Anthropology and the Science of "Race"

Brian Siegel

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE SCIENCE OF "RACE"

Brian Siegel

The fixity of a habit is generally in direct proportion to its absurdity (Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past).

"Race" is not a black or white issue in anthropology, certainly not for the last sixty years. Most anthropologists deny the existence of "biological races," but they all acknowledge the reality of "social races," and the tendency for people to deal with one another in terms of socially and culturally constructed racial categories. Forensic anthropologists, for example, measure bones to identify the race of unidentified skeletons, but their racial attributions are statistical inferences drawn from comparative skeletons of known social races. Such classifications vary across time and space, so American forensic anthropologists are best at identifying the social races recognized in America. And since social races are as often distinguished on the basis of their cultural as physical features, anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1942) has long insisted that races should properly be called "ethnic groups."

The racial categories used by the federal Census Bureau are examples of "social races." While often based upon perceived physical differences, such perceptions have changed over time. The 1890 census was the only one which attempted to distinguish between mulattos (one-half), quadroons (one-quarter), and octoornos (one-eighth black). And the 1920 census was the last one to distinguish mulattos from Negroes. The people who had once occupied these categories were still around, but the Bureau abandoned them as subjective and, in the case of mulattos, irrelevant, having decided that about 75 percent of the Negroes were of mixed origins anyway (Williamson
Similarly, Asian Indians have been classified as the Hindu race from 1920-1940, as White from 1950-70, and as Asian or Pacific Islander since 1977, when the 1970 Hispanic racial category was dropped, and Spanish-speakers were tabulated separately under "Hispanic Origin (of any race)" (Wright 1994:50-52).

The racial categories used by the federal government were set in 1977 by the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Directive 15. It offers a choice of five broad racial categories: White (for people who are mostly pink); Black (for people who are mostly brown); American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut (the Native American category); Asian or Pacific Islander (a uniquely American racial category); and Other (largely claimed by Latin Americans who reject the Black/White alternatives). These classifications are far from perfect, and the House Subcommittee which oversees the system is under pressure to change it. The Arab American Institute would like a new, non-White category for Middle Easterners, and native Hawaiians want to be moved from the Asian/Pacific Islander to the Native American category. Most contentious of all is the movement to create a new Multiracial category for the children of interracial marriages. This, by undermining the current classification system, might pose serious problems for the apportionment of congressional districts, and for affirmative action and civil rights regulatory programs. Clearly, the Census Bureau's racial categories are socially and culturally defined, and are as much about politics and money as about personal identity issues (Wright 1994).

A characteristic feature of social races is their arbitrariness. America used to recognize, as South Africa and most Latin American countries still do, a mixed (mulatto) race category of Coloreds or Creoles; and such people had substantial communities in Charleston and New Orleans.
But under the racism and miscegenation fears of the late nineteenth century, mulattos had to either “pass” as whites or join with the Negroes. Many states then adopted the South’s one-drop rule, meaning that a person with any African ancestry was defined as black, even though most “blacks” by then were really brown (Davis 1991; William­son 1980). But the one-drop rule only applies to African Americans and has never made a Native American out of someone with a Cherokee great-grandmother (even a princess). All this is peculiar to America. But so is the case of the Mississippi Chinese studied by James Loewen (1988), who were classified as blacks in the 1870s, and gradually became whites in the 1940s and 1950s.

The racial categories used in American society take different forms in other countries (Davis 1991:81-122). A white from the Dominican Republic is considered to be colored in Jamaica, and to be black in America. A Mexican Indian who wears Indian clothes and speaks an Indian language is an Indian, but one who opts for European clothes and speaking Spanish is a Ladino (mestizo). Brazil, like America, is a color-conscious society with a history of plantation slavery. And while Brazilians have some three dozen racial categories, and can assign the same person to different categories from day to day, their massive lower class tends to be populated with darker-skinned people. Yet their system of racial classification is not entirely color bound. “Money whitens,” the Brazilians say, and a wealthy, dark-skinned person is a white. None of this makes any biological sense. But social races operate on the basis of sociocultural criteria rather than on biological facts. They justify self-perpetuating differences in social rank and livelihood opportunities as if they were predetermined facts of nature. And this is because these socioculturally constituted categories are grounded in the ideology of distinct
biological races.

