

# Q&A: RACE AND IDEOLOGY

24 APRIL 2020 | PHILO 36000 | HUNTER COLLEGE | DANIEL W. HARRIS

## What is Fields' metaphysical position?

I felt that this reading greatly opposed racial realism however, it is not clear to me what the main thesis is. Is she suggesting us to consider races as a real thing as opposed to some metaphysical ideology that cannot be analyzed? or, is she suggesting that although race is not metaphysical, it is based off of the ideologies of a particular group of people that are real because of the way it has impacted American History? —Sheana

It's worth noting that Fields works as a historian, not a philosopher, and so although I think her work has very interesting metaphysical content, she is not trying to clearly articulate that content in the terms that philosophers (like Ney) tend to use. There's also just a lot going on in this article, and it's not obvious to me that any single thesis could capture all of it. Philosophical writing sometimes tends to be more goal oriented and thesis driven than writing in the other humanities.

That said, here is what I take to be two central takeaways of Fields' piece, for our purposes:

1. One of the best ways to see that some form of social constructionism is true is to look at the actual historical circumstances in which the racial categories that we have now come to be adopted, and to recognize that the lines between the categories were drawn in the ways that they were because of entirely contingent facts about the social relations of the time. If things had been a bit different in ways that would seem to be irrelevant to the biological questions about race (for example, if there had been some people with dark skin living in Europe), then we could have had very different racial categories than we actually have. Of course, this isn't logically incompatible with the existence of biological race. But (a) it undermines our reasons for looking for facts about biological race in the first place, because it shows that they are ideologically driven, and (b) the clearest and most obvious explanation of this historical data is that race is something that humans created for our own purposes, not something that we dispassionately discovered out there in the world.
2. If we pay enough attention to the concepts of race that have operated in human history, we find all manner of contradiction and inconsistency. Natural categories aren't supposed to be like that! If physics gave us a contradictory theory of electrons, we would reject it as a bad theory. But ideology is a place where contradictory beliefs can often coexist, because the pressures that give rise to the ideology are often stronger than our desire to avoid contradiction. So the best explanation of all of the contradictions in our conceptions of race is that they are the product of ideology.

## Does race have a "central theme"?

Fields says that race does not have a central theme. She also suggests that historians should be concerned with examining the circumstances in which provisional acts and decisions were made

instead of finding a central theme, but since she claims that ideologies are shaped by experience and shapes experience, I think it would be hard to separate the two. Under the circumstances, perhaps there was a theme about human nature that drove such decisions to be made, but the answer might be metaphysical in itself. I think there is a central theme that drives ideology to take shape, that maybe there is something primordial that causes people to have superior ideologies in any sense - not just circumstance alone, or in a detached sense. —Cynthia Huang

I admit that I am less than fully clear on what Fields means when she says that race doesn't have a central theme because I'm not quite sure what she means by "theme". But here's roughly how I read her in general: when we look at how the concept of race works in American history, we find it operating in very different ways in different contexts. It would distort and oversimplify things in unhelpful ways to say that there is any one overarching understanding of race that could capture all of these facts. What we need, instead, is detailed historical analysis of how different conceptions of race influenced people in different circumstances, and how each of these ideas is the ideological product of its context. So on this view it might be better to say that race is a vast collection of mutually contradictory social constructs.

I love that she mentions that treating attitudes as 'discrete entities' that can be analyzed on their own is problematic. Then that history of race shows people were able to hold contradicting beliefs in order to meet their needs. —Loreta

I think she probably overstates the degree to which people feel comfortable having contradictory beliefs. I suspect that she's wrong, for example, when she says that we have no innate tendency to avoid contradictory beliefs. There is a lot of relevant work on this in the philosophy of psychology, which suggests that if people weren't at least often rational in what they believe and intend, then it wouldn't make sense to attribute beliefs or intentions to them at all. (Daniel Dennett is one major proponent of this view, and I find what he says about it quite convincing. Check out his book, "The Intentional Stances" for some of his arguments.)

But I don't think that this is a real problem for Fields' argument(s) in the paper. What matters to her is that there are at least some circumstances in which our ideological motivations for believing things outweigh our tendency to avoid inconsistency, and so we wind up believing contradictions. And that's much more plausible than her more sweeping claims.

## **Fields as a social constructionist**

Race is not a biological real but social structure, as we have learned on Tuesday. Fields argues that "Americans, including many historians, tend to accord race a transhistorical, almost metaphysical, status that removes it from all possibility of analysis and understanding" (144). If "race is neither the reflex of primordial attitudes nor a tragically recurring central theme," why race can be "a predominant ideological medium(168)"? —Misa

(I think the later answers in this section probably answer this question too.)

