Social ontology and the Black Lives Matter movement
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One version of an old joke: the Lone Ranger and Tonto, his Native American companion, spy a large group of hostile Native warriors headed their way. "Well, Tonto", the Lone Ranger says, "this doesn't look good; this might be a situation we can't find our way out of." To which Tonto replies, "what do you mean *we*, white man?"

Race is not real, we are sometimes told. It is a social construction. Indeed, much of our lived social reality—the backdrop of assumptions, values, beliefs, conventions, norms, institutions, et cetera which make up the world we live in—comes from nowhere other than our having made them so. We don't choose what the Earth is made of; we don't choose whether whales are fish or mammals; we do, however, choose our laws, and our culture, our social identities, and so on.

But who is 'we'? The pronoun is problematic. Using the word suggests that there really is something that binds us together. Hence, the Tonto and Lone Ranger joke, which there are multiple ways of understanding. The straight-forward reading of the joke is that Tonto is simply making an observation to the Lone Ranger: maybe *you* aren't making it out alive, but *I* almost certainly am. Does it matter that Tonto is Native himself? Of course; that gives him reason to be confident in his prediction. But, on the straightforward reading, Tonto is just denying that the Lone Ranger's prediction of imminent doom applies to both of them.

But on a stronger reading of the punchline, Tonto is not merely denying that the prediction applies to him. Instead, Tonto is refuting the Lone Ranger's claim that *there ever was a 'we' in the first place*. The Lone Ranger's use of the word 'we' is presumptuous; he claims to speak for both of them when he does not, and he claims that they constitute a social unit when they do not.

If social reality is created by 'us', by something 'we' made, then it matters who 'we' are. It also matters whether, and to what extent, we are being presumptuous when we claim of our social constructs that they speak for all of us.

There are, then, two things to discuss. The first is how it is that we can jointly create our social reality in the first place. The second is whether it is possible for our social reality to be created and maintained by a disunited society—and if so, what it means and how it can be changed.

1.

Our topic of discussion is the significance of social reality for the Black Lives Matter movement, and for general movements for social and racial justice. But to get there, we

start in an odd place: with Caitlyn Jenner, and with Rachel Doležal.

These cases recently caught the public attention. Caitlyn Jenner is a transgender woman who publicly revealed her gender identity recently, while Rachel Doležal is a woman who self-identifies with a racial identity (black) different from that of her biological family (predominantly white). Let me pause to acknowledge that discussing the cases in parallel is not without problems. Many people, and many black women in particular, were frustrated that the two cases were often discussed alongside one another, as though the cases were essentially identical. But they are not remotely identical, it was said. Doležal, the argument goes, was *misrepresenting herself* by falsely appropriating an identity and a culture that she did not belong to and that she had a problematic relationship to; Jenner did not misrepresent herself in revealing her gender identity. There are other reasons why the Doležal case presents problems, but we needn't discuss too many particulars of her case or of Jenner's. The question instead is: how can one case be not like the other if neither of the operative concepts, race and gender, are 'real'? If both race and gender are socially constructed, then how is it possible for us to hold a split view about Doležal's authenticity in proclaiming a racial identity and Jenner's authenticity in proclaiming a gender identity? And, similarly, how could it even be possible for Doležal to lie about her racial identity?

The simple answer is that our social reality can be both constructed and real. Our social reality is constructed, in the sense that it is up to us; we make it the way it is. And our social reality is real, in the sense that it is *not* up to us; we do not make it as it is. This is the puzzle. But the *reality* of social reality is important, and it is a thing that we can get wrong. That is what Rachel Doležal is said to have gotten wrong—the reality of her lived experience. She had not lived as a black woman, she had not had the reality of race impinge upon her and upon her daily life in the way (or ways) characteristic of being black in America. Social reality is not fixed, and not real, but it is also immutable and real. We understand the Black Lives Matter movement better when understand how these two paradoxical statements can be both true at the same time.

2.

