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Scientific Racism: Persistence and Change

by
William Edwards



In the United States, World War II was hailed as the “war to end all wars.” The war itself was considered a classic confrontation between the forces of liberal democracy and those of German fascism. Inherent in the ideology of nazism was Adolf Hitler’s “final solution,” the specter of rule by a nation committed to genocide. The Third Reich was dedicated to the proposition of “Aryan superiority.” The Allied Forces, dedicated to the principles of democracy and freedom (though there were inconsistencies between principle and practice), vigorously opposed the geopolitical intentions of Hitler’s regime and its pronounced policy of racial nationalism. Germany, of course, was not the only country that practiced racial politics. During the 1920s the United States itself was riding the crest of a wave of nativism based upon racial and ethnic prejudice.¹ Although it did not approach the degree of German fascism, prejudice in the United States has made its contribution to the phenomenon of scientific racism.

Allan Chase² has written one of the most provocative books on the history of scientific racism. He traces its roots to the economic philosophy of Thomas Malthus, in particular his essays on population. Chase demonstrates how the politics of scarcity can become a blueprint for the determination of who should live. Scarcities may occur in food, clean air, clean water, or living space. The Malthusian dictum that population growth will always exceed food supply enforces some form of selection and, politically, the justification of that selection. One method that has commonly been employed to accomplish this is the use of pseudoscientific ideas as a means to distinguish the “deserving” from the “undeserving.” Structured upon the premise that genetic differences are indicators of qualitative types, scientific racism seeks to establish a vertical base for social differentiation and the determination of social policy. If it can be argued that the destiny of German society rests in the rise of the Aryan nation, it can be argued that the competition for living space can include the elimina-

tion of those declared undeserving or unfit.

The idea of scientific racism seems antithetical to a democratic society. Yet within this decade it has gained attention and has manifested itself in numerous ways. From the turn of century through the 1930s, scientific racism gained popularity in scholarly and popular literature. Reaching a highwater mark in the 1920s with the passage of the restrictive immigration bill (1924), scientific racism went into remission until the 1960s, when social changes in the society opened public opinion to a subtle but nonetheless invidious form of racism. While public debate focused on the more overt expressions of racial exclusion and discrimination, ideas of racial differences resurfaced and found a receptive audience among those desiring to maintain certain social arrangements. Gone were the archaic ideas of phrenology and craniology that assumed that human worth and behavior could be determined by body type. Gaining favor were studies that attempted to prove the primacy of heredity over environment in the determination of intelligence. If the language of the new proponents of genetic determinism differed from that used earlier in the century, the message was the same: genetic endowment was the great divider between superior and inferior types. More conclusively, these differences could not be mediated through legislation or public policy. The differences in races were an immutable fact ordained by the accident of genetics.

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Historically, scientific racism was never a set of ideas existing outside the influence of public action. The perceptions of human differences coexisted with the desirability of a stratified society. Thus, it is not surprising that some of the earlier theorists of

scientific racism were social scientists.³ These social scientists framed questions of individual and social differences as political questions. It was therefore not surprising that McDougall could ask, “Is America Safe for Democracy?” or that Edward Ross would discuss “race suicide.”⁴ Each of their concerns suggested that the state, without effective means of control, faced a degeneration in the genetic and intellectual stock of its citizens. In the culmination of the “final solution,” we see scientific racism raised to the level of state policy.

Pseudoscientific ideas regarding the human species have always found acceptance among those seeking to justify the subordination of others. In periods of major social changes these ideas tend to intensify as status positions are challenged or there is a perception of a threat. During the Reconstruction Era fears abounded that without strict controls the presumed unrestrained libidinous nature of blacks would imperil the white population.⁵ When Eastern and Southern Europeans were stereotyped as inferior persons, their numbers were restricted from entrance into the United States in 1924. Historically, efforts to lift racial restrictions against blacks have been met with the rejoinder that to do so would result in the “mongrelization of the white race.” In each instance the group was discredited because of an alleged feature of their genotype.