The fact that most anthropologists—about 50 percent of the physical and 70 percent of the cultural anthropologists, according to a 1989 survey reported in Newsweek (Begley 1995:67)—no longer accept “race” as a valid biological category is interesting in and of itself. It is even more interesting, though, when contrasted with the fact that nineteenth century anthropology all but invented the idea of “race” (Cunningham 1908; Stocking 1968). Most of our current racial folklore derives from the “scientific racism” and armchair evolutionism of the nineteenth century anthropologists. Yet most of their twentieth century counterparts reject the idea of biological race(s), and even those who want to retain it seem uncertain about what to do with it. What happened here? What is the history of the biological notion of race, and why is that notion now generally rejected?

Apart from Antarctica, our human ancestors had populated every continent on earth well before the end of the last Ice Age. Few species are as widely distributed across the globe. And, as with any widely distributed species, natural selection (or environmental adaptation), random genetic drift (the tendency for the gene frequencies in small, isolated populations—for no adaptive reason—to rapidly diverge from those of their parental stock), and sexual selection (“survival of the chic-est,” or preferential mating for attractive traits) combined to make us a widely varied species. Though these human differences are all based upon non-observable genotypic variations, like the ones for the sickle cell trait and the various blood groups, we more often interact on the basis of such observable, phenotypic variations as size, shape, and color differences. Humans have long been aware of phenotypic differences, but what they did with them varied from place to place.
The Rig-Veda from about 3000 B.C., for example, suggests that color prejudice is no recent invention, for it tells how the Aryan invaders conquered and slew the dark-skinned and "flat-nosed barbarians" of the Indus River Valley. The ancient Egyptians were also color-conscious, for tomb paintings from as early as 1350 B.C. represent the Egyptians in red (though occasionally, black), and the Middle Easterners, Northerners (i.e., Europeans) and Nubians in yellow, white, and black (Gossett 1963:3-4). But the Egyptians ordinarily referred to these peoples by geographical or political names, rather than by color. Recognizing physical differences does not require racial labels. Neither does it necessarily entail "racism," the belief that such differences make some people innately inferior or superior to others.

The biological meaning of "race" has changed over time. The word itself seems to have entered English around 1500 from one of the Romance languages—probably French (race) or Spanish (raza)—to denote a breed, variety, nation, or descent-related line of creatures. Thus a dog or horse "of race" was a pedigree or thoroughbred creature, while "the race and stock of Abraham" meant the Jews or ancient Hebrews (Banton 1987:1-2).

This same, varietal sense of race was applied to humans in the tenth edition of Carolus Linnaeus's (1707-78) Systema Naturae (System of Nature, 1758), the Swedish taxonomist's binomial catalogue of plant and animal life. Apart from two fanciful categories of humanity—the "wild" children abandoned in the forests, and a jumble of early ape lore and legendary men with tails—he identified four geographical varieties of Homo sapiens: the red (Native) Americans, white Europeans, pale Asians, and black Africans. Though his brief, one and two word descriptions of each variety's temperament, posture and governance
hint at unflattering stereotypes, Linnaeus offered a largely descriptive, non-hierarchical account of four geographical varieties of the human species.

There were contrasting views of human differences by the late eighteenth century, when the debate began over just how different these human varieties were, and whether they were best explained in terms of one or separate creations (monogenesis vs. polygenesis). While the monogenists explained human varieties in terms of their divergent experiences since the time of creation, the polygenists considered them distinctly different species, each the product of its own separate (and unbiblical) creation. Some sense of these contrasting views is captured by comparing the ideas and attitudes of two contemporary monogenists, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German medical professor and the father of physical anthropology, and Baron Georges Cuvier, the eminent French naturalist and the father of comparative anatomy and paleontology.

The third edition of Blumenbach’s (1752-1840) Generis Humani Varietate Nativa (On the Native Varieties of the Human Genus, 1795) was a particularly influential discussion of human varieties. He, “the least racist and most genial of all Enlightenment thinkers” (Gould 1994b:67), rejected the polygenists’ claim of separate creations and argued, instead, that his five human varieties were generated after people left their common origin place and adapted to different environments. Moreover, he saw the geographical distribution of human physical differences—he himself had tried and rejected hair forms and facial angles (Gossett 1963:70, 80)—as being so gradual in nature as to defy any demarcation of discrete racial types. Thus, Blumenbach claimed, the very traits which many viewed as markers of blacks’ inferiority also exist, to varying degrees, among other human varieties. And to rebut the claim that
blacks were innately less intelligent than whites, he wrote about Benjamin Banneker, the African American mathematical genius, and of his particular fondness, within his own special library of black authors, for the poetry of Phillis Wheatley.