I'm still conflicted over whether race is biological or social construct. However, after reading "Ideology and Race in American History," I'm leaning more towards race being a social construct. However, on pg. 151, Fields says a bit of a puzzling statement. She says that race is a purely "ideological notion" and "all ideologies are real, in that they are the embodiment of real social relations." In other words, I think Fields is trying to say that race only exists because we made it real and human beings made it appoint to care and divide humans into subcategories based on appearance and origins. However, I don't know how far the argument that race is just a social and ideological construct that humans made up can possibly go. After all, humans do come from different regions of the world and have different skin colors. I don't see how acknowledging objective facts about our physical appearance and where we come from can be a social construct that human beings just made up. Can race really just be a product of social relations and not region of ancestral origin? However, I do understand Fields' point is that American slave owners have used race based on physical appearance to justify the biological inferiority and enslavement of black people. After all, we know now that there aren't any concrete or major biological differences between the races in terms of brain size and intelligence. However, if racism didn't exist would race still be something socially constructed? —Aanisah

I think you're right that Fields risks overstating her case in some ways, or at least fails to acknowledge and respond to the obvious arguments that will be made by biological realists. But that's why we read Spencer earlier this week. As he shows, it's very difficult to find any biologically real property that is shared by all and only the members of any given race, at least in anything like the sense of "race" that seems to matter socially. You say that "we know now that there aren't any concrete or major biological differences between the races in terms of brain size and intelligence". But this understates the case. What Spencer shows us is that nobody has successfully shown that there are any concrete or major biological differences between the races in terms of their genetics or lineage, either—in short, that nobody has really been able to pin down a clear sense in which they are really biological categories at all. (This is particularly true when it comes to folk races like "black", "white", "asian", etc.)

This might seem like an attempt to deny the obvious, but if the obvious can't actually be cashed out in scientifically respectable terms, then we should probably ask why it seems so obvious to us in the first place. I take it that Fields is attempting to give us a kind of historical answer.

(My next answer is also relevant to this question.)

This essay brings Michel Foucault to mind. Race must be located in history and society to be intelligible. It would be a mistake to draw any sweeping conclusions from one example to the next. The idea that race is a central theme in American history seems to obscure rather than clarify. The account of specific and localized historic details about race relations in the antebellum south through Reconstruction leads me to believe it would be a mistake to speak about race as existing outside of its place in history. Given this is race anything more than an admittedly powerful historic artifact? —Matt

(I will address this question together with the next one.)

Much of the focus of this article appears to be an illustration how racist attitudes are not static and are influenced by their historical context. The metaphysical concept of race is not central to the article, but Fields' view seems to be in the social construct camp "That does not mean that race is unreal: All ideologies are real... Race is a concept that we locate at the level of appearances only" "Accepting that does not require dismissing race as an ideological delusion which is therefore unreal: once acted upon a delusion may be as murderous as a fact". I think Fields' analysis of racial thought as a product of history is well argued. But what I wonder how much it necessitates her perspective on race itself. She is wary of overblown perspectives of race, and in fact extends that to metaphysical status of race. "It is my intention to suggest that Americans, including many historians, tend to accord race a transhistorical, almost metaphysical status that removes it from all possibility of understanding". As such her article focuses on deflating the idea of race by putting it in its context.

But does that mean we can't start from where we are now and talk about race in a metaphysical sense? I think the metaphysical question of race is still valid. If anything the way it changes could be said to make it more metaphysically interesting. It almost seemed like her dismissiveness of types of inquiry into race could cause the same problem she is wary of: removing race from understanding. —Miriam

I think Miriam might be setting up a false dichotomy between historical and metaphysical inquiry here. It's true that Fields is a historian rather than a metaphysician, but I think that this essay can be read as an interesting argument for a metaphysical position—namely, some sort of social constructionism about race. Of course, she doesn't quite put it that way, but that's not surprising given that she's a historian. (More on this point in my reply to Sheana, above.)

That said, I think Miriam might be right that there is some methodological tension between how Fields is doing things and how, for example, Spencer does things. I can imagine Fields criticizing Spencer by saying that since he does not consider the historical origins of the categories that he is studying, he will have little hope of understanding their true nature. By contrast, I can imagine someone replying that getting caught up in the history of a thing can obscure its true nature, since what a thing is now might not be clearly connected to its origins.

For example (and I think this addresses Matt's question too), I can imagine a racial realist replying to Fields by saying that although it's true that earlier generations had false theories of what race is, they nevertheless were talking about a real thing. After all: Newton had a false theory of what gravity is, but that doesn't mean that he wasn't talking about a real thing when he used the word "gravity". There has to be something real that he was talking about in order for him to have been wrong about it, after all. Similarly, a biological realist could say that although people have always had only a dim understanding of the underlying nature of the thing they were talking about when using the word "race", still they were referring to a collection of biological categories in doing so, and we need to do biology, not history, in order to find out what those categories are. I take it that Spencer is much more concerned with anticipating this sort of objection and engaging it on its own terms than Fields is. And that's why I think both approaches are valuable.

