

Race as a Social Construct: A Lesson Examining the Development of Race and Racism in Brazil and the United States

Grade Level: 10-12

Subject: US History, World History

Key Words: race, social construct, racism, miscegenation

Suggested Time Frame: 5 days

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Summary: This lesson aims to center race as a way to understand its key role in U.S. history. This unit will first explore the idea of race as a social construct. Students will consider the assumptions they make in determining people's racial identities. They will then work toward deconstructing those assumptions. Next students will explore the transatlantic slave trade, the emergence of chattel slavery, and the experience of enslaved people in Brazil. Students will then begin to critically consider how Brazilians have conceived of race since slavery was abolished in 1888. Finally, students will be asked to hold this prism up to their own society. They will consider the ways in which Brazil's history might shed light on our own past and present in the United States.

Rationale: For many students, race is challenging to discuss, especially beyond the United States. This unit aims to provide students of U.S. history with a deeper understanding of race in their own country. It accomplishes this by drawing comparisons between the history of race and racism in the United States and Brazil. Through considering the development of these systems through the lens of another country, students of U.S. history will be better equipped to critically consider the development and perpetuation of similar systems within the United States. In learning about race in Brazil, U.S. history students will be able to understand the history of their own country in a different light.

Background:

For more information on the construction of race in both the U.S. and Brazil, see:

- Global Social Theory guide: <https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/critical-race-theory/>
- Study on race in Brazil and the U.S.: https://unews.utah.edu/black-white-or-multicultural-constructing-race-in-two-countries/?doing_wp_cron=1557236961.3977379798889160156250
- Black in Latin America, Brazil (film): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh7c46U5hhY>

Student Objectives

Students will be able to

- Use knowledge of Brazil and Brazilian history to understand the ways in which race has historically been constructed in the United States
- Understand the difference between different terms useful to the discussion of race and racism

Essential/Driving Questions

- What is race?
- What is a social construct?
- In what ways did the enlightenment serve to inform the ways in which European colonizers thought about race? How did this differ from pre-enlightenment thinking?
- What arguments did Europeans perpetuate to justify the institution of slavery?

Vocabulary words:

- Ethnicity
- Race
- The Enlightenment
- Racism
- Discrimination
- Miscegenation

Materials:

- “The Enlightenment's Dark Side.” Slate: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/06/taking-the-enlightenment-seriously-requires-talking-about-race.html>
- “The Enlightenment’s ‘Race’ Problem, and Ours,” New York Times: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/why-has-race-survived/>
- History of Western Society, McKay, “Race and the Enlightenment” (pg. 524-529)

Learning Plan

Activity 1: Introduction to Race as a Social Construct

Through a paired and class-based discussion, students talk about their own experiences and thoughts about race.

Objectives:

- Students reflect on their own personal experiences with the topic of race
- Students share their own knowledge/background on the topic

Procedure:

1. Ice Breaker Pair Share: Assign each student a partner. Partner A will talk to partner B for 1.5 minutes without interruption. Partner B does not contribute verbally or through body language. Next, partners switch roles. If one of the students finishes speaking before the allotted time is over, both students will sit in silence until it is time to move on to the next step of the activity. Students will then debrief for approximately 3 minutes.
 - Pair-share question: *What experiences in your own life have served to inform the development of your own racial identity?*
2. Class discussion
 - Question 1: *How did you experience that activity?*
 - Question 2: *What came up in conversation that was surprising to you?*
 - Question 3: *What can this activity teach us about communication?*

Activity 2: Race: The Power of an Illusion, PBS

Through a sorting activity and discussion students will reflect on the way people “read” race and employ different terms to talk about race.

