

Ian Hacking

Why race still matters

Why has race mattered in so many times and places? Why does it still matter? Put more precisely, why has there been such a pervasive tendency to apply the category of race and to regard people of different races as essentially different kinds of people? Call this the ‘first question.’ Of course there are many more questions that one must also ask: Why has racial oppression been so ubiquitous? Why racial exploitation? Why racial slavery? Perhaps we tend to think of races as essentially different just because we want to excuse or to justify the domination of one race by another.

I shall proceed with the first question by canvassing five possible answers to it that variously invoke *nature*, *genealogy* (in the sense of Michel Foucault), *cognitive science*, *empire*, and *pollution rules*.

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One final preliminary remark is in order. Most parts of this essay could have been written last year or next year, but the discussion of naturalism, medicine, and race could only have been written in November of 2004, and may well be out of date by the time this piece is printed.

Why has the category of race been so pervasive? One answer says that the distinction is just there, in the world for all to see. Superficial differences between races do exist in nature, and these are readily recognized.

The naturalist agrees at once that the distinctions are less in the nature of things than they once were, thanks to interbreeding among people whose ancestors have come from geographically distinct blocks. Racial distinctions are particularly blurred where one population has been translated by force to live in the midst of another population and yet has not been assimilated – slaves taken from West Africa and planted in the Southern United States, for example. The naturalist notes that traditional racial distinctions are less and less viable the more children are born to parents whose geographical origins are very different.

Sensible naturalists stop there. The belief that racial differences are anything

more than superficial is a repugnant error. John Stuart Mill was the wisest spokesman for this position.

Here, in modern terminology, is his doctrine: (1) Nature makes differences between individuals. These differences are real, not constructed. (2) We classify things according to differences we observe. Classifications are made by people and encoded in social practices, institutions, and language. (3) Some classes are such that their members have little in common except the marks by which we sort them into those classes – call those superficial kinds. (4) Other classes have members with a great many things in common that do not follow from the marks by which we sort them into classes. These are “real Kinds.”¹

Examples? “White things,” he wrote, referring not to race but to the color itself, “are not distinguished by any common properties except whiteness; or if they are, it is only by such as are in some way dependent on, or connected with, whiteness.” But horses, to use one of his other examples, have endless properties

1 His own words are old-fashioned but lovely. The differences between members of classes “are made by nature . . . while the recognition of those differences as grounds for classification and of naming is . . . the act of man.” However, “we find a very remarkable diversity . . . between some classes and others.” Only superficial resemblances link members of one type of class, while members of classes of the other type have a vast number (he said an endless number) of properties they share. Those that share an almost endless number of properties are his real Kinds. From John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, first published in 1843. The discussion of racial classification is found in bk. 1, chap. 7, sec. 4. The changes Mill made in later editions of the book involved sex, not race – doubtless because Mill hoped to get the questions about sex exactly right for Harriett Taylor. See chap. 7, on Millon classification, in my forthcoming book, *The Tradition of Natural Kinds* (Cambridge University Press).

in common, over and above whatever marks we use to distinguish them from other animals or other kinds of things. Horses form a real Kind, but the class of white things is a superficial kind.

The contemporary philosophical concept of a ‘natural kind’ is a descendent of Mill’s notion. Nonphilosophers who have come across this phrase may suppose it refers to a well worked out, technical, and stable concept. I argue elsewhere that it does not.²

Mill himself was as notable a profeminist and antiracist as can be claimed for a white nineteenth-century man. Although he argued that real Kinds exist, he at once went on to ask whether the races and sexes are real Kinds, or if they are merely superficial, like the classifications “Christian, Jew, Musselman, and Pagan.” The religious confessions are not real Kinds, he argued, because there is no property that Christians have and Muslims lack, or vice versa, except whatever follows from their faiths.

What about race? Most anthropologists of Mill’s day held that there were five races, named geographically but recognized by color: Caucasian, Ethiopian, Mongolian, American, and Malayan. According to Mill, color and certain other physiological traits are the marks by which we distinguish members of the different races. Races would be real Kinds if there were endlessly many other differences between the races that did not follow from the marks by which we distinguish them. Are there endlessly many such differences?