It is ironic, then, that Blumenbach imposed hierarchy upon the study of human varieties. Convinced that his Europeans were the most handsome and, thus; the original human variety, he renamed them “Caucasians” after the handsomest skull in his collection, that of a woman from near Mt. Caucasus on the Georgian-Russian border. The other human varieties, through migration and environmental adaptation, were “degenerations” (meaning, “derivations”) from that original white stock. There were, he reasoned, two main and two subsequent derivations, for a total of five varieties: one Caucasian line went off to become the brown Malays (including Australian aborigines, Melanesians and Polynesians), who gave rise to the black Ethiopians (Africans); another went off to become the red Americans, who later gave rise to the yellow Mongoloids (Asians). Thus while Blumenbach rejected the notion of separate biological races, his hierarchical, pseudo-evolutionary scheme implied that some varieties were purer, more original and handsome, than others (Gould 1994b; Banton 1987:5-6; Gossett 1963:37-39). And his scheme was easily misrepresented during this age of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and growing color prejudice, as evidenced in Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on Virginia (1786).

Baron Cuvier (1769-1832), on the other hand, viewed such varieties or races as fixed and distinct physical types. An opponent of early evolutionary thought, the mutability of species, Cuvier invented catastrophism to reconcile the extinctions documented in the geological strata with his belief in fixed, unalterable species. The earth, he said, had
experienced a long series of natural “revolutions” or catastrophic environmental changes, after which the surviving members of the species in a given region left and were replaced by new, immigrant species.

Just such a catastrophe, Cuvier believed, had driven Adam and Eve’s descendants off into different, mutually isolated regions, resulting in a hierarchy of three fixed human types—the Caucasians on top, Mongoloids in the middle, and Ethiopians on the bottom—each with its own distinctive cultural and mental traits. Thus, Cuvier divided the human species into fixed geographical types, and used their physical differences to explain their cultural and (alleged) intellectual differences (Banton 1987:28-32). The race scientists of the nineteenth century shared Cuvier’s belief in a hierarchy of fixed racial types. But they sought measurable data to demonstrate it and, in their search, invented anthropometry, the measurement of living humans, and craniometry, the measurement of human heads and skulls.

One of the earliest contributors to this “scientific racism” of the nineteenth century was the Philadelphia physician and paleontologist, Samuel George Morton (1799-1851). Morton was convinced that black and white Americans represented different, unalterable species, and that the blacks had been predestined for slavery since the days of ancient Egypt (Lorimer 1978:136). Given the mulatto presence in America, he was forced to temper the long-held polygenist claim that mulattos, like mules, were infertile. Separate species, Morton said, could indeed propagate fertile offspring, but the resulting racial hybrids suffer such diminished fertility that they eventually become extinct (Gossett 1963: 59; Lorimer 1978:132-33, 139-40; Stanton 1960:66-68; Williamson 1980:73, 95).

Seduced by the fallacious belief that brain or skull size
was an index of the capacity for civilization, Morton used pepper seed, lead shot and calibrated cylinders on 256 skulls from his collection to determine the average cranial capacity for each of Blumenbach's five "races." His results, reported in an often copied, final footnote to his *Crania Americana* (1839), seemed to confirm the notion of a racial hierarchy of intelligence: Caucasians had the largest skulls; Mongolians, Americans and Malays had middlesized ones; and the Ethiopians had the smallest (Banton 1987:34-37; Gossett 1963:73-74; Gould 1981:50-69; Stanton 1960:24-44). Upon Morton's death, his two disciples, Josiah Clark Nott and George Robin Gliddon, gave even wider currency to the Euroamerican cause of polygenesist white supremacy with at least nine editions of their 800-page *Types of Mankind* (1854) (Banton 1987:37-45; Gossett 1963:64-65; Stanton 1960:45-53, 161-73).

Apart from the fact that cranial capacity is a direct function of body size (males tend to have larger skulls than females; and Neanderthals had 10 percent larger crania than modern humans), Morton's results were predetermined by the skulls he selected for his sample. As his footnote clearly states, fourteen of his seventeen Hindu skulls and all of his Mexican and Peruvian skulls were omitted from the Caucasian and American subsets because of their smallish size. He only obtained an acceptable American figure by including a number of Iroquois specimens which were, on average, 4.5 cubic inches larger than the average Caucasian skull. He reported the range of variation found within each of his racial categories, but was so focused upon the inter-racial differences that he ignored the fact that his reported intra-racial differences (14 to 40 cubic inches) were far greater than those between racial categories (1 to 9 cubic inches).

Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould has since reexam-
ined Morton’s skulls, remeasured his sample, and recalculated his figures. It turns out that Morton’s Caucasians did not have a monopoly on the largest skulls, and that there was no significant difference (4 cubic inches, or 65.5 cubic centimeters) between his racial categories. Morton was wrong. But as he made no attempt to cover up his errors, he cannot be accused of fraud. Gould, instead, finds him guilty of “an *a priori* conviction about racial ranking so powerful that it directed his tabulations along preestablished lines” (Gould 1981:69, 50-69; Banton 1987:34-37).

By 1850, European and American ideas about human varieties assumed the existence of a hierarchy of fixed types based upon heritable physical and cultural traits. Such ideas were all but universal in the 1870s and 1880s. This change cannot be traced to the influence of any single racial theory or theorist, for, as historian Douglas Lorimer (1978) argues, the race scientists were following, rather than leading, popular opinion. Discussions about race in mid-Victorian England were very political, focusing on social class and class mobility, and the question of white-non-white equality made little sense when few thought that poor whites, the Irish, or the Jews, much less women, merited equal treatment. Citing anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1943), Lorimer concludes that the pattern of intense racial determinism and nationalism then found across Europe “was a common reaction to the increasingly antagonistic international climate and to the threatening political and social environment posed by the advance towards a more fully industrial, urban, and democratic order” (Lorimer 1978:209). Factor in the apologies for slavery and the attacks on immigration, and the same conclusion applies to America (Frederickson 1988; Williamson 1980:61-109).

Most nineteenth century scholars, then, viewed races as
pure and fixed human types, if not as separate species. Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) *The Descent of Man* (1871) was a partial exception, for while comfortable with the cultural distinction between “savage” and “civilized” peoples, and with the idea of racial extinctions and progression, Darwin generally used “race” in terms of a non-hierarchical series of varieties produced by sexual selection, and he saw no point in giving names to things he could not define. By arguing that all people were descended from the apes, he and Alfred Russell Wallace (1823-1913) made hash of the old monogenesis-polygenesis debate. But their approach did not satisfy most of their readers, who wanted to know which race had derived from which ape, or which among the races was the most or least ape-like (Lorimer 1978:142-45; Stepan 1982:56-82; Stocking 1968:110-32).

These scientific racists were not only convinced that an evolutionary hierarchy of fixed racial types existed in nature, but that Darwin’s own natural selection (or Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest”) had created it. As scientists, however, they went in search of measurable data to prove it. They studied skin color, hair forms, facial angles, the ratio of lower to upper arm length, autopsied brains, racial species of body lice, and, by the end of the century, over 5,000 measurements on the skull alone (Gossett 1963:69-83). Yet if pure and fixed racial types did exist in nature, such differences proved frustratingly difficult to measure.

But measurements were also used by the critics of scientific racism. While British and American scholars of this period celebrated the Anglo-Saxon race and the Teutonic origins of democracy (Gossett 1963:84-122, 310-38), the Germans were captivated with the myth of Aryan (national) purity. Attempting to discredit both Aryanism and a French anthropologist’s claim that the Prussians were
really an alien, Slavo-Finnish race, the German pathologist and statesman Rudolph Virchow (1821-1902) arranged an anthropometric survey of 6.7 million German school children. His results, published in 1886, found that they fell short of the Aryan ideal. Real German children seemed to be of mixed origins, for they were not predominately blonde, blue-eyed, or fair-skinned. Yet Virchow’s results had little impact upon the Aryan ideology (Shipman 1994:99-100; Stepan 1982:101).

One of Virchow’s former students, anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) arranged a similar 1908-10 anthropometric survey for the U.S. Immigration Commission, which was then concerned with the hordes of “inferior” immigrant types from Southern and Eastern Europe who threatened to overwhelm the more refined, but less prolific, “Native Americans” (i.e., Nordic types) from Northwestern Europe. Such concerns, later popularized in at least eight editions of Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), were also shared by supporters of Charles B. Davenport’s influential American eugenics (literally, “good breeding”) movement, and were substantially similar to those of its German counterpart, the ominously entitled Society for Racial Hygiene (Shipman 1995:122-30; Shanklin 1994:82-89).