Objectives:

- Analyze the ways race is a social construct
- Understand the different elements that have been used throughout history to construct racial categories

Procedure:

1. Write the following question on the board and have students brainstorm aloud: *What is a social construct?*
2. Have students complete PBS’s [sorting people activity](#). This activity should be executed independently.
3. Engage the students in conversation around the following questions:
 - Question 1: *How accurate were your assumptions?*
 - Question 2: *What tactics did you use to sort people into distinct racial categories? Eye shape? Nose size? Skin color? Hair texture?*
 - Question 3: *What lessons can we take away from completing an activity like this?*
4. Discuss major conclusions of this activity:
 - Appearance does not always tell you about someone’s ancestry or *self-identity*. It is hard to make accurate predictions based on appearance alone.
 - Racial categories in the U.S. have changed since the beginning of our history. Race is an *idea* that we *ascribe* to biology.
 - In other countries race is defined in different ways than it is in the U.S.
5. Review Key Terms with students.
 - **Ethnicity** comes from the Greek word *ethnikos* and refers to a population which shares the same geography, broad historical experience, and similar cultural elements. Ethnicity is culture writ large.
 - **Race** is a socially constructed distinction. Originally “race” was imposed by European explorers and missionaries to justify the killing and stealing of land and resources from the people who they encountered at the end of their travels who did not look like them. Distinguishing characteristics were skin color and facial features. The difference between Europeans and the newly-encountered based on characteristics resulted in a distinction called “race”. As such, race is a “constructed reality”, artificial in nature.
 - **The Enlightenment** was the influential intellectual and cultural movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries that introduced a new worldview based on the use of reason, the scientific method, and progress.
 - **Racism** involves social power and prejudice; the capacity to make and enforce decisions (power) is disproportionately or unfairly distributed. Racism can involve unequal access to such resources as money, education, information, etc. In the United States, racism can be best understood as a system with personal/ individual and institutional manifestations. Racism is a system which

differentiates between white people and people of color. Because the social systems and institutions in this country are controlled by white people, white people have the *social* power to make and enforce decisions and have greater access to resources. In a **racist system**, “white” standards for behavior are considered superior, for example, and are the standards by which behavior of other groups is judged.

- **Discrimination** is the act or practice of according negative differential treatment to individuals or groups on the basis of group, class or affiliation such as race, religion and gender.

Assessment: Watch the video [“The Atlantic Slave Trade”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnV_MTFEGlY) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnV_MTFEGlY). As you watch, respond to the following questions:

- What was the Transatlantic Slave Trade?
- What percentage of enslaved people were brought to the United States?
- What percentage of enslaved people were brought to Brazil?
- Elaborate upon Europe’s history of trading slaves. When did it begin?
- Describe the economy of the slave trade.
- What was the average life expectancy for enslaved people in Brazil? How did this compare to that of the United States? Consider: what may have been the cultural implications of this?
- Define chattel slavery. How was chattel slavery distinct from other forms of slavery?
- In what ways did Europeans use the Bible to justify the enslavement of Africans?
- In what ways did the Spanish and Portuguese help define the attitudes that characterize Atlantic slavery?

Activity 3: The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Students will engage with various materials to learn about the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the regions involved, and the experiences of enslaved peoples.

Objectives:

- Define chattel slavery and understand how it differs from other forms of coerced labor
- Identify the factors that led to the emergence of chattel slavery during the 16th century
- Explain how the nature of slavery changed as a consequence of changing global economic systems
- Explain how enslavement was experienced by Black people in the New World

Procedure:

1. Assessment Review: Divide students into groups of 2-3 to discuss the questions from the previous day's assessment.
2. Discuss questions as a class.
3. Map Analysis: In their small groups, have students observe the [map of the Transatlantic Slave Trade](https://www.neh.gov/news/voyages-the-transatlantic-slave-trade-database) from the National Endowment for the Humanities (<https://www.neh.gov/news/voyages-the-transatlantic-slave-trade-database>). Each group should generate a list of five questions based on their observations.
4. Have students compile their questions on the whiteboard. Discuss.
5. Divide students into small groups and distribute the primary sources "Slavery in Brazil" from *Brazil: A History of Change*, Teacher Resource Book pg. 18-30.
6. Assign each group two sources. Students should:
 - Identify the origin of the source
 - Identify the purpose of the source
 - Identify the value of the source in gaining insight into the institution of slavery in Brazil
 - Identify the limitations of the source in gaining insight into the institution of slavery in Brazil
7. Engage students in a class conversation that explores the value of these documents in evaluating history. Ask: What do we gain from these documents? What might we be missing? How might ideas about race influence the ways in which Brazilian society was crafted after 1888?

