

Perpetuation: Analysis of Social and Racial Construction and Racial Projects

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When it comes to analyzing the work of Haslanger and Omi and Winant, one may find that they did not leave with a clear-cut philosophy; there lacks a quasi-tangible answer or action to take in order to ‘remedy’ such perpetual confusion about racial construction. I believe this stands at the center of all their arguments, emphasizing the complexity that is racial philosophy and the discussion around it. Two major themes of the authors’ arguments are the concept behind racial categories being socially constructed and the significance of racial projects — for which I will cite a relevant example. These topics essentially create the dialogue surrounding racial philosophy that, as we see, has a cornucopia of knowledge to offer with scant specificity.

It is absolutely crucial to look more closely at what social construction is and, arguably more importantly, what it is not when determining how it forms racial categories. All three authors come to the same consensus that is seemingly one of the only concrete decisions made: race is not biologically constructed (this denoting anatomical and phenotypical categories), rather it is based on social classifications. Haslanger states that “natural properties of things” are “those studied by the natural sciences and the social properties to be those studied by the social sciences.”¹ This seems somewhat self-explanatory, but the complication occurs in their definitions of these properties. Specifically, Omi and Winant bring up the significance of cultural identity in social construction for one, in addition to applying a call-to-action: to them, people “should think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it” and “as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion,”² Not only are these just eloquent words, but they tell a greater story or even possibly an adjunct perspective that race and social construct are not layered but rather intertwined somewhat equally. Omi and Winant give

¹ (Sally Haslanger, “A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race,” in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, 302

² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formation,” in *Racial Formation in the United States*, 124

credence to the vigorous effect social and societal life has on racial construction, almost as if it should be blatantly obvious. On the opposite yet adjacent hand, Haslanger introduces the race constructionist viewpoint: one with this philosophy believes that race is neither physical nor even metaphysical, rather it is completely societally/socially constructed. She uses the example of sex and gender compared to race and “color.” She tells her audience to “consider how members of the group are *socially positioned* and what *physical markers* serve as a supposed basis for such treatment,” (Haslanger, “Constructionist Analysis,” 307). She basically argues that physicalities are involved completely separately in the ontology of a human being and that it is the social norms attributed to a group that happen to share features, such as skin color or other racial markers, that form race. Context and connotation, both social structures, are pinnacles of racial construction, not each individual’s genetics. There is a section, however, where Haslanger and Omi and Winant come to separate yet non-contradictory opinions. Haslanger continues to tackle why racial categories are socially constructed, focusing on the potency of semantics in racial communication. (Omi and Winant move to racial projects as a driving force for racial formation which I will cover in the next paragraph.) She explains that the human population has the responsibility to be wary and appreciative for the power of our words and understanding of them. (Haslanger, “Constructionist Analysis,” 304). Essentially, one would miss a crux of understanding why social constructs facilitate racial formation if they did not look at the essential role semantics plays. The overarching term described by Haslanger is “semantic externalism,” which essentially points out the disconnect between the mind and body, what we think and what we say can be completely different from what is ultimately seen as truth. She gives the example of “using the term ‘water’ without knowing that water is H₂O” or using “the term ‘elm’ meaningfully even if one cannot tell the difference between a beech and an elm,” (Haslanger,

“Constructionist Analysis,” 304).

Racial projects also play a foundational role in building what is race. Essentially, racial projects connect the semantic significance of race described by Haslanger to the real-world, social applications of race. To Omi and Winant, “society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected,” and it is the accumulation of all these projects that truly form race. (Omi and Winant, “Racial Formations,” 127). This subjugation they speak of is vastly unconscious and part of social/societal norms that form a possibly toxic concept of “common sense.” It is with this common sense that we find explicit racial biases come to the surface as racist tendencies or conversely a manner in which implicit bias is understood fostering mindful citizens. Such divergent and prominent views ensure that racial projects and thus formation lies heavily in the political realm, according to Omi and Winant. In fact, they spend an extensive amount of effort explaining how racial dictatorship in the United States, arguably THE racial project, has cultivated obvious systemic racism nationwide. History and hegemony are also heavily involved in the perpetuation of racial formation. Specifically, the discriminatory culture festered during the inception of the United States toward the Native American population perfectly exemplifies the power of racial projects. Deb Haaland was recently confirmed as the first native American cabinet Secretary, though her ancestors have been on this land for over 15,000 years. This fact is the epitome of how racial projects have been innately guiding anthropological and sociological development and how it quasi-endlessly has affected minority populations, specifically non-whites. These three major subjects are where racial projects lie: politics, micro and macro walks of life, and across history. Secretary Haaland’s struggle to be elected/appointed, and other like her failing to do so, in addition to legislative debates on the recognition of native land embodies the political realm. The mass genocide of millions of Native

Americans through smallpox-infested blankets and the Trail of Tears instigated macro-racial bias that lives on today through racist micro-aggressions. As one can see, finally, these examples are cross-generational, clearly making history. The Native American genocide incited by white settlers, what Omi and Winant see as the beginning of a racial dictatorship, symbolizes the essence of a racial project. They say that there has been a “slow, painful, and contentious” transition from racial dictatorship to democracy.

What we must deduce from reading Haslanger and Omi and Winant is that distinctness in this niche subject is irrelevant and gratuitous. Racial categories themselves are malleable, making social construction and racial projects ever-changing in their ontology; flexibility in changing with the times and understanding of race is the cornerstone of any such scholarly philosophical discourse. Seemingly the only true way to give social construction of race and racial projects justice is to continue an educated conversation about them and the philosophical branches from which they stem.

Works Cited

Racial Formation in the United States, by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Routledge, 2015, pp. 122–145.

“Resisting Reality Social Construction and Social Critique.” *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, by Sally Anne Haslanger, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 298–310.