

## Planting the Seed

### The Invention of Race

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*The history of the concept of race is deeply linked to racist thinking, particularly as it emerged in some of the quasi-scientific notions created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ferber shows how racist thought is a relatively recent historical development, one that stems from the exploitation of human groups by others. In this history of racist thought, many have tried to use science (illegitimately) to try to justify such exploitation.*

**M**y students are always surprised to learn that race is a relatively recent invention. In their minds, race and racial antagonisms have taken on a universal character; they have always existed, and probably always will, in some form or another. Yet this fatalism belies the reality—that race is indeed a modern concept and, as such, does not have to be a life sentence.

Winthrop Jordan has suggested that ideas of racial inferiority, specifically that blacks were savage and primitive, played an essential role in rationalizing slavery.<sup>1</sup> There was no conception of race as a physical category until the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> There was, however, a strong association between blackness and evil, sin, and death, long grounded in European thought. The term “race” is believed to have originated in the Middle Ages in the romance languages, first used to refer to the breeding of animals. Race did not appear in the English language until the sixteenth century and was used as a technical term to define human groups in the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, as emphasis upon the observation and classification of human differences grew, “race” became the most commonly employed concept for differentiating human groups according to Northern European standards. Audrey Smedley argues that because “race” has its roots in the breeding of animal stock, unlike other terms used to categorize humans, it came to imply an innate or inbred quality, believed to be permanent and unchanging.<sup>3</sup>

Until the nineteenth century, the Bible was consulted and depended upon for explanations of human variation, and two schools of thought emerged. The first asserted that there was a single creation of humanity, monogenesis, while the

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second asserted that various human groups were created separately, polygenesis. Polygenesis and ideas about racial inferiority, however, gained few believers, even in the late 1700s when the slave trade was under attack, because few were willing to support doctrines that conflicted with the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

While European Americans remained dedicated to a biblical view of race, the rise of scientific racism in the middle of the eighteenth century shaped debate about the nature and origins of races.<sup>5</sup> The Enlightenment emphasized the scientific practices of observing, collecting evidence, measuring bodies, and developing classificatory schemata. In the early stages of science, the most prevalent activity was the collection, examination, and arrangement of data into categories. Carolus Linnaeus, a prominent naturalist in the eighteenth century, developed the first authoritative racial division of humans in his *Natural System*, published in 1735.<sup>6</sup> Considered the founder of scientific taxonomy, he attempted to classify all living things, plant and animal, positioning humans within the matrix of the natural world. As Cornel West demonstrates, from the very beginning, racial classification has always involved hierarchy and the linkage of physical features with character and cultural traits.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the descriptions of his racial classifications, Linnaeus defines Europeans as “gentle, acute, inventive ... governed by customs,” while Africans are “crafty, indolent, negligent ... governed by caprice.”<sup>8</sup> Like most scientists of his time, however, Linnaeus considered all humans part of the same species, the product of a single creation.

Linnaeus was followed by Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who is credited with introducing the term “race” into the scientific lexicon. Buffon also believed in monogenesis and in his 1749 publication *Natural History*, suggested that human variations were the result of differences in environment and climate. Whiteness, of course, was assumed to be the real color of humanity. Buffon suggested that blacks became dark-skinned because of the hot tropical sun and that if they moved to Europe, their skin would eventually lighten over time. Buffon cited interfertility as proof that human races were not separate species, establishing this as the criterion for distinguishing a species.

Buffon and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach are considered early founders of modern anthropology. Blumenbach advanced his own systematic racial classification in his 1775 study *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, designating five human races: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. While he still considered races to be the product of one creation, he ranked them on a scale according to their distance from the “civilized” Europeans.<sup>9</sup> He introduced the term “Caucasian,” chosen because he believed that the Caucasus region in Russia produced the world’s most beautiful women. This assertion typifies the widespread reliance upon aesthetic judgments in ranking races...

