

## **Black and White: The Relevance of Race Unfinished Business**

Christopher Murphy  
Department of History and Anthropology  
Augusta State University  
5 Oct 2001

Several centuries ago, as Europeans first explored the distant, unknown reaches of the globe, it became clear that populations around the world differed enormously in appearance and behavior. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emerging study of anthropology undertook to carefully measure and describe these physical variations and scientifically classify the “races” of humankind, as they were called, based on the results.

Initially, the criteria of racial classification were based on relatively rough and ready observable traits: skin color, body configuration, facial features, hair form, measurements of skull shape and volume and so on. Eventually, anthropologists recognized a people’s customary learned patterns of behavior as separate from their physique. Among social scientists customary behavior came to be called culture and physical characteristics came to be known as race.

The western European (and later Euro-American) concept of race was developed and sustained, in part, through patterns of extensive sea trade beginning in the sixteenth century. At that time, long distance sea travel accelerated and Europeans began establishing trade and colonies on a world wide scale. These major trade routes terminated in regions of the world where local populations differed significantly in appearance from Europeans. Unlike land travel, where the gradual change of physical characteristics in a series of naturally distributed populations makes it difficult to find clear dividing lines between populations, sea travel almost guarantees dramatic disjunctions between the appearance of the people in the last port of call and the inhabitants of the next. In other words, it was relatively easy to “see” a white race, a red race, a black race and a yellow one.

Over time, biological science progressed, notably so in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the criteria for racial classification were increased and refined. In addition to directly observable and easily measurable characteristics were added more subtle, less obvious, ones: blood chemistry, variations in resistance to disease and responses to environmental stimuli. As detailed data on actual human variation accumulated it was increasingly difficult for scientists to support simplistic views of race classification and ever more complex racial taxonomies resulted.

Although early race classifications were relatively simple, usually consisting of three or four major races, as criteria proliferated, later classifications tended to add additional races and “sub-races”. For example, by 1965, Stanley Garn identified nine major races and thirty-two “local” races. But instead of ever-increasing precision and agreement among the scientists who studied racial identification, it was

becoming evident that the more information we accumulated about human physical variation, the fuzzier racial categories became because physical traits don't cluster into neat stereotypic racial bundles. Classifying humans into racial groups turns out to be much easier the less you know about them biologically. Today, many biologists and anthropologists, studying the variation within and between populations, have concluded that the concept of race, as a valid and useful biological entity, should be abandoned altogether.

However, anthropologists' increasing scepticism of the scientific utility of the race concept in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had little effect on notions of race at the level of popular culture. Instead, entrenched ideas, reflective of past attitudes and congruent with current social practice, simply continued in use under the rubric of "common sense". These ideas were, and are, learned through the most effective instructional technique known: immersion! From birth, people were, and are, surrounded by racial stereotypes and attitudes about the supposed characteristics of members of other races, and we are all products of our environments.

---

The roots of "race", as that term is popularly used today in America, are found not in science, but in the requirement for stratified societies to attempt to justify the unequal allocation of the rewards of social life. The elite members of stratified social systems receive disproportionate wealth and power because of their favored class position within the social structure. Thus, during the several thousand years that stratified societies have existed, they have invariably encompassed cultural ideologies that purported to explain and justify gross inequality.

These rationales take many forms: noble blood, the divine right of kings, the idea that the monarch is a demi god, the notion that those who achieve much do so only because they are better, more capable people. By implication, those near the bottom of the social scale are inferior in some way.

As Europeans fanned out over the globe during the age of exploration, the elites of those societies found unparalleled opportunities for the accumulation of wealth and power. In many cases however, these opportunities were only available through the destruction of local societies in North and South America, the Carribean, Africa, Asia and the Pacific islands. In other cases, local indigenous populations were subjugated and recruited into social, economic, and political systems which placed them in the lowest and least privileged classes of the newly emerging colonial social structures.

A variety of labor systems were used, indentured servitude, local wage labor, forced labor, and slavery. Whether organizing local island people to work on copra plantations in the south Pacific, forcing Quechua Indians to mine gold and silver in the Andes, or importing African slaves to perform heavy manual field labor in the Carribean or the American South, those who benefitted from their work found reasons to consider the laborers as their inferiors. As such, they were often thought of, and treated, as barely human, or even subhuman. One of the chief arguments used to rationalize this exploitation was the "racial" characteristics of the laborers themselves.

This Social Darwinism emphasized the rightness and naturalness of the exploitation. The supposed inferiority of the non-European populations made it seem justifiable to exterminate Native Americans so that Euro-Americans could turn their land into farms and towns. Even the use of slave labor in much of the western hemisphere was made to seem appropriate and reasonable.

Those who held power found a plethora of reasons why the dispossessed should work for them. The non-Europeans were exploited because they were “childlike”, because they were unintelligent, because they were uncivilized, because they were unloved by God and were not Christians, because they did not use the land in the way the Europeans felt that it should be used. A principal tenet of such ideologies is the notion that these justifications simply reflect natural facts of life. The reasons offered were spurious, but they served to prop up the exploitative practices.

Such justifications, of course, appeal primarily to those who materially benefit, or who are made to feel superior by them; the subordinated class may well question the basis of the system, and often did, but the coercive political power of the superordinate group minimizes opportunities to challenge the system.

By the time the American colonies traversed the road of separation from English rule, the concept of race with its implications of institutionalized superiority and inferiority was well embedded in the consciousness, and the economy, of the emerging body politic. The nation’s founders struggled with liberty, equality, slavery and their own economic self interest. As we all know, some of the key framers of our Constitution as well as the author of the Declaration of Independence were slave holders and financially dependent on the well established system of slave labor. Perhaps, they were torn and, perhaps, they agonized over the issues, but the union they formed retained slavery for several more generations and culminated in the most costly, tragic and divisive crisis in American history.

