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# The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race

CHARLES HIRSCHMAN

TO MODERN EYES, especially American ones, the reality of race is self-evident. Peoples whose ancestors originated from Africa, Asia, and Europe typically have different appearances in terms of skin color, hair texture, and other superficial features. Although racial differences may be only skin deep, it is widely assumed that races have been a primordial source of identity and intergroup antagonism from the earliest societies to the present, with ancient hatreds, exploitation, and discrimination among the most common patterns. Even in modern societies, which have exposed the myth of racism, race remains a widely used term for socially defined groups in popular discourse—and, in some countries, also in scholarly research, and public policy.

A basic problem with this perspective is that it is increasingly difficult to define and measure race as a social category. Are Jews a race? What about Muslims in Europe or Koreans in Japan? If Filipinos and Samoans are official races listed in the US census form, why can't Arab Americans or Middle Easterners be included? And how might the golfer Tiger Woods respond to the standard question about his racial identity?

Although these questions may seem merely pedantic, many critical issues of public policy are shaped by the perceptions of racial identities and racial boundaries. Who should be eligible for preferential admission to universities in the United States, Canada, Malaysia, India, South Africa, and other societies that have affirmative action policies? What are the rules for defining the descendants of indigenous peoples who are seeking redress for the expropriation of their ancestral lands in the United States, Canada, and many other countries around the globe? Who decides one's racial origins—are they based on subjective identity or are there objective criteria that observers can use? These are challenging questions that will tie policymakers and scholars into knots in the coming years as they attempt to take race into account in order to fashion nonracial or postracist societies.

In this essay, I review the history of the concept of race and its ties to social science, including demography. My conclusion (drawing on the work

of other scholars) is that race and racism are not ancient or tribal beliefs but have developed apace with modernity over the last 400 years and reached their apogee in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Social science did not originate the belief that innate differences are associated with racial groups, but many social scientists in the Social Darwinist tradition were complicit in the construction and legitimation of racial theories.

In the twentieth century, social scientists made strident efforts to challenge the assumptions and reveal the lack of empirical evidence behind the racial theories of humankind. However, it took epochal events, most notably the specter of Nazi Germany and the nationalist movements of colonized peoples, to weaken the grip of racism as a popular and scientific theory. Although biological theories of race have been largely discredited by these political events and scientific progress, racial identities, classifications, and prejudices remain part of the fabric of many modern societies. I maintain that social science, and demography in particular, have an obligation to show that it is impossible to discuss the issue of race with any logic or consistency without an understanding of the origins and characteristics of racism.

### The origins of physical and cultural diversity

Modern human beings (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) are the most recent branch of hominids that emerged in Africa around 100,000 to 150,000 years ago (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994; Diamond 1993; Oppenheimer 2003). As humans became the dominant species in their initial ecosystem, they experienced reproductive success that increased their numbers relative to local food supplies.

The most common response to population growth in excess of the carrying capacity of a local environment is migration to new regions and ecosystems. Over the millennia, human settlements spread to most of the major regions of the world (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994; Davis 1974; McNeill 1984). Although archeological and genetic evidence is not entirely consistent or conclusive, the general consensus is that humans left Africa less than 100,000 years ago and reached Asia and Australia around 70,000 to 74,000 years ago, West Eurasia about 40,000 to 50,000 years ago, the Americas around 15,000 to 30,000 years ago, and finally some of the small Pacific Islands only within the last millennium (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza 1995: 122; Diamond 1997: 341; Oppenheimer 2003: 348–351).

Human migration and settlement of the major world regions are not continuous processes, but are generally prompted by climate change and subsequent changes in physical geography and the availability of sustenance. Population implosions, contractions, and disappearance in local areas may have been more common than periods of expansion and dispersal. The Last

Glacial Maximum, about 18,000 years ago, made many regions of the Earth uninhabitable, but the accompanying lowering of the oceans created expanded regions of human settlement in Southeast Asia and opened the Bering Straits. At the end of the last ice age, rising sea-levels drowned large areas of land, and many human communities were lost or driven to migrate to other regions (Oppenheimer 1998).

These migration waves, followed by long stretches of immobility and isolation, gave rise to human diversity. Cultural diversity arose naturally as people learned to adapt to new climatic zones and to survive on different flora and fauna. In the short term, it often appears that cultural patterns are unchanging, repeated generation after generation. Socialization is a powerful means of cultural continuity and can be remarkably effective in a stable environment. Yet human communities are capable of rapid social and cultural change in response to new environmental conditions (Diamond 1997: chapter 17). Language divergence is a natural process fostered by isolation. If two populations with a common language become separated, different dialects will arise naturally within a few centuries, and mutually unintelligible languages will develop within 1,000 to 1,500 years (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza 1995: 165).

Human diversity in physical features—phenotype—also arises if populations are geographically separated from each other for long periods of time. Some external features, such as skin color and body size and shape, are highly subject to the influence of natural selection in response to climate. Areas with greater exposure to sun, such as the tropics, provided an advantage to persons with naturally darker skin pigmentation, who were more likely to have survived and to have left greater numbers of descendants in successive generations. In northern latitudes with less sunlight, cereal eaters do not receive sufficient Vitamin D, and fair skin provides a survival advantage because it allows for greater absorption of ultraviolet rays, which aids in the production of Vitamin D (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza 1995: 93–94).

The distribution of different phenotypes (“races”) in the modern world provides only an approximate guide to their geographical origins. Major waves of prehistoric migration have contributed to the spread of some peoples from their “place of origin.” Moreover, many modern-day peoples are admixtures of different populations. For example, most populations in the Americas, north and south, reflect the very recent migrations of peoples from Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as the blending of these peoples with native Amerindians. Similarly, the populations of modern Africa reflect major migration waves on the continent over the last 5,000 years (Diamond 1997: chapter 19).

There are different readings of the archeological, linguistic, and genetic evidence on the ancestral origins of modern-day peoples. For example, Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza (1995: chapter 6) argue that most

contemporary Europeans are descendants of migrants from the Middle East about 10,000 years ago. Because of their early development of agriculture, peoples from the Middle East were able to expand their numbers in Europe relative to the indigenous hunting and gathering populations. However, Oppenheimer (2003: 252), relying on recent research by Richards et al. (2000), concludes that migrants from the Near East contributed only about a quarter of the genetic heritage of European populations over the last 8,000 years.

Regardless of the origins of variations in human diversity between populations, whether in phenotype or culture, there is no fixed pattern of outcomes when peoples come into contact with each other. In some cases, benign curiosity has led to peaceful accommodation, while in other cases fear, hostility, and conflict have ensued. In some instances, groups have developed ideologies of inherent superiority and inferiority. A survey of historical and contemporary societies provides a preliminary assessment of the temporal and structural antecedents of racial ideologies.