Well, you cannot rule that out a priori, Mill thought. “The various races and temperaments, the two sexes, and even the various ages, may be differences of Kind, within our meaning of the term. I

2 This is one of the conclusions urged in my book *The Tradition of Natural Kinds*.

say they may be; I do not say they are.” Mill believed that only empirical science could determine whether the various races, as distinguished by color and a few other features, pick out classes that are distinct in a great many unrelated ways. “If their differences can all be traced to climate and habits [or, he added in later editions, to some one or a few special differences in structure], they are not, in the logician’s view, specifically distinct.” He would have been pleased by Anthony Appiah’s careful discussion of very much the same question using more recent terminology. Science might have revealed an endless number of differences between the races that are not consequences of the marks by which we distinguish them, namely color and physiognomy. But science has not done so, and almost certainly will not. Mill, like Appiah, thus concludes that the races are not real Kinds.

This conclusion, however, does not answer, or aim at answering, the specific question I raised at the outset, of why there is such a pervasive tendency to apply the category of race. Maybe Mill thought the answer was obvious. The desire of one racial group to dominate, exploit, or enslave another demands legitimacy in societies that, like modern Europe and America, are committed to versions of egalitarianism. Race sciences were devised to discover a lot of differences between races that do not follow from the marks of color and structure by which we distinguish them. You do not have to treat people equally, if they are sufficiently different.

Although it takes us some distance from the ‘first question,’ some recent events force us to clarify the naturalist position on race. In an important editorial on the U.S. census published in the year 2000, *Nature Genetics* stated: “That

race in this context is not a scientific term is generally acknowledged by scientists – and a message that cannot be repeated enough.” An editorial in 2001 observed that “scientists have long been saying that at the genetic level there is more variation between two individuals in the same population than between populations, and that there is no biological basis for ‘race.’”³ Now – in November of 2004 – this selfsame journal has produced a special supplement on the medical and genetic uses of racial and ethnic classification. And the November 11 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* highlights the news of the ‘race-based’ drug targeted at African Americans suffering from certain types of heart failure. All this is breaking news. Hence what follows cannot be definitive, but one may hope that a perspective somewhat distanced from media discussion can be useful even in the midst of it.

We must first update Mill with a little logic. When he wrote about differences between classes, he had in mind properties that serve to distinguish members of one class from another in a uniform way. A uniform difference between cows and horses is something that is true in the main of any cow but not true in the main of any horse – digestion by rumination, for example. There are ever so many such differences between horses and cows; hence they are real Kinds. Call them *uniform differences*. There are a great many uniform differences that distinguish horses from other kinds of animals, but almost no uniform differences that distinguish white things from green things, except their color, or Muslims from Christians, except their faith.

Writing in 1843, Mill had little occasion to think about statistical differ-

3 “Census, Race and Science,” *Nature Genetics* 24 (2000): 97; “Genes, Drugs and Race,” *Nature Genetics* 29 (2001): 239.

ences, which were only just beginning to loom large on the scientific horizon. We need some new concepts: I will use the words 'significant,' 'meaningful,' and 'useful.' All three go with the dread word 'statistical.' Since we are among other things talking about so-called races, namely, geographically and historically identified groups of people, we are talking about populations. And we are talking about some characteristic or property of some but not all members of a population.

'Significance' was preempted by statistics early in the twentieth century. It is completely entrenched there. Here I use it for any major difference detected by a well-understood statistical analysis. A characteristic is *statistically significant* if its distribution in one population is significantly different from that in a comparable population. Let us say that a characteristic is *statistically meaningful* if there is some understanding, in terms of causes, of why the difference is significant. For example, in the early days no one knew why smoking was associated with lung cancer, but now we understand that quite well, although not completely. The correlation used to be merely significant, but now it is meaningful.

Finally, a characteristic is *statistically useful* if it can be used as an indicator of something of interest in some fairly immediate practical concern. Take an example from another topic nowadays much discussed. A body mass index (BMI) over 31 is a statistically useful indicator of the risk of type 2 diabetes, and is therefore useful in epidemiology and preventive medicine. (There are much better indicators involving the distribution of mass and muscle in the body, but at present such indicators are expensive to measure, while BMI measurement costs almost nothing.)

Classes that are statistically significant, meaningful, or useful are *not* thereby real Kinds. There is no reason to believe that there are a great many independent and uniform differences that distinguish obese persons from those whose BMI is in the recommended range of 18 to 25.

