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How Racial Categories and Practices Have Worked– And Persisted– Throughout American History

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Social scientists have known for more than a century that race is a fiction – nothing in human biological or genetic makeup can be used to put a class of humans exclusively in one racial category and thus distinctly separate them from all other human beings. People no longer believe equally outmoded ideas about witches or bloodletting, but many refuse to let go of beliefs about race. My research suggests one reason why: our society is strongly invested in racial categories. I define race and outline a general theory of how race works. Using the United State as an example I trace the ethnic histories of several groups from the time of the American Revolution through today to illustrate how people continually build upon racial thinking and repeatedly ignore opportunities to dismantle racial thought.

A Framework for Understanding Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity operate together, but are distinct social concepts. Racial attributions denigrate some groups and socially elevate others, while ethnic groupings are widely thought to be more about lineage, ancestry, culture – identities that influence people's sense of belongingness. But I argue ethnicities also function to shore up racial thought. When North American groups are called "Indians," racial and ethnic inflections are confounded. Just like race, ethnicity is "socially constructed." When racial and ethnic groups are designated and people decide who is properly a member of each, assumptions are made about proper social interactions between one group and another. Ethno-racial social constructions become paradigms that dominate political and social life, endure over time, and are inordinately difficult to overturn.

Racial paradigms, I argue, are rooted in four key concepts: racial categories, racial hierarchies, racial common sense, and racial sanctions. A racial paradigm can be considered like a chest of drawers – where each drawer is a racial category and ethnic groups are sorted into them. The racial hierarchy is the order in which the drawers are stacked, and ethnic groups are valued accordingly. Finally, racial common sense includes both the rules for assigning groups or individuals to drawers and the expectations about how those in a given drawer will behave. If people resist the racial hierarchy, sanctions are imposed. Most people focus on getting themselves to a higher drawer or on keeping their higher drawer assignments. In this conceptualization, of course, it is radical and even revolutionary to insist that the chest itself should be dismantled.

There have been many different kinds of racial systems. Racism in one era, for example under slavery, looks different from racism in another, such as a period following a movement for equality. And of course, racial regimes in one place, such as Brazil, look different from others in, for instance, South Africa or the United States. But there are nevertheless commonalities. Understanding shared paradigmatic aspects of racial thought – in terms of categories, hierarchy, common sense assumptions, and sanctions – can reveal similarities across time and geography and perhaps help people oppose any given racial regime.

Race and Ethnicity in the United States

To show how ethnic groups operate under the racial paradigm particular to the United States, I have developed an ethnic history from the time of the American Revolution to today. My main finding is that all ethnic groups have struggled to better position themselves in the established racial hierarchy, but people can succeed only if they embrace racial thinking.

An ethnic group "new" to the system is placed in the lowest racial category – a process called *racialization*. In the United States, all nonwhite groups have initially been placed this way, along with African Americans. I studied 12 such nonwhite groups, including the Irish, Chinese, Italians, Jews, Mexicans, Afro-Caribbeans and Native Americans. Each of the ethnic groups I studied mixed with African Americans – that is, resided with them, worked with them, and married and bore children with African Americans. In the process, these groups were treated like African Americans, and during their time in the racial hierarchy's lower rungs, every subordinated group learned to accept the racial paradigm and implore groups with more power to give them a more desirable racial categorization, improving their social standing.

Every subordinate ethnic group, including African Americans, has made pleas for improved status. But only groups that learned to direct animus against blacks, turning especially against African American co-workers, neighbors, and kin, succeeded historically in raising their group racial status.

This dynamic helps explain why African Americans have remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy throughout U.S. history – and it appears that there is no end in sight to their denigration. Because anti-black maneuvers are the engine of certain kinds of ethnic progress in America, African Americans have had to bear the brunt of racism from numerous other groups, not just those deemed "white." If the rules of the U.S. racial game say that a group succeeds by denigrating those at the bottom, who are African Americans to denigrate?

In sum, my survey of U.S. ethno-racial history shows that, time and again, people would rather earn the rewards that come from investment in racial denigration of others categorized beneath them, rather than embrace racial equality – even when egalitarian approaches might have been in everyone's best interest.

Can Americans Overcome Racial Thought?

Because successively arriving ethnic groups affirm the United States' racial system by contributing to the extreme denigration of African Americans, my research reveals that the U.S. racial paradigm is sustained by more than just overtly racist "whites." All groups in the United States have been complicit in keeping racial categories and inequalities alive, generation after generation. My research shows how pervasive and destructive ethnic thinking can be, and how difficult it is for people to abandon.

Of course, my findings also issue a challenge for Americans to do better, to organize cross-ethnic coalitions to challenge the racial status quo. For this to happen, individual ethnic groups must decide to forego any immediate benefits they might reap from promoting anti-blackness – and instead look for ways to assure that everyone moves forward together.

Read more in Vilna Bashi Treitler, *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fictions into Ethnic Factions* (Stanford University Press, 2013).