### **Conceptual preliminaries: The distinction between ethnocentrism and racism**

In hunting and gathering or agricultural societies, strangers are generally feared. It is necessary to overcome an initial sense of distrust between groups before it is possible to engage in symbiotic relationships of exchange, trade, or other kinds of human relationships. At a societal level, this general sense of fear, distrust, and social distance between peoples is captured by the notion of ethnocentrism. Simpson and Yinger (1985: 45) define ethnocentrism as the nearly universal tendency to believe in the rightness of one's own group and the natural aversion to difference. Ethnocentrism is a product of socialization into the beliefs and practices of one's own society, seeing them as natural and, by contrast, seeing the behavior and culture of those who are different as unnatural.

Ethnocentrism may have some basis in the natural predisposition to favor members of one's own kin group (or imagined kin group) over others. Ethnocentrism may also have "functional value" as means of reinforcing social solidarity. Recent experimental psychological research has shown that anger can create prejudice against an artificially defined alien group (DeSteno et al. 2004). In situations of conflict, it is easier to motivate persons to attack others who speak differently and who may have strange patterns of diet, beliefs, and customs. Patriotism, the celebration of a society's virtues, and the disparagement of the backwardness and the savagery of others have their roots in ethnocentrism.

Hostile and threatening behavior based on ethnocentrism is generally directed at the supposed manifestations of "otherness." The underlying logic

is that other people are not like us because they have not been socialized into our language and culture. If the outsiders were to give up their foreign ways, they could (and would) become members of our society. For example, the children of the enemy are often "adopted" by conquerors after they have slaughtered the adults. The children are reared, socially and culturally, to become members of their adopted society.

Ethnocentrism, while hardly benign, is quite different from the belief that neither "others" nor the "descendants of others" could ever become like us. This alternative structure of belief, which I label "racism," holds that otherness is not simply a product of socialization, language, or culture, but is part of the inherent character of different groups. In modern terminology, racism is the belief that all humankind can be divided into a finite number of races with differing characteristics and capacities because of their genes or other inherited biological features. Therefore, adopted children inherit the attributes of their biological parents (and ancestors) and can never become the equals of their adoptive families or society.

The distinction between ethnocentrism and racism does not hinge on the presence of antipathy, the often-observed outbreaks of mass slaughter of "others," or the degree of domination and exploitation. Racism is a structure of belief that the "other community" is inherently inferior and lacks the capacity to create a society comparable to one's own. My argument is that ethnocentrism is a common feature of most societies, but that racism is a modern development of the last few centuries.

### **Race and cultural differences in ancient agrarian and maritime empires**

Studies of the great civilizations of antiquity, including Egypt, Greece, and Rome, show an awareness of racial features in art and literature, but little suggestion of modern forms of racism, as defined above. In summarizing the prevailing view among scholars, Snowden (1983: 63) notes:

The ancients did accept the institution of slavery as a fact of life; they made ethnocentric judgments of other societies; they had narcissistic canons of physical beauty; the Egyptians distinguished between themselves, "the people," and outsiders; and the Greeks called foreign cultures barbarian. Yet nothing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern times existed in the ancient world...black skin was not a sign of inferiority; Greeks and Romans did not establish color as an obstacle to integration in society.

The primary activities of elites in early agrarian and maritime empires were warfare and trade. Both activities led to cross-cultural contacts, sometimes creating opportunities for alliances across ethnic divisions. In the Medi-

terranean world, recurrent exchanges took place between lighter-skinned peoples of lower Egypt and darker-skinned peoples of the upper Nile, which included lands known as Kush, Nubia, and Ethiopia. Persons with African features are often displayed in a positive light in paintings, statues, and other art produced by Egyptian civilization. Although wars occurred between these regions, there is evidence that Egyptian pharaohs took Nubian women as concubines and that black warriors married Egyptian women (Snowden 1983: 40–41). Later writings from Greek and Roman sources suggested a generally positive view of Africans, a respect for their way of life, and admiration for their military and political roles in the Mediterranean world (Snowden 1983: 58–59).

One of the major debates in classical studies is the influence of Egyptian civilization, and by extension African culture, on the development of Greek Hellenistic civilization. Martin Bernal (1987, 2001) asserts in *Black Athena* that the Afro-Asiatic roots of the Greek world via Egypt were subsequently minimized, if not erased, by racist European thinking of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Critics of the *Black Athena* thesis believe that Bernal has overstated the case for Egyptian influences on the development of Greece (Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996). Bernal and his critics are, however, in essential agreement that modern racial ideology, as opposed to everyday nationalism (ethnocentrism), was largely absent from the classical world. Hannaford (1996: chapter 2) concludes not only that racial thinking was absent from the Greek understanding of humankind, but that the alternative theory of politics—the division between societies governed by ethics and morals and those ruled by barbarism—was the central tenet of classical Greek thinking.

Although most people in premodern times lived in isolated villages with relatively little contact with different cultural traditions, this was not the case with the great cities of agrarian and maritime civilizations in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Conquest, trade, and the creation of administrative bureaucracies produced multicultural populations of rulers, slaves, merchants, and pilgrims from distant lands, though there were different neighborhoods defined by language, religion, or region of origin. The old city of Jerusalem contains areas that are still labeled by their historical identity—Arab, Jewish, Armenian, and Christian quarters. The great Southeast Asian maritime cities of Malacca, Batavia, and Manila were divided into enclaves delineated by ethnic origins, including Chinese, Malays, Bengalis, Japanese, and Europeans. Other examples can be drawn from the great trading cities of Africa and China.

Referring to early medieval Spain, Kamen (1997: 2) describes the patterns of segregation, repression, inequality, and frequent conflicts between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but he also notes the “existence of a multicultural framework [that] produced an extraordinary degree of mutual re-

spect.... Communities lived side by side and shared many aspects of language, culture, food, and dress, consciously borrowing each other's outlook and ideas."

Although cultural misunderstandings were probably frequent in these high-density preindustrial cities and occasional acts of violence occurred between peoples of different backgrounds, strong incentives also existed to maintain order and peaceful relations. Trade and exchange, by definition, foster interdependence. Many people were drawn to cities with the hope of economic gain, primarily through trade in precious metals, cloth, spices, and other valued commodities. The most lucrative trade was often with persons who were from the most distant lands, and probably most culturally and physically dissimilar. While acts of violence, including theft and murder, might have yielded short-term economic gains, continual conflict could scarcely be the basis of a long-term commercial relationship.

Multicultural cities fared well if there were brokers who could communicate in multiple languages and understood how to work through and around cultural differences. Individuals who could fulfill the role of cultural brokers were central to the success of trading cities. The children of "mixed marriages," exposed to multiple languages and cultures during childhood, probably represented the largest share of cultural brokers. Such mixed marriages were common in all ancient cities, because traders and warriors from other lands typically married local women and produced populations of mixed descent.

