

Race and Ethnic Politics

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“Race and ethnic politics” refers to the role of social dynamics that takes place in the political sphere and the state in the construction of racial and ethnic categories, and the enactment of related practices and policies including racial oppression and struggles for social change and equality. This topic comprises a subfield of sociological theory and research that has expanded over the course of the discipline’s development in the past century. In 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the first major US sociologists to write explicitly about the relationship between racial oppression and social exclusion, political inequality, and the ideal of democracy, in his essay “Of the Ruling of Men.” Du Bois examined the multifaceted dimensions of racial politics, including the organization of institutions and industries, large-scale group relations, and dynamics of social interaction. Moreover, he analyzed the conflict between the ideals of democracy from which many governments claim their legitimacy and the forms of racial and ethnic domination and repression that still characterize many societies.

More recently, particularly since the 1980s, influential texts such as Omi and Winant’s (1986) *Racial Formation in the United States* have brought even greater sociological focus to the relationship between racial and ethnic categories and social structures and the state and political processes. Today, a large body of research covers the racial and ethnic dimensions of political power, relationships between racial and ethnic groups and political parties and organizations, and the role of the state and political activities in the development of racial and ethnic identities and inequalities.

In broad terms, the sociological study of racial and ethnic politics is holistic. While individual studies may center on certain cases and contexts, the field as a whole seeks to understand several overlapping dimensions of society and their

interplay. The actions, structure, and policies of the state comprise one key and well-established domain in which racial and ethnic politics takes place. Yet, this field of inquiry also extends into the wider political domain of electoral and policy formation processes, the public or civil sphere, and the micropolitics of everyday life and social interactions (Winant, 2001).

Politics is the domain of power centering on questions of influence over outcomes and group and interpersonal domination. In racial and ethnic politics, power is seen in how groups exert influence over and benefit from the distribution of ideologies, categories, and material resources facilitated by the state (Rosino, 2016). It also extends into more organizational, community, or even interactional-level issues that impact social relations between groups and individuals, such as the interpersonal granting of rights to others, the influence of regional political cultures and structures, and the attitudes and motivations of voters (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Glenn, 2002).

Especially crucial matters of racial and ethnic politics are political inequality and social oppression. For instance, in the United States and Europe, predominantly white political actors have used racial political processes and policies to maintain power and resources (Feagin, 2006; Brace, 2015). These processes have included the use of racial stereotypes and discourse in electoral campaigns and political speech (Haney López, 2014), the passage and implementation of policies that disenfranchise nonwhite racial and ethnic groups from the political process (Anderson, 2018), and the use of policies and influence to restrict resources to whites and particularly white elites (Feagin, 2012). At the same time, contestation and conflict are another important element of racial and ethnic politics. Social movements and other political collectivities attempt to either change or protect status quo racial and ethnic relations through vying for influence over the state (Omi and Winant, 1994).

Within the process of contestation in racial and ethnic politics, the role of demographics,

geography, and coalition formation have particular salience. Scholarship in racial and ethnic politics has revealed insights about the process of racialized political contestation, especially in light of a shift from *de jure* (by law) to *de facto* (by practice) forms of racial discrimination in post-civil rights era United States. These contestations, which take place within political institutions and mass-mediated public debates, influence dimensions of social policy such as welfare, criminal justice, or immigration (Brown, 2013; Rosino and Hughey, 2018). Moreover, sociologists have recently paid keen attention to the politics of racial demography and geography. For instance, perceptions of the relative population size of various racial and ethnic groups have played a major role in motivating racial political projects aimed at either protecting white domination or empowering marginalized groups (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2019). Racialized political processes have also shaped and allocated resources to predominantly white suburban spaces at the expense of communities outside of these boundaries (Freund, 2007). The importance of coalition building as a means of altering racial and ethnic political outcomes and the challenges of interethnic solidarity has also come through as an important area of analysis (e.g., Williams, 2013).

It is, moreover, important to note that despite their proximity, “racial politics” and “ethnic politics” are not interchangeable terms. They denote distinct but overlapping areas of inquiry. As Valdez and Golash-Boza (2017: 2182) write, focusing on a US context, “although they both operate within the system of white supremacy ... the ethnicity paradigm is focused ultimately on observing ethnic incorporation or assimilation” while “the race paradigm is focused on revealing systemic racism and persistent racial inequality.” In other words, ethnic categories reflect how groups become tied together and split apart by the collective meanings placed on cultural practices and geographic origins. In contrast, racial categories are products of political domination and contestation and they are ascribed to individuals, placing them in particular positions within social hierarchies and systems of inequality.

Accordingly, relationships between race and ethnicity, the state, and various political and legal projects are of interest. The role of the state and political processes in mediating whether

particular ethnic groups are legally sanctioned as either “white” or “nonwhite” and thereby receive access to full citizenship, political and civil rights, and social privileges has been well established. In nations such as the United States, with histories of state-sanctioned racial and ethnic hierarchies, racial and ethnic boundaries of exclusion and the criteria used by the state to rationalize or justify such boundaries have been a fruitful area of research.

For instance, Haney López (2006) analyzed legal cases over inclusion in full citizenship and the category of “white” brought forth by Asian American immigrants to the Supreme Court that, in being unsuccessful, ultimately buttressed their social exclusion. Another example of these dynamics can be seen in how various states within the US South came to define blackness in divergent ways, as reflected in census categories and state policies, as a means of upholding racial segregation and unequal legal treatment (Hochschild and Weaver, 2007). Additionally, scholars have examined the historical, social, and political processes that led various ethnic or religious groups, such as the Irish or Jews, to become included within the category of “white” (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995). Scholars continue to examine how the state and political actors racialize various ethnic or religious groups and thereby endow them with racial meaning, with recent works highlighting the racialization of Muslim Americans through such processes (Selod, 2018).

