

# Essay on definitions of the white race in the 20th century

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The White Race, also known as Caucasian, refers to any of the human beings distinguished by a light pigmentation of the skin. In general, the term white is used to denote a set of ethnic groups composed mainly of European ancestry. The term white person has been associated with other several context of geographical and social meaning. Matters of national identity, eugenics, consanguinity, public policy and racial quotas have played a major role in determining the social meaning of the term white race. In the United States, white people have been associated with vast social, economic and political definition and implication.

As earlier stated, the origins of white Americans are predominantly Europe. The United States Census Bureau defines white people to be any American with origins in Europe, North Africa, Middle East and Asia. In general, they are referred to as Non-Hispanic or Latino. As of 2010 the White community constitutes nearly 72% of the American population. The main composition of the white American includes German Americans, English Americans, Polish Americans and Irish Americans (Steinberg, 12).

The concept of defining the races of America has been quite varied. This endeavor to define what race belongs where or originated from which part of the globe led to the term later classified as scientific racism. During the 19th and 20th century several scientists and physical anthropologist defined races into three, four or five classification depending on the findings they had justified. During this period, there was a general agreement as to the definition of the term Caucasian. According to Gjerde, the term Caucasian referred to any of the people who originate from the North Caucasus, that is the Caucasus Mountains (15). These mountains stretch the entire Europe and

thus those people who immigrated to the United States from these regions also fit into this racial group. The social definition of this group was clear and defined.

However, there was disagreement as to the exact composition of the White Race. Scholars could not agree to whether population of East Asia and Mongolia regions constituted the Caucasian community. Some scholars argue that the white race included populations native to North and Central Asia. On the other hand, other scholars classified this Asian population as Mongoloids. A separate group of researchers also alienated populations from North Africa and Middle East from the White race classifying this group as the Browns. This left the whites to be only of European native (Gjerde, 18). In the United States, the term White-Race or 'Whiteness' came to the fold after 1880s (19). During this period, a new wave of immigration was taking place. The United States was experiencing a huge influx of immigrants from South and East Europe. This was different since over the previous century, these European regions sent very few immigrants to the United States. Such immigration created some concerns with the Americans some suggesting that the United States had become a 'dumping ground' for overpopulated regions and not the 'melting pot' they knew. Congress had even moved to enact the Chinese Exclusion Act that barred immigration of all Chinese workers to the United States (Daniels, 112).

According to Daniels, while the exclusion of Chinese from immigration was rather straightforward, other races that could not be clearly distinguished were forwarded to the courts. In fact by 1950s nearly 52 cases seeking the court ruling on whiteness of a person had been heard. There was no

consistency in the manner in which the court made their ruling. While several courts relied on the scientific definition of the White race to make their ruling, other courts relied on common knowledge and reference on whiteness. By 1909, several cases had created the suggestion that common knowledge would be used in court rulings as scientific definitions were easily manipulated (Daniels, 138). This illustrated that the definition of the white people in the United States had shifted to social demarcation of the society rather than scientific definition.

The White race has had a larger political and social implication in the United States around the 20th century. In early 1900, the white community developed a political ideology referred to as white nationalism (140). This political ideology was mainly concerned with the outright definition of the white race. In this group, two splinter groups emerged, that is, white supremacism and white separatism. While the supremacists were concerned with social Darwinism, the separatist were more concerned with a separate white state (Schafer, 76).

Such political movements were viewed as result of the decline in white demographics and the eventual decline in the political influence and culture. The political movement suggested that instead of using violence, white nationalist would use social science and other non violent means to keep or advance their national influence. These nationalist groups were largely composed of citizens of European Ancestry of non-Jewish descent. In the early 1900s, there was general concern that Israel nationals and Zionist were of different descent and not whites. Further, these nationalist excluded

populations from southern and eastern Europe as they were perceived a racial taint.

## **Works Cited**

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