
When We Say "Race is a Social Construction," What Are We Saying?

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Abstract

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It is an academic cliché that race is a social construction. Following Ian Hacking's work on social construction, I will trace three lines of argument in pre-World War II discourse about race that underpin this claim: The first is *contingency*: the world does not have to look the way it does. The second is *nominalism*: The world does not have joints at which we can carve it, the joints are completely products of our choosing. The third is *stability*: The world appears stable because of social factors, not because nature is providing the stability. In the development of claims about race's social construction we can see all three arguments at various times. All these arguments were framed by the rhetorical tactic of shifting probative obligations onto those who would maintain the existence of race. In other words, the critique of existing racial classifications was coupled with arguments that shifted the burden of proof onto those who would maintain the existence of race as a biological category—a burden that they would ultimately fail to meet.

I will focus on writers such as African-American activist/scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, the Polish-born French philosopher, Jean Finot, the German/Jewish-born American anthropologist Franz Boas, and the French/American literary polymath, Jacques Barzun. I argue that by focusing not just on the evidence they produced, but on the way they framed that evidence in a system of probative obligations we gain a better understanding of what it means to say race is a construction.

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