The numbers of persons involved in these early cross-cultural encounters tend to be underestimated because their descendants were gradually absorbed by the host population. Some documents suggest that black persons were very common in the military campaigns throughout the Mediterranean world (Snowden 1983: 65-66). Through marriage and relationships with local women, there may have been a sizable contribution of African genes to the modern populations of Italy and other countries of southern Europe (and vice versa). There is evidence that early Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia produced descendants who were acculturated and assimilated into local populations of modern Indonesia and the Philippines (Skinner 1960, 1996; Doeppers 1998). Most of the population of contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean is an admixture of peoples of European, African, and Amerindian heritage.

In addition to population movements and trade, another important factor that created intergroup acceptance and acculturation was the spread of major religions. For many centuries, early Christianity espoused a vision of the world in which color and national origin were considered insignificant (Snowden 1983: 108). It was the acceptance of faith that created the "City of God" or the major division of humankind, not geography, culture, or descent (Hannaford 1996: 95). The early spread of Islam and Buddhism may also have represented integrative social movements that did not place



much significance on the physical and cultural differences of those who accepted the faith.

Hannaford (1996: 114–115) suggests that Christianity, and European civilization, began to change with the change in the treatment of Jews in the thirteenth century. By limiting the political tolerance for Jews in Spain, which they had enjoyed for a millennium, and forcing them to wear distinctive dress and identifying badges, Christianity began to abandon the idea of inclusiveness. The Spanish Inquisition began in 1480 with the task of attacking heresy and blasphemy, but it soon turned to rooting out Jewish converts to Christianity for not being pure Christians (Hannaford 1996: 122–123; Kamen 1997: 57). The test used by the Inquisitors was “purity of blood” based upon genealogies, which were often fictive.

Abandoning the principle of a civic culture of peoples with multiple religious faiths (and even the desirability of conversion), Spain expelled hundreds of thousands of Jews in the late fifteenth century and more than one million Muslims from 1502 to 1510 (Hannaford 1996: 124–126; Kamen 1997: 23; Rehrmann 2003: 51). The methods used by the Inquisitors and their assumptions about purity of blood foreshadowed the rise of racism (Hannaford 1996: 100–104; Fredrickson 2002: 31–35). Some of the practices during the Inquisition included discriminatory barriers that precluded the children of Jewish converts to Christianity from holding official positions and professional occupations, but Kamen (1997: chapter 11) observes that these barriers were not always enforced and were sometimes contested.

### The origins of ideological racism

The “origins of racism” is such a broad topic that I can only highlight some key aspects of the question. My objective here is simply to make an argument that is illustrated with a few historical examples. The claim I make is that racism (defined above as the belief that social and cultural differences between groups are inherited and immutable) is a modern idea that emerged in recent centuries as a result of three transformations that created sharp divides between Europeans and other peoples: 1) the enslavement of millions of Africans in plantation economies in the New World; 2) the spread of European colonial rule across the world, especially in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century; and 3) the development of Social Darwinism—the pseudo-scientific theory of European superiority that became dominant in the nineteenth century. The word “race” and comparable terms in other languages do not appear before the late seventeenth century. It took at least another century, not until after the American and French revolutions, before the term acquired anything like its modern connotation (Hannaford 1996: 5–6).

Paralleling the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century debate about whether Jewish converts to Christianity could (and should) be assimilated as part of

the Christian community in Spain was the question of how to comprehend the nature of the peoples "discovered" by Spanish explorers in the New World. Some Spanish intellectuals and officials thought that Amerindians were lesser beings who should be enslaved, while others argued, on the basis of religious principles, that all humankind shared common capacities and attributes (Hannaford 1996: 150). This debate probably did little to lessen the harshness of the conquest, exploitation, and suppression of New World peoples by Spanish conquerors. Nonetheless, the key point is that there was no universal theory of race differences that sanctioned such cruelty and mistreatment.

A variety of ideas afloat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were precursors to the racial ideology of the nineteenth century. Among the most important eighteenth-century developments were the efforts by Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Comte de Buffon to classify all flora and fauna, including humans, in a systematic framework based on morphology and complexity. In various systems, humans were classified into subspecies on the basis of geography, skin color, and physical traits (Banton 1998: chapter 2). In the pre-Darwinian era, however, there was no single authoritative account of human diversity. For example, many Europeans regarded blackness or dark skin in a negative light, but many European travelers commented positively on the physical appearance of Africans and their intelligence and abilities (Adas 1989: 66–67).

In Christian Europe, the Biblical story of creation remained the touchstone of intellectual discourse. Although some of the new theories of human diversity classified Africans and Native Americans as separate populations with lesser qualities than Europeans, there was no clear explanation of how humans had diverged over the millennia since Adam and Eve. In the centuries following the Age of Discovery that began in the late 1400s considerable debate took place over the origins of physical and cultural diversity, but no universal agreement was reached (Harris 1968).

The intellectual currents surrounding race and racial classifications were profoundly changed in the mid to late nineteenth century in the wake of Darwinian theory (Banton 1998: chapter 4). Charles Darwin presented a plausible account of the origins of species differentiation in response to environmental change. Although Darwin's theory was controversial and contested, it found immediate acceptance among intellectuals who were searching for a convincing explanation (and scientific justification) for racial differences among humans. According to this thesis, races (or geographically isolated populations) had evolved into separate subspecies over time. With the veneer of modern science and the purported evidence on variation in intelligence by cranial size, the emerging school of physical anthropology was devoted to identifying different races and their different capacities and endowments (Gould 1996). Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Social Darwinism,

eugenics, and scientific racism were among the leading ideas of science and popular culture (Harris 1968; Higham 1988; Hofstadter 1955; Fredrickson 2002).

These interpretations and theories about the origins of human diversity were not simply intellectual issues but were rooted in the reality of growing European military, economic, and political dominance (Adas 1989). Perhaps the most critical early development was the creation of plantation slavery in the New World. Slavery was a common phenomenon in many ancient societies and persisted in Asia and Africa until fairly recent times. However, there were major differences between these various forms of traditional slavery and the modern form in plantation economies.

Traditional slavery resulted from conquest and dominance of other societies and the raiding of tribal peoples who lived at the margins of agricultural and maritime empires. In Southeast Asia, slavery was closer to indentured servitude, with persons becoming slaves if they could not pay their debts to local notables (Reid 1983). Although inherently exploitative, traditional slavery was tempered in varied ways in feudal societies. For example, the children of slaves could often become assimilated into the dominant population. In traditional societies, there was often a shared history and culture between masters and slaves that did not deny the humanity of slaves. Western slavery of Africans in the New World developed as a very different institution, one that played a critical role in the emergence of the racial ideology of white supremacy. The enslavement of Africans was the defining feature of the plantation economy in the New World from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.

Western slavery was part of an emerging world capitalist economy in which millions of Africans were transported across the Atlantic to produce sugar, tobacco, and cotton on plantations in the New World, and the products were sold to Europe. Thompson (1975: 117) argued that the plantation was a race-making institution:

The idea of race is a situational imperative; if it was not there to begin with, it tends to develop in a plantation society because it is a useful, maybe even necessary, principle of control. In Virginia, the plantation took two peoples originally differentiated as Christian and heathen, and before the century was over it had made two races.