Assessment:

Listen to the podcast, "[Brazil in Black in White](https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=542840797:543264640)" (<https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=542840797:543264640>). As you listen, consider the following questions:

- In Brazil, what is meant by the term "pardo"? Do we have an equivalent term in American English?
- After slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888, how did the government attempt to recast a national narrative around race?

- What is the relationship between race and socioeconomic status in Brazil? Why might this relationship exist?
- What challenges did the Brazilian government face in attempting to structure affirmative action programs? What solution did they develop to combat this?
- Why might Brazil's construction of race be "difficult" for us as Americans to understand?

Activity 4: Race in Brazil

Using music, students will explore the ways in which interpretations and conceptions of race have evolved in Brazil.

Objectives:

- Understand the concept of miscegenation
- Trace the ways the definition of race has evolved in Brazil from the colonial era to the present
- Identify challenges that Brazilians face when it comes to combating racial inequality in their country
- Compare the ways race is understood differently in Brazil versus the United States

Procedure:

1. Play “Sou Mais Samba,” by Candeia (YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WneWB74LvFA>). As students enter the classroom, encourage them to listen critically to the music that is playing
2. Each student should write down three questions they have about the piece.
3. Compile the students’ questions on the board. Ask students to also consider the following questions:
 - Question 1: *What instruments do you hear? Where do these instruments come from?*
 - Question 2: *What language are the artists singing in? Why is this the case?*
 - Question 3: *Listen carefully to the lyrics. What can you understand? What can we surmise from the lyrics?*
4. Hand out lyrics and translation (see Additional Resources and References). Listen to the song again. Ask: what assumptions can we make about Brazil and its history based on the sounds and lyrics we are hearing?
5. Assessment Review: Divide students into groups of 2-3 to discuss the homework follow-up questions below.
 - Question 1: *What about this podcast was surprising to you?*
 - Question 2: *How are conceptualizations of race in Brazil different from in the United States? Why might this be the case?*
 - Question 3: *How has the Brazilian government attempted to combat racism in Brazil in recent years? Would these same tactics have been effective in the United States?*
6. Discuss the above questions as a class.

Activity 5: Art Analysis

Students will engage in art analysis and draw connections to previous lessons.

Objectives:

- Critically analyze “The Redemption of Ham” piece

Procedure:

1. Let students observe “The Redemption of Ham” by Modesto Brocos 1895 (image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modesto_Brocos#/media/File:Reden%C3%A7%C3%A3o.jpg) for 60 seconds in silence.
2. Go around the room and have each student share one thing they observe. Make sure that students are simply making observations; they are not yet *analyzing* the image.
 - Examples of observations: *there are four people, there is a baby sitting on a woman’s lap, the baby is white, the woman has brown skin, there is an older woman with her arms in the air, the older woman is black, there is a palm tree in the left hand corner, there is laundry hanging in the background of the painting, etc.*
3. Now have students *analyze* the painting. As students analyze the image consider posing the following question: “What do you see that makes you say that?” (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/what-makes-you-say-that>)
 - Examples of analysis: *There is a baby who appears to be white, the baby is seated on her mother’s lap, there is a man on the right side of the image who appears to be an immigrant (you can tell by the style in which he is painted), this man is likely the father, the palm tree is both a Catholic symbol and also indicates to the observer that this is an image from the tropics, the black woman is praising God for “whitening” her family.*
4. Engage in a discussion of Big Picture Questions:
 - *What does this image tell us about the ways in which Brazilians thought about race in 1895?*
 - *Consider the United States in 1895. How might this same image have been received in our post-slavery society?*
5. Screen “[Brazil’s Color Bind](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/brazils-colour-bind/article25779474/)” by The Globe and Mail with students (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/brazils-colour-bind/article25779474/>)
6. Lead a quick follow-up conversation that ties together the major themes of the unit. *How is Brazil’s racial history similar to or different from that of the United States?*

Assessment:

During the last three classes we have explored race as a social construct. We then embarked on a journey to understand the ways in which race has historically been constructed in Brazil. Now it is time for us to use this same lens to view our own country.