In the beginning, it says it's a false move - assumption that race is an observable physical thing. My question is that this "assumption" is it based on our senses or is this assumption socially constructed? —Syeda

I think it can be both. This is something that I think Haslanger's analysis (discussed by Spencer) gets right: any two people who have grown up in America will almost always agree about how to classify strangers with respect to race, and this shows that there must be *some* superficial characteristics of people that we're latching onto with our classifications. It's not some kind of grand illusion that black people look different, on average, than white people (various kinds of borderline cases aside).

But there is also a lot of evidence that this kind of perceptual discrimination is itself influenced by the categories that we have available to us. As Fields points out, it is not difficult to imagine a history in which Americans had decided that the physical dissimilarities of the various peoples of Africa were more interesting than their similarities, and in which we therefore came up with five or ten different racial categories for people of African descent instead of the one category, "black". (As she points out on p.145, early slave traders did have many more categories.) If this had happened, then we would all be much more attuned to the physical differences that distinguish different groups of people within the category that we now call "black". So the differences that we perceive is to some extent shaped by the categories and vocabulary that we have available to us.

The same point can be made for "white" people. We tend to lump people of all kinds of origins together as white now, but at some point Irish, Italian, and Jewish people mostly weren't counted, and people were much more sensitive to the supposed physical differences between those groups and others.

So there's no completely clear division between what ideology and the senses tell us, I think. Or at least, it's hard to draw that distinction.

## **Ideology, ontology, and Fields' Marxist background assumptions**

(The next several questions address the same issue, and I will try to answer them together.)

I did not understand why the differences she stated between race and class implies that the two cannot be compared with respect to their impact. If anything, her article made that sound like an interesting line of inquiry. —Miriam

I do not agree with Field's claim that "class and race are concepts of a different order" (pg. 150) Class and race may be different concepts, but it is too ideological to say they are both separate concepts for they both intersect. I think both class and race are appearance based concepts and the assumptions and stereotypes are formed from the intersection of the two. Stereotypes like White people are considered to be rich while minority races are considered to be lower to middle class. Both ideas are ideal, but they do intersect and effect socio-economic norms through distribution and recognition. —Raima



“Class and race are concepts of a different order.” Although I agree that in an objective world (may be in a utopian world) “class and race is not an equivalent concept.” How can we simply call it “erroneous to offer as alternative to each other” in today’s reality of America? It is already interwoven and embedded into our history and today’s reality of race is already a different product. Separating it this way, are we not undermining and stripping away a significant part of a race reality. No? The Africans that were initially brought into America are no longer same as African American race today that went thru a history of slavery and mixed with various black and white blood. —Syeda

On page 150, Fields makes an interesting distinction between race and class, in that class, at its core, refers to a material circumstance, while race is purely ideological. She then notes that “all ideologies are real, in that they are the embodiment in thought of real social relations.” In German Ideology, where the term “ideology” is dissected to its very core, Marx explains that ideology is used to create false consciousness, and is controlled by and determined according to the best interests of the ruling class. With this in mind, can ideologies still be claimed to be ‘real’? To Fields, the ‘realness’ of an ideology relies on social relations. Doesn’t racism imply social relations in a sense? I can’t imagine someone being racist if they’ve never seen other people before. This feels like an overcomplicated rabbit-hole in figuring out whether or not race is real. —Ksenia

I agree that what Fields says about the difference between race and class is puzzling. I think in order to understand it, we need to know a bit of background about Fields’ Marxist presuppositions. (Good job for picking up on this, Ksenia.) However, I should preface this by saying that I am not a Marx scholar and so what I am about to give you is a loose and oversimplified sketch. Don’t quote me in your term paper in Marx class! (It’s easier to get away with this sort of thing in in-person classes!)

Marx was a historical materialist, and his materialism had a metaphysical component as well as historical and economic components. He thought that humans’ material circumstances were more metaphysically fundamental than our culture, and that human culture is primarily driven by material circumstances—in particular, class relations. This, I take it, is why Fields takes pains to say that she thinks of class as primarily a matter of people’s economic position and relations to the means of production. These, according to a Marxist, are things that aren’t merely products of our culture. They are concrete in ways that our culture is not. By contrast, Marx argued that ideology is a form of culture that must be explained in terms of underlying material facts, including facts about class and other objective social relations. We cook up and disseminate ideology in response to facts about our material circumstances—for example, in order to justify them if we are part of the ruling class. So, there is a sense in which ideology is less fundamental than class: class is always (part of) the cause, and ideology is always (part of) the effect. Class drives ideology, and not the other way around. Although she is not entirely explicit about this in the paper, part of her point, I think, is that this applies to class and race in America: the different ideas that Americans have had about race are largely a product of underlying material circumstances (such as slavery and social class) and not mostly a cause of those material circumstances. (I think you’ll find that a lot of what she says makes more sense through this lens.)

Now, of course, lots of non-Marxists disagree with all of this! And so you’re all right to be skeptical about it. But I hope that this at least helps to clarify where Fields is coming from.