

Race and the Construction of Social Identity

Reading: Robert Gooding-Williams, "Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy." *Constellations* Volume 5, No 1, 1998.

Guiding questions:

1. Does the claim that race is socially constructed presuppose a problematic commitment to racialism?
2. How is race socially constructed?
3. Should we embrace (study, perpetuate) racial identities? Why? How?

I. Racialism and Social Construction (re 1&2 above)

a) Race and the possibility of passing

[Walter Benn Michaels's] point is that a prior commitment to racial essentialism is implicit in any social constructionist account of American racial identities that acknowledges the possibility of racial passing. In Michaels's view, it is not possible to give a social constructionist account of American racial identities that acknowledges this possibility but is not parasitic on the assumption that biological racial essences exist. (19)

What is WBM's argument?

b) Third-person or ascriptive conceptions of race

Gooding-Williams' reply to WBM:

Where Piper sees the American practice of racial classification as incorporating both visual and cognitive identifications, Michaels pays attention only to visual identifications, that is, to the perception of individuals as black ("[I]f you're perceived as black," Michaels writes, "you are black"). Piper's reference to cognitive identification is meant, I assume, to flag the fact that the American practice of racial classification involves criteria entailing that someone perceived to be white can be black and that someone perceived to be black can be white. For Piper, then, someone who would not be classified as black on the basis of visual criteria could still be black because Americans' conventional (though not universal) adherence to the one-drop rule cognitively identifies her as black. (21)

c) First person conceptions of race

I would like to complicate Piper's conception of black identity by drawing a distinction between being black and being a black person. Piper, I wish to say, defines a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a black person. Even if one considers her point that being black not only involves being identified as black, but, additionally, the negative effects of being thus identified, it seems clear that her stated "definition" of black identity expresses a third-person perspective intended to highlight the objectification of blacks as blacks by a racist society. (22)

Hacking's dynamic nominalism helps to explain the concept of a black person because it provides a means of conceptualizing the contributions individuals make to the construction of their racial identities. In effect, it suggests that individuals classified as black become black persons just in case they begin to act in the world under a description of themselves as racially black. As I have previously suggested, being black – that is, being racially classified as black – is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a black person. One becomes a black person only if (1) one begins to identify (to classify) oneself as black and (2) one begins to make choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns, etc., in light of one's identification of oneself as black. (23)

d) Consequences?

- Is there such a thing as "authentic" blackness?
- What is it to be "African-American" v. Black?
- Is it possible to be "mixed" or "mixed race"?

II. The Value of Race and Racial Identities? (re 3 above)

a) *Afrocentrism*

Molefi Asanti argues:

In such a situation, in the fringes of the European experience, pushed away from the center, we swirl around lost looking for place, for location. Afrocentricity is the active centering of the African in subject place in our historical landscape. This has always been my search; it has been a quest for sanity. Therefore, it was unthinkable for me to entertain ideas of living in the margins, being in the periphery of someone else's historical and cultural experiences. My aim was more fundamental, basic, the essential quality of being normal, uncomplicated. By being normal, I do not reject the other; I embrace that which I truly know, i.e., jazz, blues, railroads, Obatala, roots, hoodoo, soul, rhythms, sweet mommas, Dunbar and Hughes, Sanchez, Mari Evans, and Charles Fuller, and so on, in ways that I do not know the products of the other, i.e., country music, mistletoe, Valhalla, Wotan, pale blonds, Frost and Mailer. I recognize these products as part of my experience in the large but they do not impact on me in the same way as those which seem to grow from the soil of my ancestors. With my own products I can walk confidently toward the future knowing full well that I can grasp whatever-else is out there because my own center is secured. (27)

What is Gooding-Williams' argument against Asanti's view?

b) *Shared multi-cultural identity?*

Arthur Schlesinger acknowledges the multi-ethnic character of American identity, but, according to GW,

Schlesinger would fend off the threat of "Balkanization" and "tribalization" by having all Americans, despite their differences, affirm a "democratic faith" in certain common and unifying "political ideals."⁴⁵ These "ideals of democracy and human rights," which Schlesinger, following Myrdal, calls the "American Creed," "transcend ethnic, religious and political lines."⁴⁶ They are the stuff of an "overarching political commitment" that Schlesinger believes can provide "the solvent that will prevent differences from escalating into antagonism and hatred." (29)

c) *An adequate multi-culturalism?*

...I suspect that race-conscious multiculturalism will enhance nonblacks' capacity to find deliberative common ground with blacks – a ground that at times seems to be sorely missing from American public life... (33)

Du Bois develops a somewhat different notion of recognition; not recognition as the predication of universal value, but what I shall call 'self-recognition'. The self of self-recognition is not, for the Hegelian Du Bois, the self taken by itself, but the self conceived as socially mediated. For Du Bois, then, self-recognition is a form of cultural recognition that entails seeing one's own cultural identity in connection to the cultural identities of the other members of one's community. Where self-recognition is frustrated by racial prejudice, Du Bois proposes, the likely outcome is social tragedy. (35)

Wolf concerns herself with self-recognition, suggesting that one aim of multicultural education is a knowledge of one's community in its multifaceted complexity. Recognizing who we are, as distinct from recognizing that they have something valuable to say, is the critical element in her interpretation of the politics of recognition. (35)

What is Gooding-Williams conception of what race should look like in a just society? Should we affirm racial identities? How? Why?

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