The word 'ontology', coming from the Greek words *ontos* ('being' or 'reality') and *logos* ('account of'), is used by philosophers and others to talk about the things that exist, and what kind of existence they have. When we ask questions like 'is this thing real?' (or "is this thing *really* real?"), we ask ontological questions. The problem with ontological questions of this sort is that the answers are generally not very interesting. The possible answers to the question "is X real" (where X is anything that you like) are: *yes*, *no*, *sort of*, and *I don't understand the question*. And while one (or more!) of those answers can be used in the vast majority of ontological questions, none of these answers is particularly satisfying; the answer tells us very little in itself. Does Santa Claus exist? Yes? No. Sort of? I don't understand the question. Does God exist? Do

colors exist? What about numbers? The United States of America? Love?

What is more interesting than the answer we give to an ontological question is the *reasoning* we give for why that answer is the right one. The reasoning tells us two important things that we couldn't get through just the answer alone: first, it tells us something about our values and theoretical commitments. What matters, in other words, in answering ontological questions? And second, it reveals something about our concept of the thing in question. In trying to answer the question of whether Santa Claus is real, or whether the United States is real, we have to have a clear understanding of what we mean by the words 'Santa Claus' or 'the United States'. Is Santa Claus the idea in your head? Is Santa Claus a person living in a building in the North Pole? Is the United States a government, an ideal, a set of geographical boundaries?

So let's return to the question of race. Is race real? We might say 'yes': our racial classifications are grounded in things that are not under our direct control. (Parents who are racialized as black, for example, often have children who are racialized as black, through no choice of the parent or child.) Moreover, we might say that race is real because the *effects* of race are real: one cannot just say that race isn't real when the police are advancing or the cab needs to be hailed. On the other hand, when asked whether race is real, we might say 'no': our racial categories appeal to surface-level traits of people, and do not map neatly onto meaningful biological kinds. There is more genetic variability within racial kinds than there is between racial kinds, and the concept of race plays little role in explaining biological properties of individuals. Moreover, racial classifications are to at least some degree culture-specific; different racial categories have been in operation in different places and different times. These facts lead one to think that racial classifications are imposed by us on a world for which they are ill-suited.

We might then find it attractive to say the race is 'sort of' real, or that the question of whether race is real is ill-formed and cannot admit of a proper answer. But we needn't be forced into one of those two positions just from the competing considerations in favor of thinking of race as real, and thinking of it as not real. An entity or concept is socially constructed insofar as it depends for its existence on collective human intentionality—that is, on beliefs, desires, intentions, and intentional actions. And so race and gender can be socially constructed when the way that they are, and the forms that they take, are dependent on the way that we think about them, or the things that we have done to make them as they are. Race, like other socially constructed things, takes the form that it does at least in part because that is the way we have made it.

There are many ways that things can be socially constructed, of course; tables and bicycles are socially constructed, albeit in a rather uninteresting sense. But particular tables and bicycles, once constructed, endure. If all human beings were to cease all mental functioning tomorrow, tables and bicycles would still be there (even though no one would be able to employ the concepts 'table' or 'bicycle'). Tables and bicycles are

created through intentional acts, but they do not depend for their continued existence on intentionality. Race, on the other hand, does depend on intentionality for its continued existence. If all human beings were to cease mental functioning tomorrow, race would simply cease to exist. This is a specific claim; it is not that human beings would cease to exist, or that families would cease to exist. People would still be tall or short, dark-skinned or light-skinned, right-handed or left-handed. There might even be biological concepts that would continue to exist which (very) roughly track our current racial classifications. Those categories would still exist, but our current racial categories would not, because our racial categories are *constitutively* socially constructed.

Is race real? Yes. We have willed it to be real. Its reality consists in the (extraordinarily large) role that it plays in our lives and in our society, not just through our cognition and our willing but also through the vast institutional infrastructure and norms and customs that have grown up around it. But that reality is sustained by us, and thus is subject to our will. The role that race plays in our lives, both good and bad, is something that we brought into this world and we can take out as well.

Perhaps, then, it's just that simple? Perhaps the negative consequences that come from our particular and enduring understanding of race can be willed away, just through our deciding so?

It is, of course, not that simple.

3.

We have talked about the extent to which race is constructed, but not the *social* aspect of the construction. No one person chose to construct race, or gender, or currency, or the law, or any of our enduring socially constructed concepts and institutions. These concepts were made by us collectively, not by any of us individually.