In addition to the differences in color and culture between white masters and black slaves, the factory model of production on plantations created both spatial segregation and a rigid hierarchy. White plantation owners often delegated the harsh disciplining of slaves to foremen and other intermediaries. The extreme levels of economic exploitation combined with the denial of even the most basic human rights could only be explained by

dehumanizing the enslaved population, who could be bought and sold at the whim of their owners. In the United States, this interpretation was given the legal sanction of the Supreme Court in the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, which ruled that slaves were property and not entitled to the rights of citizens. Such conditions were fertile ground for the development of an ideology of white supremacy (Fredrickson 1987; Jordan 1968, 1974).

The other "race-making" institution in the modern world was European imperialism. Since the late fifteenth century, Europeans had engaged in exploitative and colonial activities in much of the world. The conquest of the Western Hemisphere, first by the Spanish and Portuguese and later by the French and the British, was a relatively easy task. Encountering less technologically advanced peoples and aided by the effect of infectious diseases on the native population, Europeans quickly mastered and largely depopulated the New World and proceeded to exploit its natural resources and develop plantation economies. The conquest of Asia and Africa was a different story because these areas were densely settled, and Europeans often encountered deadly tropical diseases that inhibited large settler populations.

Not until the nineteenth century, with the beginnings of the industrial revolution, were European powers able to dominate, militarily and politically, the landmasses and peoples of Asia and Africa. European colonialists created sharp divisions of prestige, power, and economic status between the rulers and the ruled in the Victorian Age. Because these divisions coincided with differences in color and other physical attributes between whites and the peoples of Asia and Africa, racism provided a powerful legitimation of imperialism. Adas (1989: 275, 318–319) argues that European racial ideology had relatively little impact on colonial decisionmaking during the first half of the nineteenth century, but by the last decades of the century the assumption of the biological superiority of Europeans was deeply interwoven with debates over colonialism. Said (2003) argues that colonial hegemony created an intellectual school—Orientalism—that put scholars and academic specialists who studied colonized societies into the service of the imperial West. He contends that Orientalism advanced precisely with the expansion of direct European colonial domination from 1815 to 1914 (Said 2003: 41).

This age of high imperialism—late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century—coincided with the spread of popular education, increased social mobility, and the development of democratic institutions in Europe and other regions of European settlement. The assumption of the white man's burden to provide protection and tutelage to his brown- and black-skinned brothers rationalized the discrepancies between democracy at home and authoritarian colonialism abroad. The presence of European racist beliefs in the colonies can be observed in a variety of ways, from the classifications of race and ethnicity in population censuses to the writings of colonial administrators (Hirschman 1986, 1987). These ideas, which posit that observed

cultural differences reflect the heritable attributes of "races," became part of the intellectual landscape in many colonies or near colonies. Labeling the overseas Chinese as the "Jews of Asia" and rural peoples as "lazy natives" was propagated by Europeans through modern education, and ideas and vocabularies of racial distinctions were widely adopted as part of local belief structures in many parts of the world.

Although Europeans may have originated racial beliefs, these ideas became deeply rooted among colonized peoples and even in noncolonized societies. Some scholars have argued that racial consciousness in some form existed in non-Western societies before the arrival of Europeans, but there is little doubt that racial ideology came to be more deeply entrenched in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as notions of Social Darwinism were fused with indigenous beliefs of lineage and descent (Dikötter 1992, 1997).

The racist thinking that accompanied European expansion to the colonies was built on the bedrock of earlier debates over the nature of races within Europe and the encounter with native peoples of the New World. In southern Europe, the history of the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims were influential, as was the struggle between Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. For the British (and their descendants overseas), the colonization of Ireland and the labeling of the Irish as a separate race helped to set the stage for racial ideology in other British colonies (Garner 2004; Ignatiev 1995).

Although the formal institutions of slavery were abolished in the nineteenth century in the Americas, and colonialism was beginning to be questioned and even resisted during the early decades of the twentieth century, racism had developed a life of its own. Not only did white supremacy provide economic and psychological benefits to whites, but racial ideologies were central doctrines of the modern world. Racism and the inevitability of racial inequality were affirmed by science and were widely held beliefs among most intellectuals, including leading scholars in the social sciences, well into the twentieth century. Adas (1989: 318) observes, "By the early 1900s, the eighteenth century belief in the unity of humankind found few adherents among European intellectuals and politicians." Although racist ideas may not have directly caused slavery, imperialism, and cases of modern genocide, the ideology of white superiority provided legitimation and rationalization for them.

The monstrous evils that led to the deaths of 6 million Jews in Nazi Germany and the racial apartheid system of South Africa are often considered aberrations of the twentieth century. However, racism and modernity are compatible. Germany was perhaps the most modern society in early-twentieth-century Europe and the Jewish population in Germany was largely assimilated into German culture, with a high degree of intermarriage

(Fredrickson 2002: 125). Moreover, the Holocaust was carried out in modern bureaucratic fashion and included the use of modern technology. Fredrickson (2002: 104) argues that modernization is a precondition for an overtly racist regime.

Most modern states do not become racist regimes on the scale of Nazi Germany or the apartheid structure of South Africa or the pre-civil rights southern United States. But modernization does not appear to inhibit the conditions that lead to racism. For example, popular anti-Semitism in Germany was paralleled by similar beliefs in most other Western countries, including the United States. The rise of prejudices against minorities, foreigners, Catholics, and Jews was characteristic of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Higham 1988; Lieberson 1980). For example, in the early 1920s, Columbia, Harvard, and other Ivy League colleges enacted quotas to lower the number of Jewish students (Higham 1988: 278). There is little evidence to support the claim of an inevitable conflict between racial ideologies and modernity.

### **The decline of ideological racism**

Specific historical events, in addition to the growing weight of scientific knowledge, greatly reduced the influence of official racism over the second half of the twentieth century. George Fredrickson (2002: 127), a distinguished historian of comparative race relations, concludes that the period following World War II was the turning point in the modern history of racism (also see Omi 2001). The ideology and policies of Nazi Germany crystallized the issue. As the understanding that the Holocaust was the step-child of the doctrine of anti-Semitism began to sink into popular consciousness, a "moral revulsion" took hold that unnerved many people with "polite" racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices.

Following the defeat of fascism, formerly weak political, social, and intellectual movements that sought to change the official structures of dominance and hierarchy have gathered strength throughout the world. The most important of these was the anticolonial movement, which led to the independence of dozens of new states in Asia and Africa. The British generally cooperated in peaceful transitions of power, as did the Americans, but the French and Dutch tried to hold onto their colonies by force. Regardless of countries' initial reaction to the demands from the colonies for independence, the age of imperialism was over for all colonizing powers (save the Russian Soviet imperium) by the middle of the twentieth century. Within 15 years after World War II, almost all of the former colonial countries were independent or in the transition to independence.