'Significant' in the end relies on technical notions in applied probability theory. 'Meaningful' has no resort to viable technical notions in any discipline (all claims to the contrary are spurious). There do exist clear, although often abused, criteria of statistical significance. There are no clear criteria for being statistically meaningful. In practice the distinction is often easily made. For a long time, the class of people who smoke was known only to be statistically significant with respect to lung cancer. One had no idea of the causal mechanisms underlying the correlation. Now we think we understand the connections between nicotine and death, although these connections are still merely probable. We cannot say of a young man beginning to smoke that if he continues with his vice he will succumb to lung cancer if nothing else gets him first. But we can say that many such young men will die of lung cancer, and oncologists know enough to be able to explain why.

Unlike statistical significance, the idea of being statistically meaningful is a hand-waving concept that points at the idea of an explanation or a cause. Imprecise hand-waving concepts are dangerous when they are given fancy names. They can be put to wholly evil ends. But if we do not give them phony names and are well aware of their imperfections, they can be useful when we need them.

We do need this concept. Many people – as evidenced by debates going on

at the time of this writing, in November of 2004 – are scared of the idea that the traditional list of races employed by traditional racists might be statistically significant classes. With good reason!

Ten years ago *The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray attracted a great deal of attention. The authors claimed that the Gaussian distributions of IQ scores establish a natural distinction of some importance between different races. They forcefully argued that the class of African Americans is a statistically significant class – significant with respect to a property they called intelligence, and which they measured with IQ tests.

They did not imply that the races are real Kinds. That is, they did not state that there is a host of uniform differences between Caucasian Americans and African Americans. Readers not unreasonably assumed, however, that the authors meant exactly that. At any rate, the authors clearly were not talking about mere correlations, namely, disparities between IQ scores within different racial groups. But they did not establish that these disparities are statistically meaningful to any biological understanding.

About the same time that *The Bell Curve* was published, ogre naturalists, such as Philippe Rushton in *Race, Evolution, and Behavior*, made more sweeping claims to biologically grounded racial differences. They claimed that the races are distinguished by many properties rightly prized or feared for different strengths and weaknesses. If that were true, then races would exactly fit Mill's definition of a real Kind.

One deplores both Rushton and *The Bell Curve*, but there is an absolutely fundamental logical difference between what the two assert. Rushton claimed that the races are real Kinds. One imag-

ines that Herrnstein and Murray thought so too, but what they claimed was that the races are statistically significant classes. And they implied that this is statistically meaningful.

Despite the fact that his doctrines have a centuries-old pedigree, we can dismiss the egregious Rushton. We can also refute Murray and Herrnstein.⁴ Mill's type of naturalism has contempt for both doctrines. Loathing of these quite recent doctrines and their predecessors has, not surprisingly, produced revulsion against any sort of naturalism about race. Today there is some consternation over the appearance of what is called race-based medicine.

The science of medicine was for quite a long time the science of the European male body, with footnotes for non-European or female bodies. All that has changed: those footnotes are now chapters. But the current situations for the groups that had been relegated to the footnotes are quite different. Many medical differences between males and females are uniform, but medical differences between races are almost always only statistical.

We have long known that some ailments are restricted to some gene pools. Tay-Sachs is a hereditary disease (in which an enzyme deficiency leads to the accumulation of certain harmful residues in the brain and nerve tissue, often resulting in mental retardation, convulsions, blindness, and, ultimately, death) that almost exclusively affects young children of eastern European Jewish de-

4 There is a tendency among proper-thinking people to dismiss *The Bell Curve* cavalierly, as both wrong-headed and refuted, without actually saying why. Many things wrong, and one has an obligation to say what. My own 'genealogical' objections are stated in a piece in *The London Review of Books*, January 26, 1995.

scent. 'Ashkenazi' is a valuable geographical, historical, and social classification. It is geographical because it indicates where members of this class, or their near ancestors, came from, namely, eastern Europe. It makes a contrast with Sephardic Jews, whose roots are in Spain. In modern Europe and North America, social differences between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic hardly matter to most people, but they remain significant in North Africa and West Asia. Until further interbreeding makes it totally obsolete, Ashkenazi is a statistically significant and a statistically meaningful class with respect to Tay-Sachs disease.