Boas surveyed nearly 18,000 recent immigrants and their children, and measured, among other things, head length and breadth. Head form was then considered a fixed racial trait, but Boas reported in 1911 that each successive American child born to round-headed, Russian Jewish immigrants was progressively more long-headed, while those born to long-headed Southern Italian immigrants became progressively more round-headed. Boas concluded that if such a supposedly fixed racial trait could change in a single generation, “we must speak of a plasticity (as
opposed to a permanence) of types” (Boas 1940:71; Stocking 1968:175-82). In other words, his measurements contradicted the usual view of immigrants as fixed racial types.

But Boas had as much influence upon the preconceived ideas of the eugenicists and the Immigration Commission as Virchow had on the German notion of Aryan purity. Madison Grant accused Boas, a secular Jew from Germany, of leading a Jewish conspiracy to discredit the scientific fact of fixed racial types (Shanklin 1994:82). Grant and Davenport soon dominated the National Research Council’s Committee on Anthropology, and, disturbed by Boas’s professionalization of anthropology, together founded the Galton Society for the study of “racial anthropology” by “Native Americans, who are anthropologically, socially, and politically sound, no Bolsheviki [i.e., Jews] need apply” (Shanklin 1994:87; Stocking 1968:287-90). Given the prevailing social climate and the sensational findings of the Army intelligence tests, the Immigration Restriction Act passed in 1924.

Bad ideas never die, and American racism was given a new lease on life in 1916 with the perfection of the Stanford-Binet intelligence scale. It purported to offer an objective means of measuring innate intelligence, and, with the testing of 1.75 million Army inductees in 1917, soon yielded data confirming the popular suspicion that non-white and foreign-born Americans were less intelligent, and that immigration restrictions were badly overdue (Bennett 1963:363-69; Gould 1981:146-234).

Nearly fifty years later, inspired by Sir Cyril Burt’s bogus studies of twins (Kamin 1974; Stepan 1982:181-88), psychologist Arthur R. Jensen (1969) argued that the lower average IQ score of black Americans is an accurate reflection of an hereditary (i.e., racial) trait. One obvious
problem with his thesis is the unstated assumption that black Americans, 20 to 30 percent of whose genes came from European and Native American populations, are a discrete biological population. His other problematic assumptions—that intelligence is largely fixed by birth, that IQ tests accurately measure intelligence, and that one can use an explanation of IQ differences among whites to explain IQ differences between blacks and whites—are all examined at greater length by Stephen Jay Gould (1977:243-47; 1981:156-57, 24-320). These same erroneous, if unstated, assumptions have reappeared in Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1994), which argues that race and class differences are genetically determined and immutable (Gould 1994a).

By the 1930s, it had become increasingly awkward for American anthropologists to talk about human diversity in terms of the nineteenth century concept of race, racial hierarchies, and racial determinism. By the end of World War II it was virtually impossible. Boas had examined these issues in his *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911)—or *Kultur und Rasse* (1914) in the German edition—and concluded that the physical features used to define fixed racial types are not fixed, and do not in any way correlate with such socially acquired habits as culture, language or styles of thought. Except at Harvard and the Smithsonian, Boas dominated academic anthropology in America, but the debunking of race and racial determinism then was as much a part of British biology as of American cultural anthropology (Barkan 1992; Stepan 1982:140-81). So the physical anthropologists who still insisted that race really meant something fell back upon the idea of races as major geographical stocks.

There were at least three such major stocks: the Caucasoids (Europeans), Mongoloids (Asians and Native Ameri-
cans), and the Negroids (Africans). The main problem with this approach is the interesting anomalies which it creates, peoples who just do not conveniently fit into the available categories, such as the Australian aborigines—tall, dark-skinned (a Negroid trait) peoples with some high frequencies (50 to 100 percent) of wavy blonde hair (a Caucasoid trait); the Ainu of northern Japan—short, light-skinned people with (Caucasoid) beak-like noses and abundant facial hair; and the San ("Bushmen") of the Kalahari Desert—short, yellow to copper-colored people with peppercorn curls of head hair, and (Mongoloid) wide cheek bones and epicanthic eye folds ("almond-shaped" eyes). These and other anomalous peoples were usually explained away in terms of the migration and mixings of the major geographical stocks. Thus, the Australian aborigines presumably represented some crossing between the Negroid and Caucasoid stocks. Yet in none of these cases was there any other evidence for these supposed migrations and mixings.