When subjugated peoples gain national power or independence, especially if they had to fight for it, there is generally an insistence of equal

recognition and standing in the international community. These sentiments were aided by a new international normative structure with the founding of the United Nations and the adoption, in 1948, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Part of the change was ideological, but it also coincided with a shift of real power in the world whereby European (and North American) political and economic dominance was no longer absolute.

The post-World War II rise of antiracial movements was also important within societies. The civil rights movement in the United States, led by African Americans, was the single most important force in transforming the country from its racist moorings to a more open society. The civil rights movement, which became the model for many others, was inspired by the nonviolent ideology of the anticolonial movement in India and was strongly supported by many Jewish Americans who saw the parallels between the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany and the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States.

Science has also played an auxiliary role in the decline of racism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a number of books written by leading academics and "public intellectuals" were sympathetic to racist views of society, and in particular deplored the deleterious influence of the massive wave of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. This tradition is exemplified in the writings of John R. Commons (1907), an influential economist of the early twentieth century, and E. A. Ross (1914), one of the most prominent sociologists of the time. In addition, popular works professed a much more blatant expression of scientific racism, such as Madison Grant's (1916) *The Passing of the Great Race*. These voices of authority were communicated to the reading public through popular magazines and newspapers (for overviews, see Baltzell 1964; Higham 1988; Gould 1996).

There was a counterweight to racist science, most notably advanced by Franz Boas, a leading anthropologist of the early twentieth century, whose students included Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, and Ruth Benedict (Boas 1934: 25–36; Barkan 1992: 76–95; Stocking 1982). Before World War II, however, the liberal nonracist interpretation was just another theoretical perspective, and many scholars and most of the educated public held other views. One sign of the strength of scientific racism was the eugenics movement, which popularized the fear that the higher fertility of the lower social classes and inferior races would bring ruin to Western civilization (Haller 1984). These ideas were influential in promoting immigration restriction in the United States in the 1920s.

After World War II, science began to assert more forcefully and in a more unified voice that race and racial categories held little scientific meaning. Ashley Montagu's *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, first published in 1942, became a standard text for university students in the

1950s and 1960s. UNESCO, a branch of the United Nations, issued an authoritative report in 1952 entitled *The Race Concept: Results of an Inquiry* that was intended to expose the fallacious assumptions of racial ideologies. Social science evidence on the harmful effects of racial segregation was cited in the 1954 decision of the United States Supreme Court that ended the doctrine of "separate but equal" in public schooling.

Decolonization, social movements to end discrimination, the empowerment of racial minorities, and a more antiracist social science agenda were all instrumental in moving the United States and other countries away from the apartheid-style racism that was prevalent during most of the first half of the twentieth century. Race still mattered, but the official ideology of racism was on the decline.

### Races in a postracist world

Although official racism was on the decline in the late twentieth century, prejudicial attitudes and discrimination lingered. In the United States it was not until the mid-1960s that discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations was made illegal. Although blatant and openly practiced discrimination is probably on the wane, many minority group members in the United States continue to encounter unfair treatment from society's gatekeepers as well as everyday slights that tear at the fabric of civility. Skin color and other attributes of physical appearance are still commonly used as identifiers for discriminatory treatment and group identity (Fredrickson 2002; Hirschman 1986; Telles 2004).

The question arises, then, of what races mean without a theory of racism to define it. Recall that before the rise of racial ideology, race or physical differences were considered to be an important dimension of human differentiation, but not qualitatively dissimilar to other social and cultural characteristics, such as ethnic origin, religion, and language. The development of "scientific" (or pseudo-scientific) racism created a new ideology that differed fundamentally from traditional ethnocentrism. The unifying idea of the new racial ideology was that racial groups were identifiable by distinct aspects of physical appearance and by innate characteristics, such as temperament, predispositions, and abilities. The preoccupation of scientific racism was to identify the number of races and their attributes. In Nazi Germany, the task focused on identifying Aryans, Jews, and other European races. In early-twentieth-century America, racial ideology was concerned with enforcement of the "one-drop rule" for persons of mixed African-European descent (whereby all persons of mixed white and black ancestry were treated as solely black), the threat posed by immigration of inferior races from Asia and Europe, and how to classify American Indians. Colonial administrators in Southeast Asia pondered the questions of whether Eurasians



should be recipients of white privilege and whether the energetic Chinese race would overwhelm the indigenous natives. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were no doubts that races were real entities based on biological attributes.

As the world changed in the second half of the twentieth century, racism waned but the formerly defined races and racial boundaries remained meaningful social categories in many societies, influencing both popular perceptions and the design of public policy and scientific research. This was especially the case in the United States.

Assuming that popular attitudes can be ascertained from surveys, most white Americans no longer subscribe to biological theories of racial differences, although they do not always condone specific government efforts to lessen the effects of discrimination (Schuman et al. 1997: chapter 3; Bobo 2001). Whereas racism is on the decline, the concept of race remains central to American discourse on diversity. Racial groups are regarded as real entities and the word "race" is still widely used in the media, by academics, and by the broader public.

Although the historical assumption that populations consist of a finite number of mutually exclusive racial groups is no longer tenable, awareness of this fact is relatively new. The race and status of persons of mixed African and European ancestry was a topic of much debate in nineteenth-century America, and there were variations from state to state in how they were classified (Davis 1991). But as the one-drop rule became dogma in the late nineteenth century, all "in-between peoples" were classified as black. This became the law of the land with the 1896 US Supreme Court decision, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which reflected the notion that "belief in the natural reality of human races and racial animosities was a central tenet of the new scientific doctrine of racial differences" (Klinker and Smith 1999: 99). The United States' binary classification of black and white was not the pattern elsewhere in the Americas, where more variegated perceptions of race and class evolved (Harris 1964).

Popular perceptions of fixed racial boundaries were belied by considerable inter- and intragenerational mobility across racial boundaries. "Passing," or the surreptitious movement across racial communities, was a long-standing practice among light-skinned persons of mixed African and European descent. Recent photographs of the reunion of the descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings (Jefferson's mistress) show how some of the families have become white while others chose to remain within the black community (Dao 2003). Passing from a minority to the "white" majority identity was also practiced by many Hispanics, American Indians, and even second-generation immigrant whites. The most celebrated cases are the adoption of Anglo-Saxon-sounding stage names for Hollywood stars with ethnic roots in eastern and southern Europe: Bernard Schwartz becomes Tony Curtis,

Issur Danielovitch becomes Kirk Douglas, and Dino Crocetti becomes Dean Martin (Baltzell 1966: 47). Examples are also evident from the world of eminent sociologists. Meyer Schkolnick adopted the stage name Robert Merton for his early career as an amateur magician at the age of 14 (Merton 1994). William Form was originally Uli Formicola; his first name was Americanized in school and his father shortened the family name (Form 2002).

