Racial Formation

Racial formation was coined by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant in the first edition of their book *Racial Formation in the United States* in 1986—now in its third edition (Omi and Winant 2014). The theory has become a dominant perspective within sociology and has contributed to understanding the role of race in the contemporary United States during the latter half of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries. Racial formation highlights the ways that “race” is socially constructed. That is, how do processes connected to social, economic, and political forces shape how racial categories and hierarchies are formed? This question forces us to focus on both the historical context of race categorization, as well as where our current social contexts are positioned.

According to Omi and Winant, racial formation is “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (2014, 109). An underlying assumption with racial formation theory is the salience that race plays in both the historical and contemporary moments of the U.S. Omi and Winant see the role of race as embedded within all U.S. institutions and a powerful (although perhaps not always dominant) force driving categorization, separation, and political struggle. Structure and culture are important to racial formation processes, both separately and in relation to one another. This is seen in their concept of “racial projects,” where efforts are made to shape and distribute some form of resource/capital along racial lines. According to Omi and Winant, racial projects are “the building blocks” of the racial formation process—building blocks that allow us to see how racial categorizations are hierarchically organized over time to the benefit of one group over the other. By focusing on these
projects, we can understand the ways that race, including its cultural meanings and structural outcomes, is both constructed and contested given its social context.

Omi and Winant speak broadly of racial formation as situated in a trajectory of racial politics, “in which rising phases of mobilization are followed by declining phases” (2014, 7). Such a position allows racial formation theory a degree of flexibility in its attempts to understand the role of race for actors at both the micro- and macro-levels, as well as at various sites of struggle between state, economic, and civic based actors/movements. The dynamic between actors and movements, as they are positioned within various social and political institutions, is what distinguishes racial formation theory from political science perspectives regarding the role that race plays at the institutional level. As Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2005) discuss “racial orders” within American politics, their focus centers on how racial change happens in relation to state-based actors and institutions (i.e., competing political ends of a particular party that drive either progressive or regressive racial policies). Racial orders and racial formation differ in large part to where the onus of racial change stems from: with competing political aims that support/hinder racial progress for the former, and the role of non-state actors in the latter.

The changing racial dynamics of the U.S., as well as the impacts of increasing globalization, have required scholars to constructively review and elaborate on racial formation theory moving into the twenty-first century. A symposium in Ethnic and Racial Studies (2013) highlights tensions as to how racial formation explains racism in the modern era. Feagin and Elias’ critique of racial formation highlights an inability to understand the prevalence of racist practices that benefit
whites in society. In particular, they note how the maintenance of racism at a structural level is carried out by whites who actively operate under a white frame which excludes non-whites. Omi and Winant’s response offers a counterposition in which racial formation addresses the complexities of racial groups beyond a black/white binary, and in particular the political nature of challenges to racism in the contemporary United States. Other articles within the symposium are worth additional reading, as they lie in between these two positions and offer insightful ways to engage with racial formation in on-going questions surrounding racism. Another work which extends racial formation is HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido’s (2012) edited volume. The collection of chapters brings racial formation into critical dialogue with other areas of social investigation as scholars address racial formation in regard to various racial projects (such as the experiences of Asian and Latino groups), gender, and the post-9/11 war on terror.

In the debated “post-race” era, racial formation theory proves to be a continually useful framework for investigating the complexities of race in an ever-changing world.

**Essential Reading:**

**Further Readings:**
Hughey, Matthew W., David G. Embrick, and Ashley “Woody”


**Questions:**

Discuss the benefits and disadvantages that racial formation has for the study of racial inequality.

What other areas of social life, outside the realm of politics, might racial formation provide insight on race relations?

What current issues can be deconstructed utilizing racial formation?

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