Stanley Garn (1969) tried to rescue this approach by marrying it to populational genetics. He defined a race as a Mendelian breeding population, one that thus differs from other populations in its frequency of one or more genetic traits. But his resulting scheme of nested racial divisions—nine geographical races, broken down into a host of local races, and their constituent, neighborhood micro races—is just as arbitrary as, if much more complicated than, any other system of racial classification.

Finally, by 1950, the evolutionary biologists joined the anthropological attack on race, arguing that subspecies categories are categories of convenience rather than facts of nature (Gould 1977:231-36). The three main biological problems with the concept of race are as follows:
1. Races are arbitrarily defined. There is no agreement on which or how many traits best define a race. The more traits one selects to define a given race, the smaller that race becomes; and, as Stanley Garn's work suggests, the fewer people included in a given race, the greater number of races one needs to define.

2. No supposed racial category has exclusive possession of a given genetic trait. The fact that we are a single species means that humans have always mated with their neighbors, and they with theirs. Thus, as Blumenbach and Darwin had anticipated, the form or frequency of any given genetic trait is gradually distributed over the face of the earth in what biologists call a cline. And because humans have always mated with their neighbors to produce these clinal variations, pure, fixed racial types have never existed among modern humans—at least not outside peoples' minds.

None of us would have any difficulty distinguishing between native Swedes and Japanese. They appear to be distinct racial types. But if one looks at all the peoples who live between them, it is not at all clear where a European-Asian boundary line should be drawn, nor why one would want to draw such a line. Or consider this comparison of people with dogs. Both are domesticated species with worldwide distributions, and both come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, and colors. And just as the ordinary dogs of the world are mutts, rather than the distinct breeds which humans have artificially created, people do not come pre-packaged in pure, distinct racial types.

3. Because human genetic traits are distributed in clines, the range of genetic variation within a supposed racial
category is greater than those *between* supposed racial categories. Though he was blind to the fact, Samuel Morton's data on racial cranial capacities demonstrated this back in 1839. Indeed, a classic study by Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin (1972) examined the distribution of seventeen polymorphic traits, like those for blood group types, among the equivalent of seven geographical races and found that only 6 percent of these variations were distributed along racial lines. In other words, 94 percent of the variations he studied did not sort themselves out into neat, discrete geographical races. This is why the scientific racists of the nineteenth century were never able to find measurable data which would yield objective racial types.

Human beings are a geographically variable species. That is a fact of nature, while "races" are not (Gould 1977:231-36). Biological races are descriptive representations of human physical diversity. They are, at best, very rough approximations of that reality, for the static categories of distinct racial types can never capture the dynamic realities of human sizes, shapes and colors. Using racial categories to represent these dynamic realities is like using a box of Crayola crayons to capture the wide range of color hues, saturations and intensities found in nature. So why bother naming races at all?

The concept of race conveys little or no information that could not be expressed in terms of the distribution of individual traits among populations. Furthermore, racial classification can interfere with the objective study of variation. It can create a mental set in which evolutionary theories for which there is little justification are uncritically accepted. It can also cause people to waste time finding pseudosolutions to nonproblems-
-ways to make this or that population “fit”--while ignoring real problems, such as why a given variation shows the variation that it does. Of course, it is possible that there really are major divisions of humankind, distinguishable on the basis of unbiased estimates of generalized genetic distance among populations. As yet, however, the existence of such groupings has not been satisfactorily demonstrated. And until it is, we would do best to avoid “racial” classifications of all kinds (Jolly & Plog 1982:411).

Still, a lot of people believe the self-evident physical differences between humans require a word like “race” to describe them. And though anthropologists have tried debunking the concept of race for more than sixty years, racial labels are a social fact. Biological races, I have argued, cannot be defined and do not exist. But, however misleading and harmful, social races remain a convenient way to order the complexity of social life. Most of the racial labels used today refer to ethnicity, and are best understood as such. For a social race is not a primordial social fact, but a situationally defined, collective social identity; an historically grounded sense of peoplehood based upon insiders’ and outsiders’ interpretations of subjective boundary markers. In short, a social race is an ethnic group.

Relatively little harm is done when “race” is used as a descriptive device—a way to tell where a person’s ancestors came from, or what she/he looks like. The real danger lies in using “race” as an explanatory device in assuming that a person thinks, feels, or acts in a certain way because of where his or her ancestors came from, or because of what she/he looks like, for that hearkens back to the erroneous nineteenth century view of fixed racial types and racially
determined behavioral traits. Personally, I would prefer that we abandon the hopelessly misleading word, “race.” Meanwhile, we had best be careful about how that word is used.

REFERENCES