1. Using the central questions “How has race historically been constructed in the United States? What factors contributed to the development of this social construct?” Read “Drawing the Color Line,” in *A People’s History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn. Use the below questions to guide your thinking:

- According to Zinn, by 1617, what problems involving labor did English settlers in Virginia face? (24-25)
- Why was it easy for English settlers to conceive of imported black people as slaves? (25)
- Why were Africans “helpless” compared to indigenous populations and white settlers? (26)
- How did slavery in Africa compare to slavery in the Americas? (27)
- How many blacks were transported to the Americas by 1800? (29)
- What does Zinn mean when he asks, “This unequal treatment, this developing combination of contempt and oppression, feeling and action, which we call ‘racism’-- was this the result of a “natural” antipathy of white against black?” (30)
- What does Zinn mean when he writes, “there is evidence that where whites and blacks found themselves with common problems, common work, common enemy in their master, they behaved toward one another as equals”? (31)
- Why was indentured servitude not a sustainable system of labor in Virginia? (32)
- What is meant by the line, “Only one fear was greater than the fear of black rebellion in the new American colonies. That was the fear that discontented whites would join black slaves to overthrow the existing order”? (37)
- According to Zinn, what six historical conditions led to American slavery? (37, last paragraph)

Note to educators: This chapter from Howard Zinn’s work is on the longer side for student homework assignments. I encourage students to read the chapter over multiple sittings.

Activity 6: Drawing the Color Line

Students will discuss and analyze the ways in which slavery gave way to racial categories in the U.S. and how these continue to resonate in the present.

Objectives:

- Identify the six historical conditions that led to American slavery, according to Howard Zinn
- Explain how America's history of slavery contributes to the construction of race and racism in the United States
- Analyze the ways that legacies of this construct are present in the modern era

Procedure:

1. Homework Review & Class Discussion: Divide students into pairs to discuss the questions from last night's homework assignment (~10 minutes).
2. Allow for students to engage in a student-led discussion of the text. Consider using the following questions to kickstart conversation: *"According to Howard Zinn, what six factors led to the rise of African Slavery in the colonies? Why are these significant?"*
3. As students wrap up their conversation encourage them to consider the ways in which we see legacies of racism in the United States today.
4. Examining Racial Privilege: Using PBS "Race the Power of an Illusion" [Discussion Guide \(https://www-tc.pbs.org/race/images/race-guide-lores.pdf\)](https://www-tc.pbs.org/race/images/race-guide-lores.pdf), ask each person to read through this list and give themselves a point for each item that is true for them:
 - My parents and grandparents were able to purchase or rent housing in any neighborhood they could afford.
 - I can take a job with an employer who believes in affirmative action without having co-workers suspect that I got it because of my race.
 - I grew up in a house that was owned by my parents.
 - I can look in mainstream media and see people who look like me represented fairly and in a wide range of roles.
 - I live in a safe neighborhood with good schools.
 - I can go shopping most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
 - If my car breaks down on a deserted stretch of road, I can trust that the law enforcement officer who shows up will be helpful.
 - I don't have to worry about helping my parents out when they retire.
 - I never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs.
 - Schools in my community teach about my race and heritage and present it in positive ways.
 - I can be pretty sure that if I go into a business and ask to speak to the "person in charge" that I will be facing a person of my race.
5. With a partner, students should debrief how they experienced the activity. *What was surprising to them? How does history inform their experience with race in the United States?*
6. Engage students in a class conversation through which you summarize the major

themes of the unit

Assessment:

