Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Welcome everyone to the first podcast of your pre-req module for AFR 320C, Power and Place in Making Texas History. This one will all about race. So, first question.

Question: What is race and how was it developed?

Dr. Gordon: Good question. I think everybody knows what race is. If somebody walks in the door, they immediately know what race they are, usually. So why ask a question like that?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Is it actually obvious, though?

Dr. Gordon: Well, I don't know about how it was developed. That does seem like a little bit of a more profound question. So let's go way back. One of the things that I say in the AFR 303, which some of the folks have probably had a look at, is that race is ancient, but it's certainly not prehistoric in the sense that it's formed in modernity. So when I say that, then people ask, "Well, what is modernity?"

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: What is modernity?

Dr. Gordon: So, what is modernity? Well, modernity is modern times characterized by such things as the opening or the spread of Europe and racial capitalism out of Europe into the rest of the world as an economic process, but also as a culture. Modernity also has to do with various kinds of monotheistic religions. It also has to do with kind of focus on the individual. I don't know, are there other aspects of it?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So would you say that it was jump started or made even more so of a global process through colonization?

Dr. Gordon: It's absolutely a global process and colonization from Europe to elsewhere, but also from elsewhere to elsewhere, was a key aspect of modernity. One of the really key aspects of modernity is the notion of linearity in the sense that science is based on linearity, that you have cause and effect. And people came to understand that you could make some predictions about the future by looking at the past, right? Looking at how things happen and then learning what the effects are going to be, often through experimentation or through observation. So there's that cause and effect aspect of things that's the basis of science. But it's also basis of a notion of history, that things that happened at one time then produce the things that happen in the next time, right? So that things are connected in that kind of way. So it's the basis of history. So all that's modernity and race is a key aspect of modernity.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Has it been the same throughout the process of colonization?

Dr. Gordon: No.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: And then after?

Dr. Gordon: No, definitely, it's not the same. And as we're going to find out race is an identity. And so therefore, and it's a social process. And we'll talk a little bit about what that means in the near future. But what that means is that it can have different kinds of manifestations, but one of the key aspects of race being a part of modernity is that modernity creates certain kinds of identities. And it also creates certain kinds of geographies. So that in some sense, the expansion of Europe and Europeans beginning to understand themselves as Europeans is only possible as they reached other places and defined those places as being other than Europe. And in that, it produces both those other places and it produces Europe.

Dr. Gordon: Africa is one of the first places where Europe expands to. And so, Africa and the construction of Africa is key in terms of constructing the notion of Europe as a separate place. And of course, the people who occupy Europe are understood to share certain characteristics. One is Christianity, but the other is a racial identity, whiteness. And whiteness, then, only comes into being as other kinds of people who can be characterized as not white also become, or that notion is created. And so, the creation of Africa and blackness is a key aspect of the creation of Europe and whiteness.

Dr. Gordon: So what is race and how is it developed? Race is an identity, right? That is part of the ways in which the world has developed in the last 500 or 600 years as global racial capitalism has expanded throughout the world. And race is developed in the sense that people involved in that process begin to expand and recognize or label other people as distinct in one way or another, in this case, black, as they label themselves as white. So it's developed in the opposition between we and them, between Europe and Africa, between whiteness and blackness.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So through this whole process, there's also different markers of ethnicity and culture and obviously nationalities. And a lot of people sometimes use race, ethnicity, nationality, as interchangeable, but that is incorrect.

Dr. Gordon: Yeah, that is incorrect. Maybe the easiest way to think through that is to think about race in this country and how it operates. And race in particular, in relation to blackness. So I'll ask you, since you're from elsewhere, besides the mainland of North America. Is everybody who is black in this country, do they all practice the same culture?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: No.

Dr. Gordon: Can you give me some example?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So for example, black people in a south side Chicago community might not do all of the elements of black culture in a more national understanding of it, as black people in the Third Ward in Houston, for example.

Dr. Gordon: That's a good example. What about Puerto Ricans in New York? Are there black people who would identify as Puerto Rican who are also black?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Of course, I'm one of them.

Dr. Gordon: And is black Puerto Rican culture the same as what we understand as African American culture, as perhaps using your example, practiced in south side Chicago?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: No, it varies.

Dr. Gordon: It varies. So black people don't have the same culture, so it's not a culture. What about ethnicity? What is ethnicity?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So from my understanding, ethnicity is more so a conglomeration and of people that might share some cultural markers, but maybe not necessarily racial markers.

