Though the meeting of different races and cultures has been the source of tremendous innovation, much strife has resulted from the socially constructed hierarchy of race, which continues to justify prejudice, bias, and inequality that to this day keeps societies stratified along racial lines.[7]

In August of 2015, a Pew Research study found that 59 percent of Americans agreed that the United States needs to continue making changes to achieve racial equality.[8] Among the racial groups currently recognized by the United States Census Bureau, "white" Americans are less likely to see racism, race relations, and racial prejudice as among the nation's top issues. In a 2015 Gallup Poll, 4 percent of white Americans identified race relations as the nation's "most important issue," compared to 13 percent of black/African American respondents.[9] It is perhaps not

surprising that individuals in the racial group at the top of America's racial hierarchy are less concerned with race relations or racial conflict than America's marginalized minorities, though most white Americans also rank race as an important issue.

The white/black divide is America's most widely explored and widely debated racial division, but America also hosts large populations of Asians, Indians, Native Americans, and Hispanic/Latinos, and these individuals too have been repeatedly marginalized, stereotyped, and subjected to racial prejudice. In the twenty-first century, the complex ideological wars fought around the world between radical Islamist groups and governments aligned with the western powers have intensified racism and prejudice against Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent. Most recently, fear over the Syrian terrorist group ISIS has resulted in attacks and racial violence against Syrian immigrants living in Europe and North America. This phenomenon shows that race and racial prejudice are fluid concepts, changing as broader cultural transformations alter the way that individuals see themselves and each other with regard to race.

Since the 2008 election of America's first nonwhite president, the term *postracial* entered the American lexicon. *Postracial* refers to the concept of an emerging culture, or an imagined future, in which race no longer matters in society. Numerous sociologists, cultural theorists, and social activists have passionately argued against the perception that America is now (or will become in the near future) a postracial society.[10] For some, the very idea of a postracial society may seem offensive as this vision seeks to eliminate or disregard the unique characteristics that have developed among racial groups. Opponents of the postracial view therefore argue that racial equality is not about erasing the differences between people, but about encouraging people to adopt an illuminated view that embraces the value of individuals, regardless of their unique physical and cultural characteristics.

Micah L. Issitt

Notes

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7. Wazwaz, Noor, "It's Official: The U.S. Is Becoming a Minority-Majority Nation."
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Race in the Media

Viola Davis accepts the award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series at the 67th Primetime Emmy Awards in Los Angeles, California on September 20, 2015. The first African American to win this award, Davis spoke about the lack of opportunity faced by women of color in Hollywood while applauding those writers and producers who have worked to reverse this trend in recent years—"people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black."

Racial Representation and Fictionalization in American Media

The American media—a vast mega-industry made up of thousands of participating companies with annual revenues in the tens of billions—plays an influential role in creating *and* reflecting American culture. News media provides information and opinions on domestic and foreign politics while entertainment media creates films, television shows, and musical products reflecting different aspects of the American experience. However, the media not only reflect, but also shape the ways in which people see themselves, their cultures, and each other. In the complex history of media and race, the media has, in some ways, been an important tool in the development of a more egalitarian and informed view of human culture. However, in other ways, the media reinforces prejudices and biases against certain racial groups, and in this way perpetuates racial discrimination and injustice.

Race in the History of Media

Long before men and women of African descent achieved citizenship in Europe, William Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, a play about a dark-skinned soldier who became a military leader in a society dominated by "white" men. Believed to have been written around 1600, *Othello* contains racial epithets like "thicklips" as other characters express the belief, common at the time and still often espoused, that individuals with darker skin are somehow inferior to individuals with pink or white skin. In *Othello,* Shakespeare portrays racism as a complex social evil that creates assumptions about the value of individuals based on their physical traits.[1] Unfortunately, the complexity of Shakespeare's *Othello* was unique at the time and, over subsequent centuries, thoughtful portrayals of race remained rare in "white" media.

The media helped to create the racial hierarchies that still exist in the Western world, reflecting, deepening, and legitimizing the belief that white, light-skinned individuals represent the pinnacle of human development, while portraying darker-skinned populations as inferior, savage, or intellectually/culturally deficient. In some cases, minorities are depicted as "savage" or "animalistic," either directly or through associations with other symbols of nature and prehistoric culture. In other cases, popular literature has reinforced a hierarchical racial order through the mythical archetype of the cultured white "savior" who brings religion, education, or culture to poor minority populations.[2]

Whatever the method used, such reductive portrayals condense an enormous diversity of cultural characteristics into a set of repeated stereotypes that reinforce prejudicial beliefs about race relationships. Not always obvious or intentional, these patterns of misrepresentation and cultural reduction often occur due to unconscious

biases and prejudices on the part of writers, producers, directors, and other architects of media content.