The Civil War freed slaves in the United States, but it could not eradicate racial divisions nor the attitudes and beliefs that they engendered. Nor was racial discrimination in America confined to the African American population, Native Americans suffered terribly as the country engaged in the westward expansion which many white Americans considered its “manifest destiny”. Chinese and other oriental people were the target of many discriminatory laws. Even immigrants of European background, but not born into dominant or elite groups, such as Jews, Irish, Slavs, or southern Europeans, commonly suffered on “racial” grounds. The 1924 Immigration Act was, in part, intended to staunch, or at least reduce, the flow of “inferior” southern and eastern European immigrants into the country.

But Italians, Jews and Irish immigrants and their descendants were noticeably less different in physical appearance than persons descended from oriental populations or African ones. With time, and the passing of generations, speech accents disappeared and European immigrants gradually became more acceptable to the established white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. In any case, from their first entry, these immigrants had never experienced the same restrictions on their movements and choices as

had slaves and the descendants of slaves. As American born offspring of formerly despised European groups replaced their parents in the population, discrimination against them decreased and many experienced upward social mobility.

To some extent this also happened within the African American community, but visibility emerged as a key factor in continued severe discrimination against African Americans. The perception of race in America revolved around a small cluster of physical characteristics among which skin color was primary. A dark complexion was associated with other physical traits believed characteristic of all Africans. Popular stereotypic images of Africans took precedence over the real physical appearance of actual populations from different parts of that continent. Furthermore, the notion was prevalent that races were real, scientifically established, entities which were different in physical appearance, behavior, character, intelligence, ability and other important qualities.

In the pre-Civil War South, sexual liaisons, often coerced, between white men and African American women were not uncommon, but interracial intimacy was only acceptable in that form, and even that was disparaged by polite society; the reverse situation, black men with white women, was then regarded as unthinkable. After the War, with ex-slaves now free citizens, there grew up a great fear concerning the supposed threat from African American men to the honor and purity of white women and, by implication, the “white race”. Unfortunate Black men were targets of some of the cruelest torture and murder ever known in American history in the period between the 1870s and the 1940s, triggered by accusations of sexual interest in white women. By these brutal means, was racial consciousness kept alive and racial segregation enforced in America.

Anthropologist Conrad Kottak has pointed out an interesting aspect of social race attribution connected to interracial mating. When such matings occurred, the offspring was routinely assimilated to the race of the minority parent, a phenomenon Kottak calls “hypodescent”. This practice was undoubtedly caused in part by the fantasy fear of whites that interracial unions would somehow “dilute” or “corrupt” the racial qualities which many of them believed had led to their dominance. If whites were superior people, the founders of modern civilization as they liked to believe, only disaster could follow from such intimacy between the races.

Preventing all sexual contact between races and consequent miscegenation proved impossible, but putative racial purity had more than one line of defense. By clearly identifying the mixed race offspring as “Black” with the disabilities that status then carried, hypodescent ensured that these individuals could not enter the white world since the races lived in parallel, but unequal, social universes. If not for this practice, which was reinforced by law in some states and custom everywhere until after the Civil Rights movement, it might have been possible that the child’s status would follow that of the superordinate parent.

The segregating effect of this focus on a few highly visible traits in popular racial stereotyping was also enhanced by the practice of racial endogamy, a term referring to the custom of seeking a marriage

partner from one's own social group. Only very recently has census data shown any significant rise in interracial marriage. This custom cut off an avenue to upward social mobility used by many descendants of European immigrants. A well spoken, educated, middle class, third or fourth generation Italian or Irish American who married a WASP spouse could expect to enhance her or his social status.

Although formal marriages between members of the white majority and members of the African American community were a near impossibility in the period between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, we know that persons of mixed ancestry who were able to physically blend with the dominant majority sometimes gained advantages by doing so, a phenomenon known as "passing".

When offspring sufficiently resembled the white parent, individuals sometimes moved to places where their ancestry was unknown and claimed, or accepted, membership in the majority group based on their physical resemblance. If the individual in question was accepted as white, discriminatory behavior to which he or she might otherwise have been exposed dropped away. Even within the African American community itself, aesthetic preferences for lighter skinned individuals were at times widespread. Perhaps this celebration of lighter skin color resulted from white racial hegemony, but, as the Civil Rights movement gathered momentum in the 1960s, one of the clearest signs of increasing Black pride and of rebellion against past discrimination was adoption of non-white grooming standards.

---

Race is, and always has been, part of American culture, since the beginnings of European contact. It is not the classifications of scientists that keep it alive today, for these observers do not find the case for race as a scientific concept compelling. However, race in American culture is a central organizing idea around which many important beliefs and attitudes coalesce. It is enshrined in the national psyche, in "common sense", in politics, social attitudes and social relations. Even our attempts to disarm race, such as the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution, the movement for equal civil rights and affirmative action legislation require that we continue to call attention to race, if only to use it as a legal lever to reduce discrimination. Americans will not easily be quit of the notion of racial differences.

However, while we have not been able to banish race consciousness in this country, there is change and progress. Perhaps our best hope to reduce the negative significance of race in American life is to continue to push open the doors of education and economic opportunity to all and to educate our population so that ordinary citizens perceive the divisive role of race in our history. We must understand that only to the extent we can get beyond its historical role will we ever realize the potential of our entire population.

I believe that we will have put race in America in its appropriate place when we have achieved Dr. Martin Luther King's dream that his children, "...will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In the meantime, as a spur to our continued efforts toward true equality, we might recall the remark of another famous Southerner, Pogo 'Possum, who said: "We have met the enemy and he is us."