It was noted earlier that scientific racism receded after the 1920s. In fact, by the 1930s many of the tenets of scientific racism were falling into disfavor. Racial exclusion had effectively been reinforced by law and social practice. Until the 1940s few changes of major proportion had altered the barriers that kept blacks from enjoying full citizenship. The aftermath of World War II witnessed the erosion of some of those barriers. Black Americans aggressively, even militantly sought change. “This new status,” wrote the historian John Hope Franklin, “arose not merely because a substantial portion of the gains made during the war were retained, but also because of the intensification of the drive, in several quarters, to achieve equality for blacks.”⁶ From the threatened march on Washington by A. Philip Randolph in 1941, through the administrations of Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, black Americans gained greater access to housing, voting, and employment in federal jobs. Important victories were also won in the fight against segregation in public education. In terms of its national impact, the most significant of these victories came in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

Many commentators and social analysts have noted the connection between the *Brown* decision and the Civil Rights Movement. For there was an aspect of the Court’s decision that struck at the core of scientific racism. Although the primary legal question involved the philosophy of separate but equal, vital testimony in the case pointed to the psychologi-

cal implications of segregated public education. In rendering its decision the Supreme Court said unanimously: “To separate them [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”⁷

The Supreme Court recognized that more was at stake than the legality of the state providing separate educational facilities for black and white children. What the Court decided was that the philosophy of separate but equal existed under the assumption of biological differences. Most importantly the Court decision draws attention to two aspects of scientific racism that cannot be overlooked. Before commenting on those two aspects it would be worthwhile to reassert a fundamental characteristic of scientific racism. Scientific racism is a means of maintaining power relationships rooted in the idea that rule is a right of the biologically superior. To assert that right it is first necessary to establish a context for the determination of superiority and inferiority.

Scientific racism seeks to establish a base for entitlement. Based upon the assumption that only the superior should decide, entitlement is the reward for those who are superior in genetic endowment. Through the system of public education most minority groups have pursued upward mobility. Blacks especially have sought through educational attainment to expand their range of social and professional opportunities. In the South these efforts were restricted by the proscription of legal segregation. Outside of the South educational access was restricted by de facto segregation, the result of discrimination in neighborhood settlement patterns. These methods of proscription, based upon racial differences, have served to restrict claims to entitlement. When the Court argued that segregation had the effect of generating feelings of inferiority, it tacitly acknowledged that race was a key element in restricting entitlement. Therefore, the *Brown* case became a critical turning point in this society, not only in terms of education, but in the much broader sense of alterations in the system of entitlement. Opponents of change resisted the guarantee of access to people they considered unequal. If restraints to access could be overturned through the courts, could they be reinstated by other means?

In the years following the *Brown* decision, there was renewed interest in mental testing. The preoccupation with quantification resembled that following World War I and the administration of the first Army Intelligence Test in 1917. As state and municipal action mounted to either implement or circumvent the mandate of the Court, increasing attention was given to differential results in mass testing of school children. The argument that emerged, in the

The quantification of alleged racial differences in aptitude gave an aura of scientific objectivity to what had lost respectability, and legal backing, as a prejudicial attitude.

tradition of scientific racism, was that genetic endowment counted for more than environment in mental aptitude. If black children performed less well than whites, a substantial portion of the explanation for this rested in their genetic constitution. Their abilities and opportunities were immutably, genotypically, determined. Even if greater access became available, performance would be naturally limited. Society could not be “blamed” for what was essentially an act of nature. The claims regarding the inferior abilities of blacks were not new. What was new was the extent to which quantitative data were being employed to support an old argument. The quantification of alleged racial differences in aptitude gave an aura of scientific objectivity to what had lost respectability, and legal backing, as a prejudicial attitude.

The debate over the differences between test scores of black and white children reached a high-water mark in 1969. Arthur Jensen, professor of education at the University of California, Berkeley, published an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* entitled, “How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?”⁸ Among his findings was the conclusion that intelligence is 80% inherited and 20% environmental. Whatever may have been Jensen’s intentions or claims to free and open inquiry, the results of his work ignited a furious public debate on the efficient use of public funds for the education of black children.

Some critics of President Johnson’s Great Society programs found in Jensen’s study supportive evidence for their call for a retrenchment in public funding for social programs. The racial intent in many of these arguments was hidden behind an appeal to efficiency in government. If intelligence were overwhelmingly the result of genetic endowment, no amount of public funds could change that condition. While those who accepted the genetic-based link to intelligence were not necessarily adverse to the education of black children, their proposals called for educating them to the limits of their presumed capacity. These arguments bear a striking similarity to proposals prior to and just after the turn of the century. At that time it was not uncommon for Social Darwinists to advocate education that would train the “lowly classes” for specific slots in the labor force. The “lowly classes” (who were not necessarily black) would constitute a stratum who could be controlled by their access to skills and reduced to bargaining their labor for existence. Thus,

on the basis of their alleged inferior genotype, entitlement was restricted.