There are similar geographical-historical indicators for lactose intolerance and for an inability to digest fava beans. West African ancestry is an indicator for being a carrier of the sickle-cell anemia trait, which confers some immunity against malaria. This trait was often stigmatized as simply 'black.' In fact, it is primarily West African, although it shows up in Mediterranean populations where malaria was a major selector for survival. The indicator was abused for racial reasons in widespread screening.

"Drug approved for Heart Failure in African Americans" – headline on the first business page of *The New York Times*, July 20, 2004. Here we go again? Quite possibly. "The peculiar history [of this drug] on the road to the market presents a wide array of troubling and important issues concerning the future status of race as a category for constructing and understanding health disparities in American society."⁵ For a stark reminder of the commerce, the *Times* reported that the previous day the stock of the drug's maker, NitroMed, rose from \$4.31

5 Frederick Kahn, "How a Drug Becomes 'Ethnic': Law, Commerce, and the Production of Racial Categories in Medicine," *Yale Journal of Health Policy, Law, and Ethics* 4 (2004): 46.

to \$10.21, and had reached \$16 at midday. This story has been ongoing for a decade in medical, commercial, and regulatory circles.

There are real problems about the racially targeted heart drug. BiDil is a mixture of two well-known heart medications. Scientific papers assert, first, that other medicines are not as good for African Americans with heart failure as they are for other Americans with this problem, and, second, that BiDil works better for African Americans with certain specifics than any other drug on the market.⁶ In fact, randomized trials were discontinued because the drug was manifestly effective on black patients. Nobody well understands why. The reasons could be at least in part social and economic (including dietary) rather than hereditary. The correlation is strongly significant, but it is not statistically meaningful at present from a genetic or other biological point of view.

Even if one is a complete skeptic about, for example, a genetic basis for the differential efficacy of the drug, the drug does appear to be statistically *useful* in treating the designated class of patients. That means that race may be a useful indicator to a physician of the potential effectiveness of this rather than another drug – under present social and historical conditions.

Now turn to leukemia. Bone marrow transplants help an important class of patients. Donors and recipients must have matching human leukocyte antigens (HLAs); at present, doctors try to match six different types of them. If a patient has no relative to serve as a donor, matches are hard to come by. The

6 Anne L. Taylor, "Combination of Isosorbide Dinitrate and Hydralazine in Blacks with Heart Failure," *New England Journal of Medicine* 351 (2004): 2049 – 2057.

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relevant antigens are unevenly distributed among ethnic and racial groups.⁷ There exist registries of possible donors – truly generous persons, for at present donation of bone marrow is quite harrowing. Happily, free-floating stem cells in the blood also help, but the donor must take a lot of drugs to boost those stem cells. Another source of cells is umbilical cord blood. But this, like all the other options, requires antigen matching.

In the United States, the National Bone Marrow Program maintains the master registry. Most people in existing registries have tended to be middle-aged and white, which means that whites have a good chance of finding a match. Hence there have been racially targeted programs for Asian and African Americans. In the United States and Canada there is also the Aboriginal Bone Marrow Registries Association, and in the United Kingdom there is the African Caribbean Leukemia Trust. Asians for Miracle Marrow Matches has been very successful, especially in the Los Angeles region. The African Americans Uniting for Life campaign has been less successful, for all sorts of historical reasons. An African American with leukemia has a far worse chance of finding a match in time than members of other populations have. That is a social fact, but there is also a biological fact: there is far greater heterogeneity in the human leukemia antigen in persons of African origins than in other populations.⁸ (This fact fits well with the hypothesis that all

races are descendants of only one of many African populations that existed at the time that human emigration began out of Africa – populations whose characteristics have continued to be distributed among Africans today.)

If you go to the websites for the organizations that maintain the registries, you will see they do not shilly-shally in some dance of euphemistic political correctness about race. For them it is a matter of life and death. Without the Asian registries there would have been many more dead Asian Americans in the past decade. For lack of more African Americans on the registries there will be more dead African Americans in the next few years than there need be.

We certainly lack a complete understanding of the distribution of human leukemia antigens in different geographically identified populations. But we do have some biological understanding of the underlying causal differences. And race is a very useful quick indicator of where to look for matches, just as the BMI is a useful quick indicator of potential health problems.