A useful analogy is the case of language. It is easy to see that language is socially constructed: the particular words that we use, the grammar, the syntax, are all made by us. They could have been different. This is not to suggest that we have complete free reign with respect to language; we might very well be inclined or determined by our biology to choose one of a finite set of possible ways of constructing our language, at least with respect to the grammar and syntax. And yet, there is no objective ideal language that our own language is tracking; our language is what it is because we made it that way. So too it might be with concepts like race: while we might be determined or inclined by our biology to reify certain salient external differences such as skin tone, our racial concepts are not tracking any deep independent feature of the world.

If language is made by us but not made by any one of us, where does it come from? To be sure, there is a slow process of accretion through which words and phrases get

added into our language. We are told of how many new words Shakespeare invented; we can track their provenance, just as we can track the provenance of the thousands of words invented by artists today. But language is not merely a process of words getting introduced to serve a purpose, and then those which are useful stick around. We cannot always track the inventor of some particular word, but even if we could, there would still be something more to language than a series of individual choices that individuals made. We learn language through a long process of normalization: we correct each other when words stray from a common usage, we help each other when someone seems to be missing a necessary word, we encourage and sanction each other for the choices of language that we make. Language is, at heart, a norm-driven activity; to understand how we acquire language and how language grows requires that we understand the norms that govern language use.

In short, we (implicitly) think about language as a collective enterprise. As such, we add or subtract as necessary, and we allow others to approve or disapprove of our changes. We bring ourselves into line with others, and we bring others in line with ourselves. Communication requires us to be cooperative in this sense, and to grant the ultimate authority over our language to the social group that we are a part of, not to ourselves. Consider the conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

> [Humpty]: 'And only **one** for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'
>
> 'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.
>
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'
>
> 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected.
>
> 'When **I** use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you **can** make words mean so many different things.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.'

Humpty thought he could make himself the sole authority over the meanings of his words, but he cannot—not merely because he destroys his ability to communicate with others, but because he seems to have gotten something *wrong* about his language. 'Glory' just does not mean what Humpty thinks it means; Humpty does not get to decide.

Likewise, no individual gets to decide what race means for them, or for society. I cannot decide tomorrow that being black in America means something other than what society has constructed it to mean. Or, rather, I *can* decide—but then I would be as incapable of navigating the world as Humpty Dumpty. Humpty can persist in believing that words mean what he says they mean, so long as he sits on his wall all alone. One can persist in believing that one's racial identity consists in whatever they decide, so long as that person never has to use that identity to navigate a world full of other people.

It is, then, up to society to be the master over the words and concepts that society uses. The individuals in society support the actions of society—though the actions of society are often too complicated to be traced back with any reliability to any individuals, or indeed to any individual interests or motives. We sometimes make claims of the form 'this concept benefits the interests of this group.' Our racial policies and concepts, we say, benefit the interests of white Americans. Or, it is said with resentment, our racial policies and concepts now primarily benefit the interests of racial minorities. Our gender concepts benefit the patriarchy. And it is not my goal right now to arbitrate the claims themselves—our racial and gender concepts *do* generate benefits, those benefits accrue to certain people in certain ways, and we can investigate who benefits and who is harmed by our current racial and gender concepts. Rather, right now I am merely stating that even if the benefits clearly accrue to some set of people, it is often difficult to trace the intentional establishment of those gender and racial concepts back to the group that receives the benefits. It is not individual people responsible for the concepts, it is the group or society who is responsible for such concepts.

It is worth briefly clarifying this point. Groups are made up of individuals. Group policies are enacted by individuals, and at the end of the day, if we had enough time and historical evidence, we could track every change introduced into society back to the individuals who first proposed them. I do not mean to deny a commitment to a basic methodological individualism. But the people who introduce these changes are often guided by their judgments of what society permits or favors, rather than pure self-interested judgments. Language users are guided in their choice of language by their judgments of what society permits or favors, rather than purely self-interested judgments of which word is best. (If you want to insist that in acting in accordance with what society favors, individuals are actually acting according to a purely self-interested judgment, that's fine; nothing hinges on the distinction here.)

My claim is that all socially constructed concepts work the same way. Because they are socially constructed, they are produced and maintained through the complicity of the members of that society: people act so as to facilitate a shared understanding of the concept, and the ultimate authority on the proper meaning and use of the concept comes from society, not from an individual. As Emile Durkheim put it, these social constructed concepts (which are one type of what Durkheim called 'social facts') are known by the kind of force that they generate for members of society: to resist them as a part of one's social reality is to be subjected to their normative force of the concept.