Dr. Gordon: Okay. And so then why is race not the same as ethnicity? And you could use the same example we were just using for Afro-Puerto Ricans. So what ethnicity are Afro-Puerto Ricans?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: That's something.

Dr. Gordon: That's a good question.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: That's a good question. Yes. I mean, when I have to fill out government papers and even institutional papers here in UT that have these demographic questions, race and ethnicity are separate for people of Latinx or Hispanic or however you want to call it backgrounds, but everything else is put in the racial category, even Asian. But I would say that Asian should actually be an ethnic category versus a racial one, but we can get into that.

Dr. Gordon: Well, now you're going deep. So, it sounds to me like, at least in terms of the surface aspect of that question, that Afro-Puerto Ricans, some of whom look to be stereotypically black in the way we think about blackness, can be ethically Puerto Rican in one way or another. It's the same thing that Nigerian Americans are probably, well not probably, they're considered to be black. But they're ethically different, but they're also, just to complicate things, nationally different at least, as well. They have a national identity and sometimes ethnic identity is taken from nationalities. So we think about Polish Americans and Italian Americans and Nigerian Americans and Jamaican Americans, their ethnic designation also comes from their national... Well, it's not even their national affiliation. It's where they understand that they came from.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yes.

Dr. Gordon: Right. And has something to do with the culture of where they came from. So these things are somewhat complicated.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: But race is not the same as culture. It's not the same as ethnicity. It's not the same as nationality because of course, there are Nigerians who are white and there are South Africans who are white and there are... Anyway.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: You get it, right. These things are not the same thing. Race is its own kind of social category.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Great.

Dr. Gordon: Let's have the next question because we're moving right into this territory here.

Question: Is race biological?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: You mentioned science when you were explaining modernity.

Dr. Gordon: I did. Yes, I did. Well, so is race biological? I think for a lot of people, a lot of people believe it is because, well for example, I'm black. And on the one hand, I'm black because my father was black, but there's a wild card there. Most people would say that the progeny of two black people are automatically racially black because they had the biological inheritance of blackness. However, I would call myself a hundred percent black even though, and I do have a black father, but I had a white mother. So how does someone who has a white mother and a black father get to be black if biology, or if race, is a biological category? So how does that happen, Dr. Colon Pizzini?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Well, there's certainly a long history of race as a biological construct or a biological understanding, in which they come from the testing of animals. And because these tests were conducted on animals, then these scientists, mostly European, were thinking that, "Oh, it must be the same for humans." And so they were doing all these types of tests to try to prove that race, among other categories, were biological fact. But were they proven right?

Dr. Gordon: No, I think they were proven wrong because there is no basic discernible biological differences that exist that can separate the races that we understand to exist definitively based on their genetic characteristics. Now, there are genetic differences between groups of people who can be traced to particular regions of the world. But the folks who belong to those groups of people, they share a racial identity with other people who are much broader and wider than that group.

Dr. Gordon: So for example, you probably can find a gene pool of folks who come from the Delta region of Nigeria and they share some basic genetic similarities, right. But once you start to think about, well whether those similarities then also apply to other people who are considered be black, particularly when you think about, say African Americans here in this country, who we're the results of all kinds of biological mixtures and this, that, and the other thing. And yet, we are just as black as Nigerians, right? And in racial categorization, you can see that there's a problem.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: Because we don't have a common genetic pool in that kind of sense. And so in fact, there's as much difference within the genetic characteristics of people who we consider be a particular race as much or more difference within that than there are between people who we consider to be in distinct racial categories. And so, race is not a biological fact, right? It has little or no biological meaning, right? So if it has little or no biological meaning...

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Why would they use then race as biology? What are the justifications for that?

Dr. Gordon: Well, one thing is because simply thinking about this race is a social category that's based on what we understand to be bodily similarities. And we understand our body to be biologically produced, right? So it's a very simple thing to go from, well if someone is black, because their body looks black, then they must have inherited that look of their body from a particular kind of racial parent. And so therefore, race is biological.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: But when you closely look at it, some of the characteristics that we use to determine race, like principally skin color, are those characteristics which are shared with people outside of the races.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: So if you think about the Aboriginal people in Australia or the Trobriand Islanders, or even people from Bangladesh who have very dark skin.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: Skin that which we would characterize as black, they are not characterized as being racially black in the sense of being descendants from Africa. So these physical traits are inherited through parentage, but they're not concordant. In other words, they are shared with people who are outside what we designate as different races. And so therefore, we know that biology is not what determines race.