So when, if ever, is it useful to speak in terms of the category of race, on the grounds that the races in some contexts are not only statistically significant but also statistically useful classes? To answer this question, we can use our distinctions:

- *The Bell Curve* may show that IQ is a statistically significant characteristic

7 This also matters to renal transplants. See Pauline C. Creemers and Delawir Kahn, "A Unique African HLA Haplotype May Identify a Population at Increased Risk for Kidney Graft Rejection," *Transplantation* 65 (1998): 285–288.

8 For HLA differentiation, see T. D. Lee, A. Lee, and W. X. Shi, "HLA-A, -B, -D and -DQ Antigens

in Black North Americans," *Tissue Antigens* (1991): 79–83. For maps, see, for example, one of the essays in the November *Nature Genetics* issue referenced in the text: Sarah A. Tishkoff and Kenneth K. Kidd, "Implications of Biogeography of Human Populations for 'Race' and Medicine," *Nature Genetics Supplement* 36 (2004): 521–527.

of some American subpopulations, but it is neither meaningful from a biological point of view nor useful for any well-defined purpose.

- Some medications may be less effective, and BiDil may be more effective, for African Americans with certain types of heart failure. If so, this is statistically significant and statistically useful for helping patients, but (in my opinion) it is at present not statistically meaningful.
- The relationships between human leukemia antigens and race are statistically significant, statistically meaningful for a biological understanding, and statistically useful in making marrow matches possible for minority groups.

It is not a good idea, in my opinion, to speak of BiDil as a race-based medicine, as do *The New York Times* and other media. The drug is not in the least *based* on race. It is quite possible that the reason it is more useful for African Americans than for other large and loosely characterized groups has less to do with the inherent constitution of their cardiovascular systems than with a mixture of social factors. If we had reliable data on the relevance of diets shared by a subclass of white and black Americans, we might be able to help whites with similar diets. The drug would not then be 'diet-based' but 'diet-targeted.' If you find it useful to use the word 'race,' say 'race-targeted' medicine.

I should have thought that the differential distribution of human leukocyte antigens would be esoteric enough to escape notice. Not so. The Stormfront White Nationalist Community, whose best-known figure is the neo-Nazi David Duke, is having a good time on one branch of its website discussing HLA diversity. In my opinion, the correct

strategy is not to play down the differential distribution of HLA, but to make it common knowledge that specific differences among peoples may be used in helping them – in much the same way that white Australians, given their socially induced tendency to overexpose themselves to the sun, should be targeted to cut down on the rate of death due to skin cancer.

I have introduced these remarks to make plain that naturalism about race, far from being an atavistic throwback to an era well left behind, is a topic for today, one about which we have to become clearer. Not because the races are real Kinds, denoting essentially different kinds of people. But because already we know that the races are not only statistically significant classes for some diseases, but also statistically useful. Some correlations are statistically meaningful. There is every reason to believe that more statistically meaningful correlations will be discovered.

Every time such a phenomenon is found useful, the racists will try to exploit the racial difference: witness the neo-Nazi use of differential antigens. Hence we need to be fully aware of what is involved.

A historian may well despise the complacency of naturalism. Differences between the races have seemed inevitable in the West, it will be argued, because of a framework of thought whose origins can be unmasked only by a genealogy. Classification and judgment are seldom separable. Racial classification *is* evaluation. Strong ascriptions of comparative merit were built into European racial classification and into evaluations of human beauty from the beginning. And so the Caucasian face and form were deemed closest to perfect beauty.

That is the vein in which Cornel West has sketched a genealogy of modern racism.⁹ Though his is not exactly a deep genealogy in the spirit of Nietzsche and Foucault, it is an excellent résumé of events. I wish only to comment on his starting point, less to correct it than to encourage rethinking the connection between race and geography.

According to West, “the category of race – denoting primarily skin color – was first employed as a means of classifying human bodies by François Bernier, a French physician, in 1684. He divided humankind into four races: Europeans, Africans, Orientals and Lapps.” Note that none of these is named by color and that the first three are identified by where they live or come from. It hardly matters now, but the fourth name, “Lapp” (probably derived from a word meaning simpleton), for the people who call themselves Sami, is about as racist a designation as there is. Bernier seems to have met only two Lapps, and he found them loathsome, and he simply reports that other unnamed travelers told him that the inhabitants of Lapponia were “vile animals.”¹⁰

There are certain emendations to be made in Cornel West’s account. Bernier did not designate a race restricted to Europeans. What he called the “first race [sic]” included Europeans (the disgusting Lapps aside), North Africans, and the peoples of West and South Asia.