Misrepresentation to Underrepresentation

The representation of race in American media demonstrates long-standing racial concepts to new generations and influences the way that individuals identify themselves as belonging to certain groups. A *Sports Illustrated* report from 2013 revealed that there are 15 times more African American physicians and 12 times more lawyers than there are African American athletes, and yet African Americans are far more likely to be portrayed on television as athletes than professionals. The overrepresentation of African American athletes sends a message to young African American viewers that achieving sports stardom is one of the primary ways to earn social acceptance in white-dominated culture. Given a lack of African American involvement in politics, science, and engineering, the choice of how to portray African Americans on television can influence generations through the demonstration of potential life goals, careers, and possibilities for advancement.[3]

Similarly, studies in the 2000s indicated that African American and Latino/Hispanic Americans are far more likely to be portrayed as "poor" in news broadcasts, despite the fact that two-thirds of the population living in poverty are white. A 2015 study by researcher Travis Dixon found that depictions of race in television news have improved since the 1990s, with realistic and varied depictions of minority individuals becoming noticeably more common. However, significant areas of racial bias were also found. For instance, reporters interviewing or showing police on camera in Los Angeles chose a white officer to profile/interview in 73 percent of instances, while only 53 percent of police in the region are white. About 16 percent of police officers shown on California television news were Hispanic/Latino, despite the fact that Hispanics/Latinos constitute over 30 percent of the police force. Essentially, white males are more likely to be depicted in "power" positions, as executives or police officers, while minority individuals are more likely to be portrayed as poor laborers or criminals.[4]

Even when the architects of American media actively attempt to avoid racism or racial insensitivity, subtle misrepresentations present a distorted version of reality that supports the preferences of white audiences and the overarching racial hierarchy. The rarity of realistic minority depictions may be linked to the dearth of minorities in the news and media industries. In the film industry, for instance, more than 94 percent of studio executives were white and 100 percent were male in 2014. A full 92 percent of film studio managers are white, as well as 93 percent of television senior managers.[5] A Pew Research study from 2012 found that only 12 percent of the newspaper workforce were minorities, with little increase in diversity since the early 1990s.[6]

The situation is little better on the other side of the camera. An analysis of the 100 top-grossing films in 2012 by the University of Southern California, found that only 10.8 percent of speaking characters in films were black, while 5 percent were Asian, 4.2 percent were Hispanic/Latino, and 3.6 percent were of mixed race.

Studies like these, of which there are many, demonstrate how minorities are under-represented in media, again reflecting a subtle and sometimes unconscious bias favoring the portrayal of white protagonists. In many modern television programs and films, minority characters are still portrayed in highly stereotyped ways. White protagonists may have "sassy" or "street smart" African American friends, or may have "Hispanic/Latino" maids or servants. In some cases, even attempts to depict minority individuals in positive ways still reflect racial reduction and bias. Asian Americans may be portrayed as scientists or "technical experts," which, while not entirely unflattering, represents a white stereotype holding that Asians are "good at math and science." Asian and Indian actors also are often cast as shop owners or immigrant cab drivers, reflecting certain roles that might be especially visible in American cities and therefore easy to stereotype but that fail to capture the diverse lives of minority Americans.

Misrepresentation and underrepresentation collectively contribute to a mythological version of American society in which white characters, particularly white males, are portrayed with relative depth and complexity, while minority characters and women often represent archetypes whose presence in the narrative serves only to reflect the white male protagonist's experiences. Commercialized attempts to introduce "diversity" are sometimes criticized as ineffective and superficial, with studios and executives meeting external "diversity requirements" through the addition of "token" minority characters. Critics of the modern media's handling of race argue that these superficial attempts to be more racially diverse result in stereotyped characters that continue to reflect underlying assumptions about minority cultures.

Cooptation to Collaboration

Different minority groups in the United States have created unique cultural expressions through art. In early America, there was a type of theater, called the "minstrel show," in which white actors and artists dressed in "blackface" and imitated the dances and songs that had developed among African slave populations. Minstrel shows have long been derided as an example of white exploitation of African American culture, but the popularity of minstrel shows demonstrates that, even as most white Americans may have believed African Americans were inferior at the time, those same white Americans begrudgingly admired the unique and beautiful artistic creations emerging from the slave population.

Various kinds of music and art created within minority communities, like hip hop, jazz, breakdancing, break beat, dub step, ska, R&B, soul, and reggae, have long fascinated individuals outside the cultures that created them. However, minority art and language represent particular shared experiences often created in direct response to the oppression of white European or American economic and cultural hegemony. As such, white artists attempting to use minority music and language are often accused of cooptation, which is a form of exploitation in which an artist from outside a particular culture imitates, mocks, or appropriates forms of expression formed within another culture. Cooptation does not involve only music and art and

occurs whenever members of a dominant racial group appropriate forms of cultural expression unique to marginalized societies.[7]

There is a fine line, however, between cooptation and legitimate innovation, and popular culture around the world has been greatly enriched through the blending of different art forms and other cultural expressions. The musical genre of jazz, for instance, though originating within the unique mélange of influences in black American culture in the early 1900s, spread to Europe during World War II, where it was transformed into new genres through the involvement of white Europeans and the also marginalized "gypsy" or "roma" minorities in places such as France and Belgium. Back in the United States, jazz and blues gave rise to R&B music, which was the first step in the creation of American "rock 'n' roll" music. This transition, from minority to majority music, involved cooptation by artists like Elvis Presley, who imitated African American innovators like Chuck Berry and T-Bone Walker and thus brought this innovative new art form to the white American public. In the fluid formation of culture and art, appropriation can be an unfortunate first step towards collaboration and innovation.[8]

Ultimately, media both reflects and helps to form ideas about race and racial values. The democratization of art through digital media has only begun to transform the American cultural landscape, opening the door for numerous alternative forms of art that might once have been rejected by the predominantly white male executives who decide what news and entertainment will be most profitable or productive for their purposes. Whereas racial portrayals were once overtly designed to reinforce racial stereotypes, in the twenty-first century, cooptation, misrepresentation, and underrepresentation, even when unintentional, still have pervasive effects on popular conceptions about various racial groups. But unintentional, racial bias is perhaps even more important to address because it speaks to the insidious underlying level of racial prejudice that colors all media and continues to reinforce racial hierarchies both locally and around the world.

<div align="right">Micah L. Issitt</div>

Notes

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