

Phil1200-006

11/30, 12/2 (these days we had a class discussion of the Introduction and first chapter of Rothenberg).

Race, Class and Gender in the United States

Introduction

The problem with abstract nouns and mass terms like ‘the behavior of the pygmy’; ‘a woman’s right to choose’; ‘people of color’; ‘the white man’; ‘the man on the street’; ‘public opinion’; ‘human intelligence’—it is very hard to be clear who or what we are talking about precisely, since there are no actual instances of these things (all these terms refer to abstract entities that do not exist in the actual world except as generalizations about classes of individuals [‘the black man’], or the properties of individuals treated as a class [‘the average blood pressure of an adult in the United States’]).

Why we must be on our guard against imprecise uses of such terms: since there are no actual instances of what these terms refer to, it is easy for them to be used to assert nonexistent facts about the world (‘the average voter is a bonehead’) whose truth or falsity cannot be tested (because there is no way to find the average voter and see if he or she is a bonehead, unlike particular voters, whose boneheadedness can perhaps be established by direct observation!).

Now we must be good Socratic speakers and listeners. Why: because race, gender and sexual identity are highly charged in our society. If you are blissfully unaware of the charged nature of differences associated with race, or with gender, or with sexual identity, the readings from now on will probably be disturbing to you. Most people already have strong ideas and feelings in these areas of public discourse, so it will tax our abilities as Socratic listeners (which I defined early in the semester as “listening to other opinions with the assumption that no one would advance a view different from our own except for good reasons, and we must try go find out what those reasons are”).

What does Rothenberg mean by “socially constructed differences”? Are these less real than other kinds of differences (say, ‘biologically constructed differences’)?

Rothenberg suggests that socially constructed racial, gender and class differences have continuing and real, negative consequences for many people who fall on the ‘wrong side of the difference’, i.e., women, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Indians and many others who live in the United States. We will be reading from evidence that supports this claim. It will be up to you to decide what this evidence means, and in particular, whether your view of ‘reality’ has been distorted by socially constructed notions of racial, gender and class differences, as Rothenberg and numerous others studying phenomena of race, gender and class in America claim.

Part 1 Introduction

- A. The portrayal of race and gender and class differences was a basis for unequal distribution of social goods (wealth, power, opportunity) in the United States and Europe.
1. Familiar models of difference:
 - a. Healthy male traits in a woman=unhealthy female psychology
 - b. All peoples not of white-skinned European descent are inferior to those that are.
 - c. Nonwhites are better suited to menial and/or brutal forms of labor unsuitable for whites.
 - d. Financially successful people are smarter and have better character than unsuccessful people.
- B. Upshot: these common beliefs suggest that race, class and gender differences are based upon natural, biological and mental differences among individuals.
- C. But race, gender and class distinctions are not, Rothenberg argues, based upon and derived from natural distinctions, but are social constructions (ideas created to promote or to justify a certain social arrangement, in this case, unequal distribution of power).
1. How can this be? Isn't gender at least a biologically determined fact about us?
 2. The difference between sexual maleness/femaleness and the meaning we attach to them : anatomical facts (obvious and not obvious: genital differences and hormonal systemic differences) and capabilities (insemination gestation) vs. sex-based 'behavioral traits' (social-role stereotyping of the sexes)
 3. Evidence that social-role stereotyping of the sexes is socially constructed, not based on natural differences:
 - a. strenuous physical activity assigned to women in some cultures.
 - b. the hardest physical labor assigned to women even in cultures whose official social role assignments for women assume they are less capable of doing such work than men (fruit picking for example).
 - c. men and women are naturally different, but nonetheless they are more like *each other* than they are like *anything else* in the natural world (this is what Freud called "the exaggeration of a specific difference", something that human beings are particularly good at). Analogy: tangerines insisting vehemently that they are not oranges.
 4. "[E]xclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities." [9]
 5. Also true about racial stereotyping of social roles. While less common now, it was very recently that people began to give up the idea that people of different races had biologically-based differences in intellect, temperament, and character. Don't confuse this with ethnic differences: ethnicity is specifically thought of as a social creation (based upon common social histories and cultural traditions).