9 Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” in West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 47–65.

10 François Bernier, “Nouvelle division de la terre,” *Journal des Sçavans* (April 24, 1684): 148–155. A definitive account of this paper is Siep Stuurman, “François Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification,” *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 1–21.

With some hesitation, he also included Native Americans of both hemispheres in that category.

He did not classify by color but mostly by facial features. Although he counted Mongols, Chinese, and Japanese as white (*véritablement blanc*), he felt they had such differently shaped faces and bodies that they constituted a different race. Indigenous Americans were also white. South Asians were less white (*olivâtre*), he thought, because of the torrid climate. When his categories (minus the Lapps) were expressed in terms of color during the next century, they became ‘white,’ ‘yellow,’ and ‘black’ – categories still going strong in Mill’s day. It may come as some surprise that for high-brow race science, whites included Arabs, Turks, everyone on the Indian subcontinent, and maybe Americans, that is, the indigenous ones.

Bernier does discuss color, but mostly when noting the existing hierarchy in the Indian subcontinent, where the lighter skin of the Moghul elite puts them ahead of the browner Hindus. Bernier’s observations of Africans seemed to be based almost entirely on African slaves, especially at Turkish or Arab slave markets (where of course he saw white, mostly female, slaves too). Yes, (sub-Saharan) Africans were black, but they contrasted with the first race chiefly in other aspects of the body, especially the hair and lips. “Here Bernier,” Siep Stuurman writes, “surely anticipates later racial discourse.”¹¹

In 1685, the year after Bernier published both his classification of races and his abridgement of Gassendi, Louis XIV promulgated the rules of the Transatlantic slave trade, the *Code noir*, making the effective identity of blackness and

11 Stuurman, “François Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification,” 4.

slavery a point of law, in no need of any race science to legitimate it.¹²

In West's important subthesis about aesthetics and human beauty, he shows that Bernier's conception was not simply that black Africans were uglier than the first race. There was also the element of sexual exoticism. Bernier raved about African women on display for sale in Turkey, naked. He regretted only that they cost so much.

West wanted to write a genealogy in part because he had the insight to address an intellectual problem that is seldom stated: The oceanic empires of Europe, chiefly France and Britain, and the United States in their wake, are unique in world history in that the dominant tendency of their moral and political philosophy from the start emphasized equality. Backsliding and self-interest are apparent beyond exaggeration, but the propensity for egalitarianism has been permanent and progressive. At the same time, West cites numerous celebrated egalitarians and reminds us of their persistent racism. In justice, Mill himself does not escape criticism.

How can racism and egalitarianism coexist? Because equality is among those who are essentially the same. If races are essentially different, they need not be treated alike. The framework for this alliance was established at the beginning, West urges, and became entrenched as Western thought passed from the first stage described in his genealogy to the second. One can envisage broadening West's analysis into something with the same form as Michel Foucault's *A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* – a history of racism in the age of equality. Stuurman, whom I have cited as the authority on Bernier, has impor-

tantly contributed on the other side, in his newly published *François Poulain and the Invention of Equality*.

Now we turn to the universalist approach favored in the cognitive sciences. It is proposed that human beings are born with an innate capacity not only to sort other people along racial lines, but also to act as if the differences distinguished are essential characteristics of people. This capacity is 'preprogrammed' by a genetic inheritance and matures and becomes operational early, say, at three or four years of age. A further proposal is that children are born not only with an ability to sort items into specific types of classes, but also with a predisposition to identify certain properties as essential to specific classes.

Lawrence Hirschfeld is an anthropologist who works at the intersection of cognitive science and developmental psychology – to use proper names, the improbable intersection of Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget.¹³ Hirschfeld draws on the work of psychologists, child-development experts, anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, neuroscientists, and others to postulate the distinct innate cognitive modules with which all of us are born. These modules

13 Lawrence Hirschfeld, "The Conceptual Politics of Race: Lessons from our Children," *Ethos* 25 (1997): 63–92. See also his book *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Conception of Human Kinds* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). The expression 'human kind' is obviously derived from 'natural kind.' I regret that it was I who put the phrase into circulation with this use, in Paris in 1992, at a conference on culture and cognition attended by Hirschfeld: Ian Hacking, "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds," in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack, eds., *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 351–383. I have abandoned this terminology, partly, and only partly, because it was modeled on the unsatisfactory idea of a natural kind.