The present differs from the past in the extent of intermarriage across group boundaries and the declining urge to identify solely with the traditionally defined higher-status group. Marriage across ethnic and religious boundaries among white Americans has become normative (Alba and Golden 1986). About one-fifth to one-third of Hispanic and Asian Americans marry someone from a different racial group (Smith and Edmonston 1997: chapter 3; Farley 2002: 39; Bean and Stevens 2003: 239). Mixed marriage among African Americans, although still at relatively low levels, has increased significantly in recent decades (Farley 1999; Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997; Stevens and Tyler 2002). Although the tradition was to assume that children of mixed marriages would follow the "one-drop" rule in racial identification, this is no longer the case.

These mixed marriages have produced increasing numbers of Americans for whom racial identity is a matter of choice. Parents of mixed-race children exercised considerable variation in choice when reporting the "race" of their children in censuses and surveys (Waters 1999, 2002; Xie and Goyette 1997; Saenz et al. 1995). Some parents chose the race of the mother, others chose the race of the father, while others tried to report both races, even when the instructions permitted only one race to be reported on the form. These "only one race is permitted" forms (similar forms are used in schools and in other institutions) were the primary stimulus that gave rise to a social movement among mixed-race families to create a new "multiracial identity" that would allow their children to affirm their heritage from both parents. In many inquiries, nontrivial proportions of the population refuse to report a race or ethnicity or simply report that they are Americans (Lieberson and Waters 1993).

### **The problem of measuring race: The US experience**

The growing confusion over the meaning of race in the United States is most evident in efforts to classify the population by race in censuses or in administrative records collected by schools, hospitals, and other public agencies. In earlier times, the racial ideology of biological differences led to an obsessive concern with tracing the ancestries of persons who might straddle racial boundaries. The enumerators of the 1890 US census were instructed to collect race data as follows:

Write white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian, according to the color or race of the person enumerated. Be particularly careful to distinguish between blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons. The word "black" should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; "mulatto," those who have three-eighths to five-eighths black blood; "quadroons," those persons who have one-fourth black blood; and "octoroons," those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood. (US Census Bureau 2002: 27)

By 1960, the ghost of racism had almost been vanquished from the census concept of race, and users of the data were instructed about the definition of race as follows:

The concept of race as used by the Bureau of the Census is derived from that which is commonly accepted by the general public. It does not, therefore, reflect clear-cut definitions of biological stock, and several categories refer to national origin.

...Negro [includes] persons of Negro or mixed Negro and white descent...and persons of mixed American Indian and Negro descent unless the American Indian ancestry predominates....

...American Indian [includes] full blooded American Indians, persons of mixed white and Indian blood...if enrolled in a tribe...or regarded as Indians in their community.

...Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino, etc., are based largely on country or area of origin, and not necessarily on biological stock. (US Bureau of the Census 1963: x)

In spite of the intent to create a racial classification based on social rather than biological categories, the logic of the 1960 census measurement continued to rely upon the assumption of the one-drop rule for persons with any African ancestry. The only exception was for persons of mixed black and American Indian descent for whom American ancestry predominates—presumably this means that they "looked" American Indian in terms of skin color and other physical attributes. Was this a throwback to racist notions or simply an allowance for social identity to override the one-drop rule? Note that persons of mixed American Indian and white ancestry who are not members of tribes or recognized by members of the community were not to be classified as American Indians.

These may have been the assumptions of those who designed the census; however, Census Bureau enumerators did not enforce them. The 1960 US census was the first in which the majority of householders filled out the questionnaires themselves. The Census Bureau reported that there were

only small differences in the racial composition of the population in the 1960 census that would not be consistent with projections based on the 1950 census, when the population was classified by race according to the observations of enumerators (US Bureau of the Census 1963: xi). This observation was inconsistent, however, with the increase of almost 50 percent in the number of American Indians (Snipp 2003). The color line between black and white was more clearly demarcated by the one-drop rule than for American Indians of mixed ancestry.

Following the passage of the civil rights laws in the 1960s, a new imperative emerged in measuring race in census and administrative data. Federal laws made discrimination illegal, and wide racial disparities could, in certain circumstances, be interpreted as potential evidence of discriminatory behavior. The 1965 Voting Rights Act gave the federal government the right to review electoral boundaries in areas where the potential voting power of racial groups and language minorities might be diluted by local government bodies. The 1965 act left the definitions of protected groups implicit, but 1975 legislation specified that in addition to blacks, the law was intended to protect the rights of "persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaska Native, or of Spanish heritage" (Edmonston and Schultze 1995: 147–148). These new federal responsibilities could only be undertaken with detailed census data on race and other groups by geographic areas (Edmonston and Schultze 1995: chapter 7; Edmonston et al. 1996: 4–15).

In the wake of the civil rights revolution, the federal government, universities, corporations, and many organizations in the United States began to respond not only to the mandate to eliminate discriminatory procedures in admissions, hiring, and promotions, but also to take "affirmative action" to ensure that individuals who had encountered (or might encounter) discrimination would be included in the pool of eligible candidates to be admitted, hired, or promoted. All of these initiatives were thought to require "objective" data on race and ethnicity gathered by census-style questions in surveys or administrative records.

By the 1970s, the census measurement of race was still in the process of transition from race as a biological concept to a social category, based on the subjective identification of respondents who were supposed to check the right categories or to fill in the blanks according to the everyday understanding of race. Awareness was also growing, however, that race was a "political" category in the sense that the numbers of a group mattered. In addition to the formal considerations of legal or judicial mandates, benefits are associated with a population whose presence can be counted. The leadership of minority communities recognized the significance of being counted and began to push for inclusion in the census. In the 1970 census, a new question on Hispanic origin was included on the long form (5 percent sample), and in 1980 Hispanic origin was moved to

the short form (100 percent of the respondents). This was a complete turnaround from the response to the creation of a category for Mexicans in the race question in the 1930 census. In the 1930s, the Mexican American population (and the Mexican government) protested against the effort to stigmatize Mexican Americans by labeling them a racial group (Cortes 1980). By the 1970s, the leadership of the Latino community understood that census data on their population was more of an asset than a liability, although they insisted on being labeled an ethnic group rather than a racial one.

A similar political effort was made in the late 1980s to ensure a detailed listing of specific Asian and Pacific Islander populations on the census form. The Census Bureau proposed a global Asian and Pacific Islander category, with a blank line so that individuals could write in their particular national origin. Representatives of the Asian American community argued that the Bureau's proposal might lead to a lower count of their populations, and, with the help of their Congressional representatives, they were successful in expanding the list to include eight specific national-origin populations (and an "other" category) on the 1990 census form (US Bureau of the Census 1990).

