RACE, CLASS, AND ONTOLOGY

Reginald Williams

Introduction

Many who write on race consider it an 'illusion'. Others argue that race is real, even if socially constructed, because the notion of race, and the categorizing of people in terms of race, has greatly affected their lives. This paper criticizes a reason that is often given for thinking that race is an illusion: the fact that there is no biological basis of race. I defend two primary claims. First, while there is no biological basis for membership in a socio-economic class, by which I mean one's being relatively affluent or poor in a particular society, no one takes socio-economic class to be an illusion. Second, race is arguably a more fundamental reality than is socio-economic class. For one's racial identity can causally contribute to, and account at least partly for, one's membership in a socio-economic class. But membership in a socio-economic class does not thus contribute to, or account for, people's racial identities.

The Argument

There are multiple ways to argue that race is not real. One and the same person, for instance, can be considered a member of race X in America but a member of race Y in Brazil; and some thinkers take this to imply that race is not real since it is not an 'objective' feature of people [Michael Root defends this view in 'How We Divide the World', *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*. Philosophy of Science Association (1998)]. But the consensus among behavioral scientists,

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and many philosophers, is that races are not 'biologically real' because there are no typifying genotypic or phenotypic characteristics of races.

Now, this is a peculiar argument. For to my knowledge, no one has argued that since socio-economic class has no biological basis, it is not real. People who are poor in a given society *really are* poor. And this is true even if one's being poor has no genetic basis, even if one's income would not render one poor in a society other than one's own. Why should we infer that race is not real from the fact that it has no biological basis?

Perhaps this inference is made precisely because people have thought that there is a biological basis of race. Perhaps we would be inclined to consider socio-economic class an illusion as well if it had long been thought that poverty was due to people's genetic structure, if research had sought to prove this, and so on. But even if people tend to infer that an alleged social reality is illusory in the event that its presumed biological basis is debunked, this inference is hasty, particularly when the alleged reality affects people's lives to the extent that people's racial identities do. Just as being poor is real and can affect one's life – just as falling under the socially-constructed rubric 'U.S. poverty line', for example, is a real experience for millions of people – falling under such rubrics as 'African American' and 'Latino' is a real experience for millions as well. And falling under one of the latter rubrics can affect a person's life. Indeed, in an important respect, it can affect one's life more than one's being poor can.

Falling under such race rubrics has causally contributed to many people's being poor. For generations slavery and *de jure* discrimination prevented African Americans from generating income and wealth for themselves, from inheriting property, and from securing employment. Even today, African Americans and Latinos face *de facto* discrimination in the U.S. workplace; they are also frequent targets of racial profiling, which increases the likelihood that they will be convicted of crimes which Caucasians

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commit with greater impunity. This, in turn, disproportionately diminishes the earning prospects of some African Americans and Latinos – i.e. vis-à-vis delinquent Caucasians. For employers tend to avoid hiring people with criminal records.

This is but one example of how one's racial identity can causally contribute to, and thus account at least partly for, one's socio-economic class in a particular society. The reverse, however, does not seem to be true. One is not seen as more or less of an African American, for instance, by virtue of one's being more or less poor. One's identity as an African American will be more a function of one's ancestry, even one's complexion, than it will be a function of one's socio-economic class. In this way, then, race appears to be a more fundamental social reality than socio-economic class because socio-economic class can be partly a function of one's racial identity – but not vice-versa. And if race is more fundamental than socio-economic class, race should be seen as real, not the illusion that many consider it. For I have not seen it argued that socio-economic class is an illusion.

If socio-economic classes are real, and if the membership or constitution of socio-economic classes can be even partly a function of people's racial identity, then people's racial identity should be thought real. We do not take genes and the subatomic features of things to be illusions, after all. We take them to account for people's cancer predispositions and a plethora of macroscopic qualities, respectively. And we accordingly take them to be real.

One could dispute this analogy because race and socio-economic classes are socially-constructed and thus not 'real' in the sense that genes and subatomic features are. I, however, have not assumed that race or socio-economic class is an objective feature of people or the world. My contention is that the notion of reality is logically prior to the domains of social science, biology, and physics, and that the notion operates according to the following principle:

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> If something is real, be it objective or socially-constructed, then anything that contributes casually to it must be seen as real in order to account for the alleged reality of the something in question.

This principle seems plausible. It would be odd for genes to causally contribute to, or account for, people's predisposition to cancer without genes being real. It would be odd for subatomic features of physical objects to causally contribute to, or account for, their macroscopic features without being real. And it would be similarly odd for people's racial identity to causally contribute to, or partly account for, their being poor without their racial identity's being real. There remains, however, an important objection that I will consider by way of conclusion.

Conclusion

One could take this paper to conflate 'racial identities', whose reality and significance no one appears to deny, and 'race' itself. People see and categorize each other in racial terms; rightly or wrongly, they do this everyday. Moreover, one could grant, such perceptions and categorizations can contribute to, and account at least partly for, one's being poor – i.e. one's socio-economic class. Race, however, can be seen as distinct from people's racial identity and thus as contributing to, and accounting for, nothing that racial identity does.

The implication is that my argument equivocates 'race' and 'racial identity'. Far from impugning my argument, though, I take this objection to underscore a long-standing problem with the race debate itself: the tendency to see race as *more* than people's racial identities, to see it as something biological or genetic, worthy of independent research.

Race has never amounted to more than people's racial identities. The concepts should have always been identical,

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and to distinguish them is to perpetuate a deep confusion. It is time that we transcend this confusion. This paper's equating 'race' and 'racial identity' has been an attempt to do so.

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