Jensen’s work, and a subsequent controversial publication by Christopher Jencks,⁹ also fueled public debate regarding compensatory educational programs. These programs shared the premise that the life course of individuals and groups could be altered through policy intervention. The inheritance argument, on the other hand, questioned whether social intervention of a compensatory nature would produce significant changes relative to the expenditure of funds for such programs. While these debates developed, the IQ controversy was augmented by the rise in concern over “merit.” In fact, the two ideas merged in the work of Richard Herrnstein.¹⁰ Publications such as *Commentary* and the *Public Interest* became principal forums over the issue of meritocracy and democracy. Arguing that attempts to improve the life chances of a group was antithetical to the principle of individual liberty, conservative ideologues attacked many interventionist programs as antidemocratic. They argued that these programs granted to the disadvantaged an unearned privilege. What had begun as a quantifier for the exclusion of certain European groups as immigrants in 1917 had reached full political fruition in what Leon Kamin calls “the science and politics of IQ.”

If the debates in the late 1960s and 1970s were not as overtly racist as those during the first quarter of the century, there were striking similarities nonetheless. The appeal to the inheritability of intelligence restates essentially the same argument that social classes are the products of differential genetic stock. Just as scientific racism in the 1920s and earlier represented a value premise, the arguments regarding merit contained a value premise. What is meritorious? How is merit determined and who makes the determination? Is there an absolute or relative basis to merit? Does heredity play a role in merit? What these questions imply is a vertical ordering of society, a system of stratification. Invariably this means a placement of individuals or groups along a continuum, although not necessarily a permanent one. Such attempts employ the trappings of verifiability in lieu of prejudice. This is the very base of scientific racism. “Scientific racism attempts to make inferiority a matter of science not prejudice.”¹² Methodologically, scientific racism attempts to accentuate intergroup differences at the expense of intragroup differences. The history of scientific racism indicates that class differences have been frequently invoked to insulate privilege, restrain mobility, and limit entitlement.

There were two schemes that surfaced during the 1970s that closely resembled Francis Galton’s notion of hereditary genius and the politics of eugenics. Stanford University professor William Shockley advocated during the early 1970s a sterilization bonus plan. Concerned about the dysgenic consequences

of “too many babies born to Negroes,” Shockley offered a financial incentive for those blacks whose IQ fell below the norm of 100 to be sterilized. Basing his plan on the premise that black performance on intelligence test was a measure of their inferior biological constitution vis-a-vis whites, Shockley proposed a payment of \$1,000 for every point below 100 they scored. Without a definitive check on the birth rate of the genetically inferior blacks, Shockley feared genetic enslavement.

Prior to the development of the sterilization bonus plan, Shockley speculated on a “white gene” hypothesis. This notion held that for every 1% of “Caucasian genes” in the bloodstream of blacks, their IQ rose one test point. Shockley concluded that since lower IQ black mothers are likely to have more children, they are subjecting their offspring to genetic enslavement, and the society would realize the consequences of dysgenics. How he determined the relationship between IQ and birth rate was never firmly established, nor on what basis he assumed a fixed ratio between IQ and the quantity of “white genes” in the blood of blacks.

Harvard professor of psychology Richard Herrnstein shared Shockley’s concerns regarding the possibility of “genetic enslavement.” He offered no financial bonus plan, but he did advocate a tracking system linked to the decennial census. In an interview cited by Allan Chase, Herrnstein “. . . advocated that IQ test scores be recorded by the U.S. Census takers in order to enable our lawmakers to observe dysgenic or eugenic trends in American society.”¹³ He believed that, if at some future time, it was necessary to limit population growth, “. . . we could use census information on IQ to decide how and when to limit it.”¹⁴ Herrnstein’s suggestion establishes a critical relationship between population size and measured intelligence. But most startling in his proposal is that living space can be a factor, not of need, but of genetics.

Apparently those with low IQ scores would become the most expendable, would forfeit any entitlement to living space because of their IQ. Herrnstein’s plan reflects a historic assumption regarding intelligence and scientific racism: that is, intelligence is a fixed entity, conditioned only by the accident of birth. Herrnstein also attempts to influence public policy by implying a scientific basis for decision making. In the main his proposal is a companion to the idea that it is possible to quantify human value.