With a growing awareness that there was no clear conceptual framework within which to collect data on race and ethnicity in the United States, in 1977 the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) stepped in and issued Statistical Directive No. 15, "Race and ethnic standards for federal statistics and administrative reporting" (Edmonston et al. 1996: Appendix B). Statistical Directive No. 15 is long on details about the specific groups to be included and the format of data presentation, but it provides minimal information on the concepts of race and ethnicity or on the logic of why some groups and not others are included in the classifications. The introduction notes that "these classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature, nor should they be viewed as determinants of eligibility for participation in any Federal program." The only rationale offered for the classification is that it was developed in response to needs of the executive branch and Congress. In defining the five major race/ethnic populations to be measured (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and White), Statistical Directive No. 15 refers to persons having origins in specific regions of the world. Persons with mixed ancestry or origins should be classified in "the category which most closely reflects the individual's recognition in his community."

The listing of categories offered by Statistical Directive No. 15 was ad hoc, there were no clear criteria to define race or ethnicity, and there were no directions on how people were to be classified (presumably according to subjective identity, but this was not specified). Perhaps most importantly, political considerations were clearly beginning to tear at any consensus that the OMB classification was the best possible one. Pacific Islanders, espe-

cially Hawaiian natives, felt that their inclusion with Asians was inappropriate. Many ethnic communities or national origin populations, such as Arab Americans, thought that they should be included as populations designated on the census form. Most vocal was the multiracial population, who thought that the mutually exclusive categories of the race classification forced persons of mixed ancestry to choose only one (Farley 2002).

To address these and many other concerns, OMB, in the early 1990s, requested that the National Research Council convene a workshop to receive input from researchers, administrators, and other interested parties on a revision of Statistical Directive No. 15 (Edmonston et al. 1996). There were also studies by the Census Bureau, opportunities for public comments, and extensive interagency discussions that led to the final revision of Statistical Directive No. 15, issued in 1997 (Office of Management and Budget 1997a, 1997b). The results were ad hoc modification of the race and ethnic categories and their labels (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White) and a major change in measurement that allowed persons to "mark one or more" races with which they identify (for a comprehensive overview of multiple-race classification, see Perlmann and Waters 2002). There was no additional conceptual clarification of the meaning or definition beyond the 1977 statement that race and ethnicity do not represent scientific or anthropological categories.

One might draw rather different conclusions about the significance of these varied approaches to measuring race as a social category. On the positive side, one might say that most Americans are able to think in terms of, and to reliably report themselves in, discrete race and ethnic categories. The overwhelming majority of African Americans, Asian Americans, and whites will classify themselves in the same categories regardless of what classifications are used (Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000). While the measurement of race changed from the basis of enumerator observation in the 1950 census to householder choice in the 1960 census, there were few signs of this change as reflected in consistency of reporting. In the 2000 census with the major change to allow for multiple race identification, only 2.4 percent of persons chose to mark two or more race groups (Grieco and Cassidy 2001). Even without conceptual clarity of the meaning of race and despite wide variations in measurement strategies and the possibility that the tabulation of the population by race will add to more than 100 percent, it seems that race is so deeply embedded in the American psyche that the society can continue to think about and measure race as it has always done.

However, an alternative case can be made that the conceptual validity of race is beginning to wane. In the 1990 census, about 5 million Americans (2 percent of the population) did not answer the race question, and another 10 million wrote in a response that did not appear in one of the

listed categories (Edmonston et al. 1996: 21–22). Coding these “write in” responses was a major task with about 300 codes for race, 600 codes for American Indian tribes, and more than 70 for Hispanic groups in the 1990 census. In 1990 more than 250,000 census respondents wrote in roughly 75 different multiple race responses under the “other race” category (Edmonston et al. 1996: 22). The Census Bureau recoded many of these write-in responses to one of the listed categories. Most of those left in the “other race” category were primarily of Hispanic origin. Most census users are probably unaware of the resulting “untidiness” of responses to the traditional single “forced-choice” race question.

There are two populations for whom the race question is particularly problematic: American Indians and Hispanics. There is a broad continuum of persons of American Indian descent, whose identity varies with the nature of the question asked. For example, Matthew Snipp (1989: chapter 2) has shown that only about one in five persons who claimed American Indian ancestry (which allows for multiple responses) in the 1980 census reported themselves to be American Indian in the census race question (which had mutually exclusive categories). Mixed ancestry, which may represent the future of other racial populations, has been a characteristic of the American Indian population for at least a century, perhaps even longer (Snipp 2002). Mixed marriage rates among the American Indian population are higher than for any other racial group (Sandefur and McKinnel 1986). This means that the count of American Indians from any census and survey depends on subjective identity and the specific question asked.

With the lessening of the stigma (and the increase of the advantages) of being American Indian, a virtual population explosion in their numbers has occurred that cannot be explained by natural increase and immigration (Eschbach 1993, 1995; Passel 1996). The 1990 American Indian census population of 1.96 million grew to 2.46 million in 2000 if only the single identifiers are included and to 4.12 million if multiple identifiers are included (Snipp 2002; Grieco and Cassidy 2001). The ten-year increase may be either 24 percent or 110 percent! An increasing proportion of the mixed ancestry population has switched their “race”—signifying that being American Indian is now viewed positively (Snipp 1997).

Although explicitly not labeled as a racial group in Census Bureau classifications, Hispanic or Latino origin has a quasi-racial status by virtue of its mention in Statistical Directive No. 15 and in the 1997 revision. Because Hispanic origin is defined by a separate question, it is possible to cross-classify Hispanics by race and to compare white Hispanics, black Hispanics, Asian Hispanics, and so on. In most analyses, however, Hispanics are lumped together regardless of their race, perhaps because many Hispanics do not consider the American racial categories to be meaningful. Of the 35 million Hispanics enumerated in the 2000 census, 42 percent checked “some other

race" in response to the race question, often adding an Hispanic or Latino descriptive term in the write-in category (Greico and Cassidy 2001: 10). Another 6 percent of Hispanics checked multiple races, with the second race being "some other race," indicating that they considered Hispanic origin as equivalent to the checked race category.

Another sign of the lack of recognition of American racial categories among Hispanics is the fraction that simply does not answer the race question. In the 1995 Race and Ethnic Targeted Test (RAETT) survey, about 13–14 percent of persons in the targeted Hispanic sample (living in areas that were predominately Hispanic) left the race question blank (Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000: 338–339). However, nonresponse to the race question dropped to less than one percent when Hispanic was included as a category in a combined race/ethnic classification. Whether because many recent Hispanic immigrants are not socialized into thinking in terms of American racial groups or because many Hispanics feel that their ancestry/language/ethnic group is their only identity, the conclusion is that members of America's largest minority community do not agree with the traditional means of designating race (Rodriguez 2000). Mainland Puerto Ricans perceive no association between skin tone (reported by interviewers) and subjective "race"—being either white or black (Landale and Oropesa 2002).