6. Evidence that race-based social role stereotyping is socially constructed, not based on biological differences:
 - a. who is considered ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘colored’ depends on the cultural situation, not biological differences (Japanese immigrants in South Africa vs. Japanese immigrants in the USA, etc.).
 - b. for human beings, there is more within-racial grouping genetic variation than there is between-racial grouping genetic variation (upshot: individual differences matter far more than group differences, yet social role assignments based on race ignore this demonstrable biological fact).
7. Class-based social-role assignments are also socially constructed, but have been frequently portrayed as natural (the rich have different natural traits than the poor [poverty as personal failure, rather than structural disadvantage]; those who perform mental work are superior to those who perform physical work; social Darwinism [where people end up in the status sweepstakes is a matter of their natural talents, not factors independent of individual traits; tracking in school as creating the differences that later will be claimed are natural [Michael Spottsville story]).

D. Difference-as-Status-and-Power-Hierarchy

Differences among racial groups and genders, though a specious basis for social-role assignments, are not necessarily the cause of inequality of social opportunity. Why? Because *even racism (stressing the differences among races)* does not necessarily lead to subordination of one group by another. For that, *differences must be interpreted on a scale of value, low to high.*

Chapter 1: Racial Formations (Omi and Winant)

The Phipps case—outrageous or good science?

Race as a convenient post-Enlightenment explanation for why parts of the world are free, others enslaved.

However, Race is not a biologically defensible category because it *cannot be defined scientifically.*

Nonetheless there are ongoing efforts to reinstitute the notion that race is a natural category (Arthur Jensen, et al.).

Race in America: the theory of ‘hypo-descent’ (“just one little teeny drop and a person’s all Negra”—Elizabeth Taylor’s character in *Raintree County*)

Inter-cultural differences in racial dividing lines: the case of Latin American societies (where racial groupings are not sharply divided as they are here)

The meaning of “black” changes depending on the society, and interests of groups existing within societies (Asians and Afro-Caribbean youth adopt ‘black’ as an expression of self-identity, while in contemporary Britain, ‘black’=anyone who is nonwhite.).

“Racial formation”: “the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories”[16]

Race as “common sense”: What to do when someone does not ‘act white’/’act black’?
What is the cause of the ensuing discomfort? The need to categorize has many purposes, some of which are to simplify social life, make it more manageable. What other purposes could it serve?

The unavoidability of race: while “particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, ... the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of US culture.”[17]

How does this strike you? True, false, why or why not?

The reliance of television on ‘racial caricatures’: when have you seen a Asian playing the role of a spoiled blue-blood from Boston, or a Hispanic female playing the nervous Victorian spinster who is afraid to enjoy even a good glass of wine for fear of upsetting the moral order? Is this mere reliance on convenient shorthand so other things can be done (entertain us, of course), and even so, does it have real consequences in maintaining a system of racial stereotyping?

“Black” as a creation of U.S. slave culture (before 17th century, people were identified as Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, etc.).

“White” as a creation of Europeans looking for a way to distinguish themselves from non-Europeans (preceded first by “Christian” and later by “free and English”).

Recent redrawing of the same color line: blacks as a racial group characterized by defective family organization, cultural norms who are disproportionately among the ‘dependent class’ created by the welfare state (who are different than *we*, who are paying for it).

Richard Wright on “The Ethics of Living JimCrow”

Possible questions for class discussion:

1. Does this story arouse any memories of similar experiences anyone in class has had on the basis of *other* formations besides race, for example, gender or class distinctions?
2. Are the individual white people in Richard Wright's stories immoral?
3. How would you deal with living in such a circumstance as one of the white people in the Jim Crow period of American history?
4. Since Jim Crow ended within *my* lifetime, is it reasonable to suppose that the system described in Wright's stories has been completely eliminated?
5. If not, what does that say about the lives of black people in contemporary America?
6. Has anyone witnessed anything that smacks of Jim Crow in their own experience? How did they deal with it?
7. Is there any theory of civil government we have considered that either permits, or would not explicitly bar the kind of social arrangements that existed under Jim Crow laws and practices in the United States?
8. Would utilitarianism make Jim Crow immoral, or not? Why?