**The Changing Meaning of Race**

**By Michael A. Omi**

**(Read after notes, video, and discussion from the website, and before reading Race as a Social Construction)**

* Biologists, geneticists, and physical anthropologists, among others, long ago reached a common understanding that race is not a “scientific” concept rooted in discernible biological differences. Nevertheless, race is commonly and popularly defined in terms of biological traits- **phenotypic** differences in skin color, hair texture, and other physical attibutes, often perceived as surface manifestations of deeper, underlying differences in intelligence, temperament, physical prowess, and sexuality. Thus, although race may have no biological meaning, as used in reference to human differences, it has an extremely important and highly contested *social* one.
* There is an enormous gap between the scientific rejection of race as a concept and the popular acceptance of it as an important organizing principle of individual identity and collective consciousness.
* The meaning of race will be fluid and subject to multiple determinations.
* Real issues and debates about race…need to be approached from a perspective that makes the concept of race problematic.
* The distribution of power- and its expression in structures, ideologies, and practices at various institutional and individual levels- is significantly **racialized** in our society.
* Prior to World War II, the term “racism” was not commonly used in public…The term was originally used to characterize the ideology of White supremacy that was buttressed by biologically based theories of superiority/inferiority. In the 1950s and 1960s, the emphasis shifted to notions of…prejudice and discrimination. The rise of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s fostered a redefinition of racism. Since World War II, there has been a shift in global racial order that had persisted for centuries. The horrors of fascism and a wave of anticolonialism facilitated a rupture with biologic and **eugenic** concepts of race, challenged the ideologies of White supremacy (Holocaust awareness).
* The **transnational** flow of capital and labor have created a new economic context for situating race and racism.
* The notion of **colour blindness**…Calls to get “beyond race”are popularly expressed and any hint of race consciousness is viewed as racism. (Discussion point: Affirmative Action and reverse racism).
* While formal, legal equality has been significantly achieved,…substantive racial inequality in employment, housing, and health care remains and, in many cases, has deepened.
* **Questions around Panethnic organization**:
* How do new immigrant groups negotiate the existing terrain of racial meanings? (ie. Caribbean Blacks and fourth generation North American Blacks; Chinese Canadian and new Chinese immigrants; Asians and Pacific Islanders) Conflicts over resources within presumed homogenous racial groups can be quite sharp.
* It has been a longstanding liberal dream…that increased “race mixing” would solve our racial problems. Multiraciality disrupts our fixed notions about race and opens up new possibilities.
* According to various estimates, 75-90% of those who now check the “Black” box could check a multiracial one (See the One Drop Rule).
* The terms “mixed race” or “multiracial” in themselves imply the existence of “pure” and discrete races. Multiraciality reveals the inherent fluidity and slipperiness of our concepts of race.
* The rigidity of the “one drop rule,” …long standing fears of racial “pollution” and the persistence of antimiscegenation laws (until the Loving decision of 1967) demonstrate how the colour line has been policed.
* Questions: Can Blacks be racist? Some scholars have defined racism as “prejudice plus power.” Using this formula, they are that people of colour can’t be racist.

Oxford Dictionary:

**Racism:** the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races.

**What do you think?**

* Focus group interviews White students at the University of California, Berkeley, reveal many of the themes and dilemmas of White identity in the current period: the “absence” of a clear culture and identity, the perceived “disadvantages” of being White with respect to the distribution of resources, and the stigma of being perceived as the “oppressors of the nation.”

(**Watch MTV’s White People)**

* Higginbotham notes that, “Race *only* comes up when talk about African Americans and other people of colour, gender *only* comes up when we talk about women, and class *only* comes up when we talk about the poor and working class.”
* Whites tend to locate racism in color consciousness and find its absence in color blindness,. In so doing, they see the affirmation of difference and racial identity among racially defined minorities as racist. Black students, by contrast, see racism as a system of power, and correspondingly argue that they cannot be racist because they lack power….there are two “languages” of race, one is which the members of racial minorities…see the centrality of race in history and everyday experience, and another in which Whites see race as peripheral, nonessential reality.
* Activity: Privilege Walk.