Video Blog: Using a computer, smartphone, or camera, create a 3-5 minute video responding to the following question:

- How does your understanding of race in Brazil inform your understanding of race in the United States? Consider the following questions in your response:
 - a) In what ways is race a social construct?
 - b) How has the definition of race evolved in the United States from the colonial era to the present?
 - c) How has the definition of race evolved in Brazil from the colonial era to the present?
 - d) How does race impact you as an American citizen?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Links:

[“Brazil: A History of Change.”](http://www.choices.edu/curriculum-unit/brazil-history-change/) The Choices Program, Brown University (http://www.choices.edu/curriculum-unit/brazil-history-change/)

[Skin Color Still Plays Big Role In Ethnically Diverse Brazil](https://www.npr.org/2013/09/19/224152635/skin-color-still-plays-big-role-in-ethnically-diverse-brazil), NPR (https://www.npr.org/2013/09/19/224152635/skin-color-still-plays-big-role-in-ethnically-diverse-brazil)

Videos:

Video Resource: [“How does the painting, ‘The Redemption of Ham’, by Modesto Brocos illustrate ideas of whitening?”](https://video.choices.edu/media/how-does-painting-%E2%80%98redemption-ham%E2%80%99-modesto-brocos-illustrate-ideas-whitening?), The Choices Program (https://video.choices.edu/media/how-does-painting-%E2%80%98redemption-ham%E2%80%99-modesto-brocos-illustrate-ideas-whitening)

Video Resource: [“How did the idea of ‘whitening’ develop in Brazil?”](https://video.choices.edu/media/how-did-idea-%E2%80%9Cwhitening%E2%80%9D-develop-brazil?), The Choices Program (https://video.choices.edu/media/how-did-idea-%E2%80%9Cwhitening%E2%80%9D-develop-brazil)

Lyrics Handout

Sou Mais o Samba

Candeia

REFRÃO (2x):

Eu não sou africano, eu não
Nem norte-americano!
Ao som da viola e pandeiro
sou mais o samba brasileiro!

Menino, tome juízo
escute o que vou lhe dizer
o Brasil é um grande samba
que espera por você
podes crer, puedes crer!

REFRÃO (2x)

Á juventude de hoje
dou meu conselho de vez:
quem não sabe o be-a-bá
não pode cantar inglês
aprenda o português!

REFRÃO (2x)

Este som que vem de fora
não me apavora nem rock nem rumba
pra acabar com o tal de soul
basta um pouco de macumba!
Eu não sou africano!

REFRÃO (2x)

O samba é a nossa alegria
de muita harmonia ao som de pandeiro
quem presta à roda de samba
não fica imitando estrangeiro
somos brasileiros!

REFRÃO (2x)

Calma, calma, minha gente
pra que tanto bambambam
pois os blacks de hoje em dia
são os sambistas de amanhã!
Eu não sou africano!

REFRÃO (2x)

I'm More Samba

Candeia

CHORUS (2x):

I'm not African, I am not
Not even north American!
To the sound of the viola and tambourine
I'm more the Brazilian samba!

Boy, take your wits
listen to what I'm going to tell you
Brazil is a great samba
What awaits you?
you can believe,
you can believe!

CHORUS (2x)

To the youth of today
I give my advice for once:
who does not know the be-a-ba
can not sing in English
Learn Portuguese!

CHORUS (2x)

This sound that comes from outside
I do not panic neither rock nor rumba
to end this soul
just a little macumba!
I'm not African!

CHORUS (2x)

Samba is our joy
much harmony to the sound of tambourine
Who pays the samba wheel?
do not imitate foreigners
we are Brazilians!

CHORUS (2x)

Calm down, calm down, my people.
Why are you so much bamboo?
because today's blacks
are the sambas of tomorrow!
I'm not African!

CHORUS (2x)