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The Extent and Origins of Races, Ethnic Groups, and Racism in America

Even though the United States is a nation of immigrants, its history reveals persistent divisions based on race and ethnicity. From the earliest days of colonization to the present, the definition of race has shaped people's opportunities and the way they have been treated. Understanding how these racial divides developed, and how racism continues to be embedded in the fabric of American society, shows us why the nation continues to struggle with the same social problems today.

Race is not a biological construct. As Omi and Winant (2015) explain, "Defining groups of people as "other" is obviously not restricted to distinctions based on race. Gender, class, sexuality, religion, culture, language, nationality, and age, among other perceived distinctions, are frequently evoked to justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, subordinate status, and in some cases violent conflict and war." It is a construct made by people and it started during European colonization and the slave trade. European settlers used race to justify the enslavement of Africans and the displacement of Native Americans. They used skin color to prove they were the superior beings and that they had the right to dominate over these groups of people.

Ethnicity refers to shared culture such as language, religion, and traditions. While race was used to divide people and control them, ethnicity was a means of community and survival and support for immigrant groups. Sometimes race and ethnicity are flexible as seen by the gradual acceptance of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants eventually being accepted as white.

America's diversity is the result of multiple waves of immigration, forced migration, and colonization. Native people lived in the land long before the Europeans arrived, but their colonization brought disease, displacement, and violent assimilation efforts. As a result, much of the native culture was lost. Africans were brought to America through the slave trade beginning in the 1600s, establishing a system that defined white race at the top and the black race as the servants.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, millions of Europeans came to the U.S. looking for work and opportunity for a better life. Asian immigrants started businesses and helped build the country's railroads, but they were faced with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first act of its kind, stopping another race from entering the United States. Hispanic and Latino lands in the Southwest were absorbed after the Mexican-American War and they faced their own set of discrimination and still do today. Racism remains deeply set in American society. Systemic racism happens when inequality is built into our schools, housing, and justice systems. Some groups are favored over others and sometimes it's intentional. Examples include residential segregation, incarceration, and unequal access to education and healthcare. "In the United States, race is a master category- a fundamental concept that has profoundly

shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States (Omi and Winant, 106).

Social attitudes toward race have evolved, but discrimination persists in stereotyping and cultural appropriation which are modern displays of racial hierarchies. Despite the progress made through the Civil Rights Movement, groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants of color continue to face unequal social and economic barriers.

Ethnic groups in the U.S. have demonstrated remarkable resilience, even though they have been faced with so many challenges. Native American nations continue to declare their sovereignty and protect cultural heritage and languages, while Latino and Asian American communities have built strong networks for political representation and support. Their experience shows that diversity is a powerful source of strength for many.

The origins of race and ethnicity in America reveal a history marked by power, inequality, and struggles. It is also marked by adaptation and resilience of the people who came here for a better life. It still influences how people live in the United States today and may define the opportunities and struggles they continue to face. More work needs to be done to continue making progress toward a better future for all. Efforts need to continue to further education and understanding of our past to help our future.

References

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