It is worth noting, however, that these socially constructed concepts like race are not merely maintained through the complicity of members of society. Rather, they are maintained in part through institutional force. With respect to language, we teach 'proper' (i.e. normal, i.e. in accordance with norms) language use in schools. With respect to our racial concepts, we are taught those as well, and we are taught them through our institutions. The instruction is perhaps not as explicit, but it is just as pervasive nonetheless.

4.

What is it to be racialized as black in the United States? It means many things, of course; there is no one canonical black experience. Nevertheless, a strong claim can be made that the reality of race in America—in particular, the reality of being black in America—is the reality of being subjected to a kind of institutionalized violence.

We have seen the examples. We have seen them repeatedly. Institutions in America—schools, law enforcement, courthouses, prisons, government services, financial institutions, neighborhood watch programs—subject African Americans to violence. In doing so, the institutions teach what race means in the United States. The frequency of this institutional violence matters, yes, but what matters as much if not more is the *normalization* of it.

The institutionalization of racial violence matters. One sometimes hears it said that people seeking social justice do not complain as loudly when black people murder other black people as when black people are murdered by law enforcement. And while the premise itself is debatable, the conclusion is wrong either way. Not all deaths are alike; deaths that are sanctioned and normalized by social institutions are far more problematic than deaths that are produced by individual bad actors.

To see why, consider the stronger version of the claim made above, namely: being black in America is *essentially* being subject to social and cultural norms, among them being judged apt for institutional violence. This is a strong claim, but it is not so strong that it cannot be considered; indeed, it is very similar to the claim that Ta-Nehisi Coates makes, both in his columns for *The Atlantic* and in his book *Between the World and Me*. The view is summed up well by Thomas Chatterton, in his review of Coates ("Loaded Dice", *LRB* 37(23), December 2015, pp. 15–18) for the *London Review of Books*:

> "One of the rhetorical moves Coates uses to great effect – positioning himself permanently as a member of the ghetto where he grew up – is to conflate blackness (and conversely whiteness) as a physical and cultural designation with an economic and political position."

Though Chatterton left out perhaps the most important aspect for Coates of the

economic and political position that blacks inhabit: namely, that it is one in which a threat of violence and a loss of bodily integrity is omnipresent. But then arises a small conundrum: if that's all that blackness is, at heart, then how does society pick out black people in the first place, in order to subject them to such violence? There is a potential vicious circle lurking: if being black means being subjected to certain kinds of institutionalized violence, then what is the justification for subjecting any given person to such violence? The answer cannot be "because the person is black", on pain of circularity.

The way out of the conundrum is, of course, simple. Being black means being subjected to certain social conditions, including the omnipresent threat of institutionalized violence. And how are they picked out for such treatment? On account of their skin, their culture, their appearance, their manner of speech, and so forth. The United States, in part through its institutions, takes people with dark skin and turns them into black people. Black people are not born; black people are made. And, if it is right to claim that the black lived experience is equal to the experience of being subjected to certain treatment at the hands of institutions, then black people are made *through social institutions*.

We need not say that black people are made through the autonomous choices of individuals who participate in social institutions. Individuals do not, by and large, set the norms for institutions. Individuals do not, by themselves, establish standards for how people are to be viewed, or treated, or responded to, anymore than individuals themselves establish standards for normal speech. Well-positioned or influential individuals can make a difference, of course. But the problem is not the failure to act on the part of a few well-positioned individuals, anymore than the problem is the bad actions of a number of bad actors. The problem is that we collectively normalize racialized standards, and even well-intentioned actors in institutions seek to further the norms of the institutions they are members of. We collectively construct our concept of race, and then that concept creates its own associated network of institutions which preserve and further the norms embedded in that concept. At that point, it is the institutions themselves that are in control of the norms, and we as members of society merely support it.

Which brings us back to Tonto's response to the Lone Ranger: "what do you mean *we*, white man?"

5.

