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Historicizing whiteness -- or not

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whiteness

 whiteness **translate** whiteness **definition** whiteness **perfect**

Whiteness is a hot topic nowadays. From *BuzzFeed* to the *New York Times*, there seems to be a never-ending fascination with discussing privileged societal positions derived from skin colour appurtenance, seen, in return, to universally cut across all imaginable distributive axes of allocating group advantages and disadvantages.

Yet talking about whiteness mainly benefits those doing the talking. Careers are created, such as the one of **Robin J. DiAngelo** (<https://robindiangelo.com/>), whose bestseller book on *White Fragility* aims to show that a white woman can explain to other whites what they "don't get about whiteness and race"; status positions are continually juggled, as shown by many examples of racialized, tenured academics, who fail to see the contradiction between cashing in sunshine list salaries while simultaneously playing the subaltern card (although their class status offsets the adjacent material effects of such racialized positioning); and new markets unendingly affixed, to broadly disseminate the white privilege epistemological rhetoric that sustains the aforementioned salaries, positions, and tenured carriers.

Such is the case with the recent "**Historicizing Whiteness in Eastern Europe**" (<http://socialismgoesglobal.exeter.ac.uk/conferences/>) conference. The event, organized by a group of British academics, unfolded last week, on June 25 and 26 in Bucharest, Romania. Eastern Europe seems a ripe cultural market for the introduction of the Anglo-American analytical concepts of whiteness and race. The communist modernity of the former Eastern Bloc saw itself in non-racial terms. In the **Soviet rhetoric** (<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137481191>), the term "identity" -- marked as "face" (*litso*) -- was conceptually entrenched with the markers of class (*klassovoe*) and political identity (*politicheskoe*) and not necessarily with race per se, which was considered a concept specific to the West.



The main message spread at the conference was that the whiteness-race dialectic has been existent in the region yet hidden from ongoing analyses about racialized subjects. Papers ranged from simplistic accounts on the subject matter (i.e., the Roma are racialized; the Albanians are white), to conceptual incongruences, such as defining whiteness by providing a descriptive characterization of race, or defining it simply as a phenotypical possession (i.e. skin colour), hence a proxy for possessing privileges, to much more complicated chronological accounts with historicized racial formations from Carl Brigham's times. Most of these conceptual accounts were positioned within the Anglo-American analytical paradigm of defining whiteness. There was little engagement, however, with problematizing the taxonomic system that produces definitions of racial formation and, through these definitions, the very same system of racial differentiation.

Two contentious points come into mind.

First, the presumption that there is a universal, global process of racial formation, whereas whiteness is seen to retain an ontological sameness, unanimously manifested across various geopolitical spaces and national referential frames, is historically and conceptually flawed. From a historical perspective, it is important to note that racial taxonomies as well as the societal understanding of what constitutes whiteness, and respectively race, changed throughout time. If Carl Brigham and William Ripley secured their Princeton and respectively Harvard professorships by writing about whiteness and race as expressed by blood or one's shape of the head, our current understandings of the terms (i.e., as phenotypically embodied by one's skin colour), trickled down in the 1940s, from the anthropology field. In writing from an anti-racist standpoint and against the racialization of the Jews, anthropologist Franz Boas made it unquestionable that **three major races** (http://www.nellpainter.com/assests/pdfs/articles/A81_WasMarieWhite.pdf), White, Asian, and Black, corresponding to the Caucasian race, the Mongoloid race and the Negroid race, would suffice in explaining what identity is all about. Recent taxonomic examples, however, show us that current racial classifications cannot capture this presumed homogeneity of racial identity. Let us look at national official counts, for example.

The **U.S. Census** (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/2020-race-questions.html>), which generally records three "official" races and an added Native category, classifies the Iranian nationality under the white taxonomy. Systems of classification do matter in the allocation of societal rights. If Iranians, are white, for example, and privileged by inference, Iranian subjects will have no access to affirmative action efforts within the nation. It is absurd to equate an Iranian-born person with a born-American in terms of privileges, only because their skin colour is white.

Clearly there is a great societal difference between being Black in the U.S. and being Black in Somalia or Kenya, for that matter, or between a Black Ethiopian and a Black Eritrean, given these two countries were engaged in a border-related war.

Within the U.K. Census

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/measuringequality/ethnicgroupnationalidentityandreligion>), the taxonomy of whiteness is much more malleable. The Office of National Statistics provides the option to check mark one out of four different types of white identity: Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British; Irish; Gypsy or Irish Traveller; and "any other White background." Beyond problematizations of who fits under the Gypsy label or the White-other label, what these official systems of classification bring to light is the impossibility of capturing racial identitarianism. If race and whiteness would be ontologically homogenous, national offices of counting subjects would not have heterogeneous ways of categorizing racial identity.

Second, the taxonomies of whiteness and race, whereas whiteness got defined itself relationally, in comparison with, and by negating Blackness (and more broadly race), have been historically placed in a dialectical relation through North American colonialism and settlers' involvement with African slavery. Such processes of racial formation did not follow the same historical path in peripheral Europe. The colonial expansion in North America was primarily British and not essentially European, despite the common academic jargon that synonymizes Europeaness with colonialism and whiteness. There are 49 nations in Europe but the states actively involved in colonizing represented about 14 per cent of all European countries (i.e., Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), while five of these nations, Spain, Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands, carried out the colonial expansion of the Americas. At the same time, the "degenerate" whites in Europe were also colonized; by the Tsarists, the Habsburgs, or the Ottomans, just to pencil in some examples.

It is far stretched to infer that eastern Europe is similarly invested in the same processes of global racial formations, where the "global" is seen to unilaterally refer to the aforementioned First World-Third World form of colonialism, although different racial histories have unfolded in the region. A comparable conceptual symmetry simply does not hold. Categories exist as analytical tools for understanding the world. But these tools have not been created in an epistemological vacuum. They have certain histories attached to them; histories that bestowed them with the conceptual adequacy of having been used as explanatory in particular points in time. That is not to say that race is inexistent or irrelevant in eastern Europe. But rather to argue that analyses of racial formation in peripheral Europe should start from the creation of a localized genealogy of race in lieu of importing, and subsequently applying, a pre-determined, Anglo-American system of classifying the world.