These areas of analysis connect to emerging concerns at the intersection of racial and ethnic politics and the dynamics of political power. For instance, Rosino (2016: 940) advocates for sociological theory and research that connects the “structural and interactional processes through which racial dynamics of political power operate by advancing a conceptual framework centered on *boundaries* and *barriers* as primary mechanisms.” In other words, attention should be given to the relationship between the domain of everyday social life and interactions, the formation of communities, social groups, and organizations, and large-scale social and political processes. This framework highlights “racialized boundaries of inclusion/exclusion that determine who benefits from the use of political power,” such as policies and the distribution of resources, and “racialized

barriers to influence over the use of political power,” such as legal, social, and bureaucratic hurdles faced by people of color that hinder full democratic participation, with particular focus on “micro- and meso-level contestations over inclusion/exclusion and access to political power” (Rosino, 2016: 940).

The study of racial and ethnic politics has not been limited to the social and political processes within singular nation-states. It has also focused on international relations and global politics. Studies in this vein have been primarily concerned with the role of international processes tied to colonialism, imperialism, and globalized capitalism. From this perspective, racial and ethnic politics is not simply a space of group relations but one characterized by a multilevel and global system of racial oppression and white supremacy (Mills, 2003; Weiner, 2012; Christian, 2019). For instance, Mills (2003: 38) argues that such a sociopolitical system “clearly comes into existence through European expansionism and the imposition of European rule through settlement and colonialism on aboriginal and imported slave populations – the original racial ‘big bang’ that is the source of the present racialized world.”

Moreover, scholars of race and ethnic politics have examined the relationship between racial domination and contemporary global capitalism. For example, Goldberg (2009) describes the modern day relationship between global capitalism and racial politics as racial neoliberalism. This political project is characterized by both freedom via economic deregulation and racial oppression via the maintenance of international social and political systems forged by European and US colonialism and imperialism. It simultaneously champions deregulation of “flows of capital, goods, and services, and more recently of information” (Goldberg 2009: 232) while advancing and strengthening the regulation and control held by white capitalist elites over the bodies and labor of marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Other studies have focused on issues of international ethnic politics between and through states, their militaries, and distribution of resources in the form of aid. One important question is how and why states intervene and take sides in ethnic conflicts that take place within and outside of

their borders. For instance, Saideman (2001: 12) argues, “the interaction of ethnicity and domestic political competition produce incentives for politicians to support one side or another of ethnic conflicts in other states,” and “the existence of ethnic ties between decisionmakers’ supporters and the combatants in conflicts in other states will greatly determine the foreign policies of states.”

Another perspective in this vein has sought to highlight the central role of imperialism and colonialism in the political construction of racial and ethnic categories, their meanings, and systems of social inequality. Jung and Kwon (2013: 934), for example, add needed context to the racial and ethnic politics of the United States by seeing it as an empire-state which entails “the usurpation of political sovereignty of foreign territories and peoples.” Accordingly, they argue,

US state formation has always, from the very beginning, entailed the racial construction of colonial spaces (e.g. incorporated and unincorporated territories, Indian reservations) and the racial subjection of various colonized peoples (e.g. Native Americans, Puerto Ricans) and non-colonized peoples (e.g. Blacks, Chinese). In other words, ... racial domination and inequalities are not anomalies, betrayals, relics, or contradictions to be overcome by an ever more perfect nation-state but the basic building blocks and products of a modern empire-state. (Jung and Kwon, 2013: 934)

Issues of transnational ethnic politics can also be seen in comparisons of programs aimed at addressing particular wide-scale social, economic, and medical problems. For instance, Lieberman (2009: 239) notes that “strong caste and ethno-regional lines in India, and strong racial lines in South Africa, were sources of conflict, and ultimately of national government passivity on AIDS policy.” However, “in Brazil, much greater ethnic tolerance and norms of mixing in combination with a legacy of institutional prohibitions against ethnic classification meant that race and ethnicity played almost no role in the politicization of HIV/AIDS for most of the history of the epidemic,” rendering it “possible for AIDS activists [in Brazil] to drive forward perhaps the most aggressive AIDS policy rollout

in the entire developing world” (Lieberman, 2009: 239).

Studies of racial and ethnic politics have also focused upon the racial and ethnic dimensions of political parties and the speech and actions of political actors. Particularly, in the United States, researchers have examined the ideologies, collective identities, strategies, and platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties. For instance, Kinder and Sanders (1996: 66) observe that “the strategic problem for Democratic candidates is to maintain the loyalty and enthusiasm of black voters without alienating conservative whites,” and thus, “for Democratic campaigns, the temptation on matters of race is silence and evasion.” On the other hand, “the strategic problem of Republican candidates is to draw the support of white conservatives without appearing to make racist appeals” and therefore “the Republican temptation is racial codewords” (Kinder and Sanders, 1996: 66). Additionally, emerging studies center on the platforms, collective actions, and impacts of grassroots political parties or “third parties” through the lens of racial politics (Rosino and Hughey, 2016).

SEE ALSO: Ethnicity; Political Sociology; Politics; Race; State

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