A second major aspect of scientific racism that emerges from the *Brown* case is its link to power relations. The restraint or denial of entitlement is a restraint on the exercise of power. As mentioned earlier, scientific racism is a means of maintaining differential power relations through the assertion of superiority or inferiority. It is an anti-egalitarian notion. It supports the proposition that nature decrees

racial difference and that difference is significant in the degree of power each is capable of exercising. In the *Brown* case, the Court declared that educational systems had been constructed so that race became the basis for the denial of choice. For blacks, the denial of choice meant the inability to assert an authoritative voice in the decisions affecting how and under what conditions they were to receive public education.

Throughout this discussion it has been asserted that scientific racism seeks to limit the participation of those believed to be inferior. This limitation necessarily restricts the exercise of power over many aspects of their lives. The same is true where race has been used as a means to set a group apart, by so doing inferring its inferiority. Their choices have been proscribed by their birth. Their ability to negotiate with the larger community is likewise proscribed. A major social change such as the *Brown* case forces an adjustment or realignment in historic patterns of power relations. Many of the assumptions that defined the old patterns entered into the process of adjustment. Blacks were believed no less inferior because the Court had ruled against segregated schools.

Since the nineteenth century, scientific racism has confirmed the fact that there is power in an idea. As a collective body of thought, scientific racism has been a powerful inducement to action. Winthrop Jordan,¹⁵ George Fredrickson,¹⁶ Stephen Jay Gould,¹⁷ and Thomas Gossett¹⁸ have clearly demonstrated the organizational power of an idea regarding the presumption of differences in the human species. Their studies represent persuasive evidence of the political consequences of scientific racism. They also affirm W.I. Thomas’s adage, “If a man defines a situation as real, it is real in its consequences.” Throughout its existence and its manifestation in racial segregation, scientific racism has produced ideas that have sustained the belief that blacks are inherently inferior. Many of the tenets of racial superiority and inferiority compose the body of thought presented in school texts. This has especially been the case in biology.

In recent years arguments concerning affirmative action and minority admissions into the universities have contained the seeds of scientific racism, if not its essence. With an increase in the number of blacks entering previously or predominantly white universities, there arose cries that educational standards would have to be lowered to accommodate them. Some black students on these campuses faced the stigma of being labeled “special admits” simply because of their racial identity. The presumption was that they could not have been admitted under the routine standards of the university. These examples may not immediately suggest themselves as scientific racism, but they perform the same function. They assume a difference in mental capacity. They

also assume that in the absence of overt prejudice, blacks could not succeed on the basis of ability alone. Where differences in the performance of white students may be perceived as a routine distribution of grades, racial connotations often accompany a similar distribution among blacks.

Scientific racism in its traditional form has lost currency in today's society. Gone are the anthropometric measures that presumably located blacks at the low end of an evolutionary scale. Gone also are the crude assumptions regarding anatomic type and social behavior. Our society has become more tolerant of differences, but that does not imply that equity prevails. There is still controversy regarding the application and use of tests. Testing has the possibility of abuse — for example, the testing of servicemen during World War I. These tests were used to verify existing ideas concerning the inferiority of groups of immigrants. Today testing is being used to reinforce notions on the inheritability of intelligence or performance capacity.

Increasing interest has been given to sociobiology recently. While the findings in this field offer new challenges to the understanding of human behavior, it has the same potential for abuse as any idea that roots human behavior in a genotypic context. In a society still predisposed to discrimination, subtle results in sociobiology can become an "objective" rationale for public action. The history of scientific racism has indicated that "objective" data may have adverse subjective consequences. The study of genetics in the field of etiology is not the same as pursuing a qualitative difference in human beings. The protection of the rights of human subjects in scientific studies must never allow a repetition of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment¹⁹ where racial ideas permitted 400 black men to go untreated for a communicable disease.

Scientific racism has caused the deaths of countless millions of people because of the presumption that they were different, inferior, undeserving. In the

absence of an absolute scale of merit and in the presence of "final solutions" such as Adolph Hitler's, we should be wary of labels, and particularly wary of labels that claim to have a scientific foundation. Any practice that contracts rather than expands the human potential is pernicious, no practice more so than prejudice as it is expressed in scientific racism.

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