Dr. Gordon: Because race is not biological, that means a whole bunch of things. The most important one is that race doesn't determine behavior or capacity. In other words, it's not biological so it has nothing to do with innate biological capacities of one another. And that's something important that we'll emphasize as we go further. So now we can go on with the next question.

Question: If race is not biological, then what is it?

Dr. Gordon: Yes. Well, we can turn this off by just saying, "Well, if it's not biological, it must be a social construct." In other words, it's historically produced. It's what people have come to understand are basic differences between humans. And that we have come to understand that through specific historical processes, that can be traced. We can figure this out. And as you might have guessed, given what we've talked about first, it's probably related to modernity in one way or another, right. Does that mean that race doesn't exist, Dr. Colon Pizzini?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: It certainly has material consequence and actual...

Dr. Gordon: Oh, that's a high falutin. What does that mean?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So it means that even though race is a social construct, there are ways in which it still categorizes every single person within these sometimes restrictive labels, racial labels, even though the definitions of those labels through this process of modernity and time and history have made them change and have seen them go through a sort of evolution. Race and these categories are not static. They're always changing. But-

Dr. Gordon: So you're going pretty high there. And so maybe what I should do is ask you to explain yourself a little bit more with a next pointed question. But before we do that, do you have a set of racial theorists whose definition of race you think is particularly appropriate for understanding this?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah. So Omi and Winant defined race as a concept, which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. So it is a sort of marker or marking of bodies through this sort of visual examination, so to speak. And the dominant culture assigns identities to groups as a means of separating them, diminishing their status, and maintaining control over them. And some of these identities include race.

Dr. Gordon: So this really race as a concept has as much to do with power or more to do with power than it does to do with biology. All right. So let's get down into more of what Dr. Colon Pizzini was talking about in terms of race as a social construct, with the next question.

Question: If race is a social construct, why is it so important?

Dr. Gordon: Why, indeed? So I interrupted you when you were about to tell us.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Yeah.

Dr. Gordon: A little more about why it's so important. You said something about real, or I don't know if you said it has concrete impact or something like that, you said, right?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: Material consequences.

Dr. Gordon: Material consequences, right. So what's that about?

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So I don't just mean material in terms of economic, because it does have an impact in that way. But the racialization, the process of racialization, that Omi and Winant are referring to is, like you said, about power and about exerting power and demarcating people that have less power. And by doing that demarcation, you're also removing opportunities and certain rights, even, to this larger sort of model of things like citizenship and humanity and just fair living as a human being. So that's what I mean by material consequences. This can look in not just money and how much people are paid because of their race versus others, but also job opportunities in the first place, education, housing, medical treatment, even. So it has a lot of impact on how people that have been historically and contemporarily marginalized through their race, how they can live versus the dominant culture or racial group.

Dr. Gordon: Yeah. So what you're saying is it's important to understand how the world works and how power in the world is distributed. Yeah. It's also important to know that race in that sense has had real material impacts on people's lives. It's, in some sense, the reason why certain people were enslaved. It's also why certain people lose their lives in lynchings and other kinds of things. So I'm with you.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So what is important to know in terms of race as a concept is that it was really a product of, as we know it now and how it's changed and how it's affected us in the contemporary moment, from modernity, the process of modernity, of racial capitalism, the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism. And that it is not biological. It was understood as something of a biological fact in the human body through early, especially European white European scientists, but there's actually no scientific evidence that race is biological. But it is then a social construct, a social construct that has become a tool for the dominant to assign identities and categories that separate them from others. And that social construction and those processes can have very important consequences on the people that are within these non-dominant racial categories.

Dr. Colón-Pizzini: So for the dominant, race is a sort of political tool. And I don't just mean political in the sense of voting and electoral politics and the government, but even things like the interpersonal politics and institutional politics and all kinds of politics that are imbued in our daily lives in order to maintain that dominance over other groups. And for the dominated, race has these consequences that can be very negative, but they can also use this label to justify and explain the inequalities that they experience under the dominant group, and also as a form of finding solidarity with each other. So it is a complex concept and has transformed, but that is sort of a nitty gritty conversation about race.