
U.S.

What We Mean When We Say 'Race Is a Social Construct'

In a world where Kevin Garnett, Harold Ford, and Halle Berry all check "black" on the census, even the argument that racial labels refer to natural differences in physical traits doesn't hold up.

TA-NEHISI COATES MAY 15, 2013





Walter White. Chairman of the NAACP. Black dude. (The Walter White Project)

Andrew Sullivan and Freddie Deboer have two pieces up worth checking out. I disagree with Andrew's (though I detect some movement in his position.) Freddie's piece is entitled "Precisely How Not to Argue About Race and IQ." He writes:

The problem with people who argue for inherent racial inferiority is not that they lie about the results of IQ tests, but that they are credulous about those tests and others like them when they shouldn't be; that they misunderstand the implications of what those tests would indicate even if they were credible; and that they fail to find the moral, analytic, and political response to questions of race and intelligence.

I think this is a good point, but I want to expand it. Most of the honest writing I've seen on "race and intelligence" focuses on critiquing the idea of "intelligence." So there's lot of good literature on whether it can be measured, its relevance in modern society, whether intelligence changes across generations, whether it changes with environment, and what we mean when we say IQ. As Freddie mentions here, I had a mathematician stop past to tell me I needed to stop studying French, and immediately start studying statistics -- otherwise I can't possibly understand this debate.

It's a fair critique. My response is that he should stop studying math and

start studying history.

I am not being flip or coy. If you tell me that you plan to study "race and intelligence" then it is only fair that I ask you, "What do you mean by race?" It's true I don't always do math so well, but I understand the need to define the terms of your study. If you're a math guy, perhaps your instinct is to point out the problems in the interpretation of the data. My instinct is to point out that your entire experiment proceeds from a basic flaw -- *no coherent, fixed definition of race actually exists*.

The history bears this out. In 1856, Ralph Waldo Emerson delineated the significance of race:

It is race, is it not, that puts the hundred millions of India under the dominion of a remote island in the north of Europe. Race avails much, if that be true, which is alleged, that all Celts are Catholics, and all Saxons are Protestants; that Celts love unity of power, and Saxons the representative principle. Race is a controlling influence in the Jew, who, for two millenniums, under every climate, has preserved the same character and employments. Race in the negro is of appalling importance. The French in Canada, cut off from all intercourse with the parent people, have held their national traits. I chanced to read Tacitus "on the Manners of the Germans," not long since, in Missouri, and the heart of Illinois, and I found abundant points of resemblance between the Germans of the Hercynian forest, and our Hoosiers, Suckers, and Badgers of the American woods.

Indeed, Emerson in 1835, saw race as central to American greatness:

The inhabitants of the United States, especially of the Northern portion, are descended from the people of England and have

inherited the traits of their national character...It is common with the Franks to break their faith and laugh at it The race of Franks is faithless.

Emerson was not alone, as historian James McPherson points out, Southerners not only thought of themselves as a race separate from blacks, but as a race apart from Northern whites:

The South's leading writer on political economy, James B. D. De Bow, subscribed to this Norman-Cavalier thesis and helped to popularize it in De Bow's Review. As the lower-South states seceded one after another during the winter of 1860-61, this influential journal carried several long articles justifying secession on the grounds of irreconcilable ethnic differences between Southern and Northern whites. "The Cavaliers, Jacobites, and Huguenots, who settled the South, naturally hate, condemn, and despise the Puritans who settled the North," proclaimed one of these articles. "The former are a master-race; the latter a slave race, the descendants of Saxon serfs." The South was now achieving its "independent destiny" by repudiating the failed experiment of civic nationalism that had foolishly tried in 1789 to "erect one nation out of two irreconcilable peoples."

Similarly, in 1899 William Z. Ripley wrote *The Races of Europe*, which sought to delineate racial difference through head-type:

The shape of the human head by which we mean the general proportions of length, breadth, and height, irrespective of the "bumps" of the phrenologist is one of the best available tests of race known. Its value is, at the same time, but imperfectly appreciated beyond the inner circle of professional anthropology.

Yet it is so simple a phenomenon, both in principle and in practical application, that it may readily be of use to the traveller and the not too superficial observer of men.

To be sure, widespread and constant peculiarities of head form are less noticeable in America, because of the extreme variability of our population, compounded as it is of all the races of Europe; they seem also to be less fundamental among the American aborigines. But in the Old World the observant traveller may with a little attention often detect the racial affinity of a people by this means.

Two years later, Edward A. Ross sought to apprehend "The Causes of Race Superiority." He saw the differences between the Arab "race" and the Jewish "race" as a central illustration:

It is certain that races differ in their attitude toward past and future. M. Lapie has drawn a contrast between the Arab and the Jew. The Arab remembers; he is mindful of past favors and past injuries. He harbors his vengeance and cherishes his gratitude. He accepts everything on the authority of tradition, loves the ways of his ancestors, forms strong local attachments, and migrates little. The Jew, on the other hand, turns his face toward the future. He is thrifty and always ready for a good stroke of business, will, indeed, join with his worst enemy if it pays. He is calculating, enterprising, migrant and ambitious

You can see more of this [here](#).

Our notion of what constitutes "white" and what constitutes "black" is a product of social context. It is utterly impossible to look at the delineation

of a "Southern race" and not see the Civil War, the creation of an "Irish race" and not think of Cromwell's ethnic cleansing, the creation of a "Jewish race" and not see anti-Semitism. There is no fixed sense of "whiteness" or "blackness," not even today. It is quite common for whites to point out that Barack Obama isn't really "black" but "half-white." One wonders if they would say this if Barack Obama were a notorious drug-lord.

When the liberal says "race is a social construct," he is not being a soft-headed dolt; he is speaking an historical truth. We do not go around testing the "Irish race" for intelligence or the "Southern race" for "hot-headedness." These reasons are social. It is no more legitimate to ask "Is the black race dumber than the white race?" than it is to ask "Is the Jewish race thriftier than the Arab race?"

The strongest argument for "race" is that people who trace their ancestry back to Europe, and people who trace most of their ancestry back to sub-Saharan Africa, and people who trace most of their ancestry back to Asia, and people who trace their ancestry back to the early Americas, lived isolated from each other for long periods and have evolved different physical traits (curly hair, lighter skin, etc.)

But this theoretical definition (already fuzzy) wilts under human agency, in a real world where Kevin Garnett, Harold Ford, and Halle Berry all check "black" on the census. (Same deal for "Hispanic.") The reasons for that take us right back to fact of race as a social construct. And an American-centered social construct. Are the Ainu of Japan a race? Should we delineate darker South Asians from lighter South Asians on the basis of race? Did the Japanese who invaded China consider the Chinese the same "race?"

Andrew writes that liberals should stop saying "truly stupid things like race has no biological element." I agree. Race clearly has a biological element - *- because we have awarded it one.* Race is no more dependent on skin color today than it was on "Frankishness" in Emerson's day. Over history of race has taken geography, language, and vague impressions as its basis.

"Race," writes the great historian Nell Irvin Painter, "is an idea, not a fact." Indeed. Race does not need biology. Race only requires some good guys with big guns looking for a reason.

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