The science of racial classifications relied upon ideals of Greek beauty, as well as culture, as a standard by which to measure races. Race became central to the definition of Western culture, which became synonymous with “civilization.”<sup>10</sup>...

The history of racial categorizations is intertwined with the history of racism. Science sought to justify *a priori* racist assumptions and consequently rationalized and greatly expanded the arsenal of racist ideology. Since the eighteenth century,

racist beliefs have been built upon scientific racial categorizations and the linking of social and cultural traits to supposed genetic racial differences. While some social critics have suggested that contemporary racism has replaced biology with a concept of culture, the [1994] publication of *The Bell Curve*<sup>11</sup> attests to the staying power of these genetic notions of race. Today, as in the past, racism weaves together notions of biology and culture, and culture is assumed to be determined by some racial essence.

Science defined race as a concept believed to be hereditary and unalterable. The authority of science contributed to the quick and widespread acceptance of these ideas and prevented their interrogation. Equally important, the study of race and the production of racist theory also helped establish scientific authority and aided discipline building. While the history of the scientific concept of race argues that race is an inherent essence, it reveals, on the contrary, that race is a social construct. Young points out that “the different Victorian scientific accounts of race each in their turn quickly became deeply problematic; but what was much more consistent, more powerful and long-lived, was the cultural construction of race.”<sup>12</sup>

Because race is not grounded in genetics or nature, the project of defining races always involves drawing and maintaining boundaries between those races. This was no easy task. It is important to pay attention to the construction of those borders: how was it decided, in actual policy, who was considered white and who was considered black? What about those who did not easily fit into either of those categories? What were the dangers of mixing? How could these dangers be avoided? These issues preoccupied policy makers, popular culture, and the public at large....

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, discussion of race and racial purity grew increasingly popular in both academic and mainstream circles as Americans developed distinctive beliefs and theories about race for the first time. As scientific beliefs about race were increasingly accepted by the general public, support for the one-drop rule became increasingly universal. Popular opinion grew to support the belief that no matter how white one appeared, if one had a single drop of black blood, no matter how distant, one was black....

Throughout the history of racial classification in the West, miscegenation and interracial sexuality have occupied a place of central importance. The science of racial differences has always displayed a preoccupation with the risks of interracial sexuality. Popular and legal discourses on race have been preoccupied with maintaining racial boundaries, frequently with great violence. This [essay] suggests that racial classification, the maintenance of racial boundaries, and racism are inexorably linked. The construction of biological races and the belief in maintaining the hierarchy and separation of races has led to widespread fears of integration and interracial sexuality....

The history of racial classification, and beliefs about race and interracial sexuality, can be characterized as inherently white supremacist. White supremacy has been the law and prevailing worldview throughout U.S. history, and the ideology of what is today labeled the white supremacist movement is firmly rooted in this tradition. Accounts that label the contemporary white supremacist

movement as fringe and extremist often have the consequence of rendering this history invisible. Understanding this history, however, is essential to understanding and combating both contemporary white supremacist and mainstream racism.

### NOTES

1. Jordan, Winthrop. 1969. *White over Black*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
2. Banton, Michael, and Jonathan Harwood. 1975. *The race concept*. New York: Praeger; Mencke, John G. 1979. *Mulattoes and race mixture: American attitudes and images, 1865–1918*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms Research Press.
3. Smedley, Audrey. 1993. *Race in North America: Origin and evolution of a worldview*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
4. Banton and Harwood 1975, 19.
5. Banton and Harwood 1975, 24.
6. West, Cornel. 1982. *Prophesy deliverance! An Afro-American revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
7. West 1982.
8. West 1982, 56.
9. Smedley 1993, 166.
10. Young, Robert J. C. 1995. *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*. New York: Routledge.
11. Herrnstein, Richard J., and Charles Murray. 1994. *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
12. Young, 1995, p. 94.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Ferber mean when she writes that “the history of racial categorizations is intertwined with the history of racism”?
2. What role have science and religion played in the social construction of racism?