Social construction requires a unified society. In order for 'us' to collectively intend something, there must be an 'us' in the first place. Collective intentions that are made by a smaller group and then forced onto a larger group do not ipso facto become collective intentions of the larger group. Consider the following toy example: a group of people is made up of two smaller groups, group A (a large subset of the overall

population) and group B (a small minority subset of the overall population). Group A, being the larger group, has control over the institutions that are largely responsible for generating and enforcing societal norms—schools, legal institutions and the police, etc. Both group A and group B are unified in the sense that they can form collective intentions. But whereas group B can form collective intentions that generate norms for group B alone, group A can form collective intentions that affect societal institutions, and then generate norms for society overall, meaning both group A and group B.

What are we to say about such a case? First, we should note that each of the *individuals* in group A and group B can truly say "I'm not responsible for the norms of society; they impose themselves on me just as they do on you." Everyone feels as though social norms are imposed on them without their consent or participation; again, compare with how we find norms of language and grammar imposed on us. That said, there is a difference between the individual members of group A and group B: the members of group B feel *doubly* alienated from the institutional norms, because those institutional norms were not even socially constructed by group B—and yet they apply to the members of group B all the same.

And so, the members of group A should be cautious about assuming that socially constructed institutional norms were generated by *both* group A and group B, rather than just by group A. They should be cautious, that is, of being presumptive, of erroneously believing that the 'we' which is in place is a 'we' which covers both A and B, rather than A alone. The error might be a well-intentioned error; it might reflect merely a failure to understand the perspective of the other. It is, however, a failure nonetheless.

We need not quibble about how well-intentioned the error is; what matters is what is to be done. The challenge the Black Lives Matter movement faces is a serious one: it is, in effect, changing the entire social construction of race in America. If being black in America is constituted by being subject to institutionalized violence, then the Black Lives Matter movement must aim to change how blackness is constructed. Moreover, it has to do so by clearly articulating not just the extent to which black lives are constantly under threat, and not just by exposing the extent to which social institutions in America are preserving a set of norms that permit and encourage that threat to black lives, but also by redefining what blackness can and does mean in America.

Suppose one wanted to change the language of the United States. Not just change the language surrounding race, but change the entire language. How could such a thing be done? Certainly not just by one person, and not all at once. But language has changed, and will continue changing. Indeed, it seems plausible to say that black people have had as much a role as anybody or anything in affecting the language patterns of America. Linguistic innovations happen in subgroups, where people are free to create and enforce their own norms. They spread from there, as more people accept the norms that permitted the linguistic innovations in the first place.

Black Lives Matter must project these norms into the institutions that are, or might be, hostile to them. The title says it all: we reject the view which holds of black lives that they are appropriately subject to violence, that the life itself does not matter as much as the control that is exerted upon it. There is another way to conceptualize race in America.

I do not want to suggest that Black Lives Matter should only focus on projecting better norms of racial identity to an uncomprehending and institutionally hostile majority culture. I also do not want to suggest that it is up to black people alone to change the norms surrounding racial identity. The situation is bigger than that. But being black has long meant being subject to a certain kind of controlling treatment at the hands of social institutions. Moreover, this racial identity has been collectively constructed, but not by all of us in society. And the norms surrounding this racial identity have been preserved by social institutions, though we do not all participate equally in the direction of these institutions. If our social reality is to be socially constructed, it should be better reflective of well-worked out norms that we fully endorse.

We should thus understand that norms governing race, including norms governing how members of racial groups are treated, are socially constructed and institutionalized. Moreover, we should be cautious about the claim that these norms have been socially constructed by a unified society, either now or in the past. Racial norms, and in particular the institutionalization of those racial norms, have been socially constructed by only a subset of the overall population.

There are several possible correctives to this problem. One corrective is for society to be completely unified before institutionalizing norms of behavior—though even the most optimistic of us should be skeptical that this will happen anytime soon. Another corrective is for minority groups to insist that institutions of society reflect the norms that they themselves have socially constructed for themselves, rather than the norms that have been imposed on them. It is a matter of saying our voices matter, our norms matter, our group matters, Black Lives Matter.

The problem with Black Lives Matter is that it is necessary at all. That one group would need to tell another group “our lives have worth, and they are not being treated as such” is a damning indication of where the country is and where it came from. And it shows why the sometime response “well, all lives matter” misses the mark. Of course all lives matter. The institutional norms regarding how to treat all lives are not the same, however. Saying “all lives matter” is a banal truism. Given that our language and its norms can change, perhaps it will become as banal of a truism at some point to say “black lives matter” as well.