

DAVIS, JAMES F.: *Who is black? One nation's definition*. Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania. 9th printing 1998. 205 pp. ISBN: 0271021721.

"Who is black?" is F. James Davis' contribution to a critical reflection of how the category 'black' in the United States has been constructed within a certain social and historical process. The author (*1920), Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Illinois State University, describes in detail the development of the so called *one-drop-rule*, defining as black "any person with *any* known African black ancestry" (5). Consequently, the actual color of skin is not the determining factor, and the paradox situation becomes possible, that white-colored persons are defined as black. For the majority of US citizens, this one-drop-rule represents the natural answer to the question of who is black and is not subject to modification, but Davis shows that other regions have found completely different answers to the question, and that even within the United States, the one-drop-rule has historically not gone unchallenged. It was not before the 1920s that it finally 'won' the contest over a "three-layered system of racial classification" (36). It came along with the creation of a dichotomy between whites and blacks, which included the domination of the latter by the former, and which was necessary for the maintenance of slavery and later of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. The one-blood-rule thus has historically been established to maintain these domination systems – a fact that is even less known within the US population.

According to Davis, the one-drop-rule was especially important for the US, since miscegenation – contrary to common beliefs – has been a long-time-phenomenon throughout US history. This becomes clear when regarding two errors in the common understanding of miscegenation: While usually thought of as marriages between a white and a black person or a mulatto, it also includes unions between two mulattoes as well as between a mulatto and an unmixed African black. Furthermore, most miscegenation occurs within illicit relationships rather than legalized marriages. Historically, interracial sexual contacts have occurred mainly between white males and black (slave) women. In order to maintain racial purity, children had to be regarded as blacks if the mother was regarded black. With the help of additional institutions like the idea of "white womanhood", the "racial etiquette", the "master-slave etiquette" and the US-specific possibility of "passing as white", the one-drop-rule has functioned to reproduce the "social system of white domination" (63). In order to fulfil this

function, the creation of a polarisation between blacks and whites and thus, the elimination of middle-categories has been essential. This polarisation during and after the Civil War came along with a shift in self-identity of mulattoes, who allied with blacks against the common enemy.

This gradual – and in order to uphold white domination necessary – integration of the middle category of mulattoes into the dichotomous category ‘black’ shows connections to Becker’s labelling theory, according to which individuals are first regarded as members of a certain groups and as a result, they identify themselves as members .

Another link that seems interesting to a sociology of membership is the inherent penetration of membership relations with power structures. By upholding “white womanhood”, it was possible for white males to suppress both groups of blacks and women: while “the norms of Jim Crow gave interracial sexual license to the white male” (79), women were not granted this sexual freedom but were reduced to their function of bearing purely white children and to keep “the white race pure” (174).

Also interesting for a sociology of membership is the mechanical acceptance of the one-drop rule within the US citizens. They all belong to either one of the constructed categories of black or white, but they do so without challenging the rules for this membership. The system of racial groups in the US can thus be seen as a system where members are very conscious about their belonging to one group, but where this belonging itself does not happen consciously, but is taken for granted and accepted as natural.