RACE AND ANIMALS

The social realities of race and human-animal relations are complex. While the two phenomena have distinct histories, race and human-animal relations have often been connected. Some racial groups have been demonized as animalistic or less than human. Other groups have defined their racial identity based on how they treat animals. And some animals have been treated negatively because of their association with certain racial groups. While race and human-animal relations are often debated as separate issues, it is important to understand how they intersect with one another.

‘Race’, while often defined in relation to biological features, is not biologically fixed. Rather, what it means to be ‘white’ or ‘Asian’ changes over time and is determined by social processes, such as historical lineages of culture and kinship, one’s experiences of racism or racial privilege, or dominant ideas about skin color in one’s society. Racial categories, however, are often seen as ‘natural’ and unchanging. This obscures the unequal social relations that produce racial difference in the first place, as well as the racist inequalities that persist among different racial groups. For this reason, race is a social construction but it also has very real consequences.

‘Animal’ is a term based in biology, however, and refers to various organisms grouped within the Animal Kingdom. Though humans are also within the Animal Kingdom and humans share many characteristics with nonhuman animals – mortality, for instance – humans are also often thought to be distinct from other animals and higher up in a hierarchy of living beings. For this reason, ‘animal’ also has an everyday meaning to refer to that which is the opposite of human. This meaning of ‘animal’ as less-than-human can be attached to nonhuman animals. For instance, a person might insult an ape as being ‘just a stupid beast’. But this meaning can also be applied to other humans. For instance, someone might say ‘that criminal is an animal.’

Once one understands that both what it means to be of a certain racial category and what it means to be an ‘animal’ (in the everyday sense) are determined by social processes that change over time and space, we can begin to understand how race and human-animal relations become connected.

One way this happens is when a human social group is racialized – meaning its racial identity is defined – based on how that group’s relationships with animals differ from the larger social norm. For instance, in 1990s Miami, Caribbean immigrants were portrayed in the popular press as ‘backward’ – a euphemism for calling a group racially inferior – because they practiced Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion that can involve the ritual slaughter of dogs and other animals (Wolch and Emel, 1998). Similarly, in post-Apartheid South Africa, suburban whites who resented the integration of black South Africans into their previously all-white neighborhoods accused blacks of being ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilized’ – also euphemisms for racial inferiority – because of their religious slaughter of cows (Ballard 2010). The white South Africans defined their whiteness based on an imagination that modern farming techniques were more humane.
In both examples, racial superiority was defined according to how a certain social group related to nonhuman animals.

While these examples demonstrate how racial status becomes defined based on a group’s relationships with animals, in other instances racism operates by systematically placing racially oppressed groups in positions that require certain human-animal relationships over others. For instance, following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), much of the pig slaughter industry relocated from the US to Mexico, where poorer Mexicans were paid low wages to work in unsafe conditions of animal slaughter. This division of labor perpetuated a racial hierarchy, in which non-white workers in Mexico were forced into human-animal relations of violence while the majority-white executive boards of US animal slaughter companies - and American consumers - avoided such violent interactions.

Racial inferiority can also be created through the animalization of certain social groups. ‘Animalization’ here means the assigning of certain characteristics associated with “inferior” animals to certain human groups or the more straightforward use of animal names as racial slurs. For instance, there exists a long history within the US of denigrating people of color as animal or beastly, and specifically associating black people with ‘dumb’ and ‘savage’ apes. Jackie Robinson, the first African American player to desegregate Major League Baseball, was often taunted with monkey gestures. Barack and Michelle Obama, the first black US president and First Lady, have been compared with monkeys. For instance, Univision TV host Rodner Figueroa was fired after saying Michelle Obama should have been cast in the film Planet of the Apes. This racist animalization of people of color has a long history based in the European colonization of African peoples and has traveled beyond just the United States. For instance, at a 2014 soccer game in Spain, black Brazilian player Dani Alves had a banana thrown at him. This racist association has even extended to the depiction of animals themselves. Great Apes such as gorillas and chimpanzees have been racialized as black and threatening, as in the Hollywood film King Kong wherein a monstrous African gorilla kidnaps a white woman and terrorizes ‘civilized’ New York City. Animals can also become associated with racist imaginations in more roundabout ways. For instance, in the US, the breed of dog known as pit bulls has often been portrayed as vicious fighting dogs associated with racist stereotypes about black violence and urban black communities.

Race and human-animal relations are distinct to their historical and geographic contexts. But by understanding that both ‘race’ and ‘animal’ have meanings that are affected by social processes that change over time, we can understand how race and human-animal relations unfold in other contexts.

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See also Animal; Great Apes; Pitbulls; Social Construction

Further Reading