Although the Census Bureau is entrusted with measuring continuity of the country's statistics, the Bureau has an erratic record in the measurement of race. The 1980 census dropped the word "race" from the questionnaire and simply asked respondents to complete the sentence "This person is \_\_\_\_\_" by choosing from a list of racial categories. The word "race" was brought back in the 1990 and 2000 censuses, presumably because respondents needed to know how this question differed from the other census items that measure Hispanic origins and ancestry. Another fundamental and growing problem is the inherent subjectivity of race responses. Statistics are supposed to be about objective phenomena that can be measured with some reliability. Under the present American system, however, a person's race is whatever the respondent thinks she or he is—in response to a list of categories. If the list of races, the names of races, or the sequence of questions changes, people's responses will change as well. These problems were exacerbated with the freedom of multiple-race reporting in the 2000 census. The preliminary report of multiple-race reporting from this census lists 57 possible combinations of 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 races.

## Conclusions

The thesis of this essay is that the common view—officially sanctioned in some countries, notably the United States—of race as a fundamental and relatively stable ascriptive attribute of human populations is flawed. To put



the matter simply, there is no conceptual basis for race except racism. Racism (or racial ideology) assumes that aspects of physical appearance—phenotype—are outward manifestations of heritable traits such as abilities, propensities for certain behaviors, and other sociocultural characteristics. This assumption, though widely accepted only a couple of generations ago, has been put to rest by recent genetic research.

It is because these differences are external that these racial differences strike us so forcibly, and we automatically assume that differences of similar magnitude exist below the surface, in the rest of our makeup. This is simply not so; the remainder of our genetic makeup hardly differs at all. (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza 1995: 124)

Although overt racism has receded (though prejudice and discrimination have not been eradicated) and racial ideologies have lost official and scientific legitimacy, race remains part of the popular and scholarly lexicon, especially in the United States. The term is now viewed as a social—not a biological—category to describe members of a population who share some common physical features (e.g., skin color) and whose ancestors share a common geographical origin.

This new concept of race as a social category, however, does not have a logical basis. In general, the definition tends to rely on popular perceptions of race—race is whatever people think they are or whatever they think others are. This approach, however incoherent or inconsistent, usually works in societies that have only recently emerged from under the shadow of official racism.

For example, the contemporary distinction in the United States between black and white rests on the assumption of the one-drop rule that all persons of mixed white and black ancestry are considered and treated as solely black. This arbitrary classification reflects popular perceptions, but only because most Americans, white and black, have been accustomed to think this way. Most other societies with mixed white–black populations, such as in Latin America or South Africa, do not have a one-drop rule, but rather consider color to be a continuum or have other groupings. There is no correct way to classify people of mixed ancestry within the standard American race categories—popular perceptions vary across societies and over time, reflecting historical experiences of official racism and state-sanctioned discrimination. With intergroup relations in flux, including high levels of intermarriage that are producing even larger populations of mixed ancestry, popular perceptions of race will surely change, although we have only vague perceptions of what the future might hold.

On this very shaky ground American society has created social arrangements and public policies that assume that race is a real phenomenon and that distinct racial populations exist. These arrangements and policies are a reflection of public and private efforts to combat the legacy of the era of official segregation and discrimination. During that era, casual observation of physical appearance was sufficient for gatekeepers to deny housing, employment, and promotion opportunities to those considered "nonwhite."

The contemporary situation is very different. Racial and gender discrimination is illegal, and administrative bodies and courts are expected to evaluate the evidence when institutional discrimination is alleged. One standard method of ascertaining discrimination is to examine statistical proportionality—the difference in racial composition in an economic sector or residential area from that which might be expected if discrimination were absent (Prewitt 2002). Given the new method of collecting data on multiple race identities in the 2000 census, several experts believe that it will become much more difficult to enforce civil rights laws and to use the method of statistical proportionality as evidence of institutional discrimination that will hold up in courts (Harrison 2002; Persily 2002).

A related problem is evident when gatekeepers (human resource directors, college admission committees, supervisors) make affirmative action efforts to ensure some measure of opportunity for those who may have (or whose ancestors have) encountered discrimination. Who is eligible for such consideration? How are such efforts to be weighed against other attributes, including the potential for achievement and other personal circumstances that may indicate hardship? How will others, such as courts of law, the news media, and public opinion, perceive decisions made by gatekeepers? In these circumstances, many idiosyncratic factors will affect individual and institutional behavior. Organizations that wish to report progress in minority hiring may take the broadest definition of racial groups and include recent immigrants whose ancestors were not subjected to official discrimination in American society. On the other hand, gatekeepers may try to be risk-averse and inquire about an applicant's ancestry to ensure that he or she is a legitimate candidate for such programs. Because these programs are controversial and opportunities and resources (though modest by any measure) are being allocated, some clear basis must exist for making decisions and evaluating them.

Perhaps the most telling example of the difficulty of reconciling social programs that rely on unambiguous definitions of race and the demographic reality of mixed ancestry is the situation of American Indians. As a token effort to compensate American Indians for the expropriation of their lands and periodic programs of physical and cultural extermination, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a branch of the Department of Interior, provides subsidies

for health care and other programs. Individual American Indians are eligible only if they are recognized as members of tribes and the US government recognizes their tribe. Since most criteria for tribal affiliation and the recognition of a tribe are inherently subjective, most tribes (and the government) have fallen back on genealogy, expressed in terms of the infamous "blood quantum" rules that are a legacy of nineteenth-century racist thought (Snipp 2002). Because American Indian tribes have a degree of sovereignty, it has been possible to establish profitable gambling casinos on some Indian reservations that are close to major metropolitan areas. This new industry has raised the economic value of American Indian affiliation considerably. The result is a growing number of new "Indian wars" (political struggles) between existing and nascent tribes over the question of recognition and potential wealth, with the debate often focused on "blood quantum" as the measure of true racial membership.

There has never been any credible justification for assuming that physical markers, such as skin color, can be considered as ascriptive characteristics that universally predict sociocultural characteristics. It was only during the era of scientific racism of the century or more before 1950 when laws and social policies oppressed nonwhites that racial divisions could be considered as relatively permanent divisions of the population. Contemporary societies, including the United States, now reject the racial ideologies of the past, but US practice continues to try to measure race as an ascribed status and to fashion social policies as if racial categories are mutually exclusive. The 2000 US census that allowed multiple race reporting has exposed the fault line in the system, but the full implications of what has transpired have yet to be acknowledged. Most players appear to favor a technical fix to the problem—an improved system of measurement that would be comparable to the past and better reflect the present. The reality, in my judgment, is that the concept is broken and there is no valid rationale for preserving the old system, however modified. Race without racism is an anachronism.

There is a perfectly good concept to take the place of race, that of ethnicity. Ethnicity is explicitly subjective, it acknowledges multiple ancestries, and it recognizes that ethnic groups are porous and heterogeneous. Physical differences in appearance among people remain an important marker in everyday life, but this reality can be better framed within the concept of ethnicity, which emphasizes ambiguity rather than either/or distinctions. Although jettisoning the concept of race is a necessary step, this act alone will not solve the problem and may make it more difficult to measure inequality and discrimination in the short run (e.g., Hirschman 1993; Hirschman, Alba, and Farley 2000: 391). The more important and challenging task is to develop meaningful measures of ethnicity and alternative concepts for use in censuses, surveys, and administrative records.

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