12 Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code noir, ou, le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).

enable infants to acquire specific abilities. There is not just an all-purpose module for sorting things according to their resemblances, but specific modules for classifying living things, for making judgments of number, for sorting according to motion, and so forth.

Where does race enter? Hirschfeld proposes a module that enables children to distinguish different kinds of people. Some of the earliest distinctions children make using this module involve racial traits, primarily stereotypical skin color and a few facial characteristics. There is the further proposition that due to an innate disposition, the races, like any classes recognized using this module, are treated as if they were essential characteristics of people. Experiments show that children believe that changing a person's race, as marked by stereotypical features such as color, would change the kind of person that that individual is. In these first experiments, children were asked only about black and white individuals, illustrated by simple cartoon representations. Hirschfeld's initial data were drawn from experiments on school children in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but they now appear to be confirmed in results from more diverse groups.

This cognitive theory proposes that the tendency to regard racial classifications as essential is a corollary of a developmental fact about the human mind. We have a phenomenon on the order of the cognitive fallacies known from Tversky and Kahneman's studies of decision under uncertainty. Whatever evolutionary value our human kind module might have had, it made disastrous racist practices all too easy. But this proposal stands wholly apart from ogre naturalists' claim that the alleged differences between the races are grounds for making social arrangements that discrimi-

nate between the races. The cognitive scientists will say their results show how hard we must fight to control our innate tendencies to find essential differences between races.

Hirschfeld's analysis may be queried on grounds specific to race. Experimenters are vigilant not to confuse cultural from cognitive input. They highlight the issue in titles such as *Culture and Cognition*, which is the present approved way to express the nature-nurture debate. Yet one cannot but suspect that they underestimate how quickly very young children catch on to what is wanted of them. One might say, with a whiff of irony, that children have an innate ability to figure out what adults are up to, and hence to psych out the experimenters.

In any event, nurture has preprogrammed very young Americans to attend to race. Well-intentioned television programming for children constantly emphasizes that the characters, even if they are not human, are of different races. From infancy, children watch television cartoons that show, for instance, a happy black family playing with a happy white family. The intended message is that we can all get on well together. The subtext is that we are racially different, but should ignore it. Experimenters discover that small children expect parents of any color to have children of the same color. Is that proof of innate essentialism or of the efficacy of television?

It is time to turn away from cognition, and back to institutions and history.

Categories become institutionalized, especially by censuses and other types of official tagging. It is important to remember that the first working European censuses were carried out in colonies – Quebec, New Spain, Virginia, and Iceland. Categorization, census, and empire: that is an important nexus.

I turn to empire in part for personal reasons. Race, as a category, has its own manifest meanings in the United States. For me, race has of course the American connotations, but other ones as well. The primal racial curse for me as a Canadian is my country's history of relations with the native peoples. Now I work in France, where the chief racial issue concerns people of North African descent. Despite all their differences, the Canadian, French, and American racial obsessions have a single historical source: Empire. Conquest and control – whether of North Africans, West Africans, or the first nations of North America.

On *Webster's* definition, empire – “a state that has a great extent of territory and a great variety of peoples under one rule” – is about the conquest of peoples. With it comes an imperial imperative to classify and enumerate the conquered peoples. Thus the words cast in stone three times – in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian hieroglyphics – on the Great Staircase of Persepolis at the heyday of the Persian Empire:

A great God is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created welfare for man, who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many. I am Xerxes the great King, King of Kings, King of the countries having many kinds of people, King of this great earth far and wide, the son of Darius the King, the Achaemenian.¹⁴

Xerxes (?519 – 465 B.C.E.) inherited the Persian Empire in 485. The lapidary invocation to his power, thought to date from the beginning of his reign, includes carved processions of the many peoples

14 Ali Sami, *Persepolis (Takht-Jamshid)*, 9th ed., trans. R. Sharp (Shiraz: Musavi Printing Office, 1977), 35.

he ruled. First come the Medes bearing vessels, daggers, bracelets, coats, and trousers. Then twenty more stereotypes of peoples, each similarly accompanied by their characteristic tribute. They process in the following pecking order: Medes, Elates, Parathions, Sogdians, Egyptians, Bactrians, Armenians, Babylonians, Cilicians, Scythians, Thracians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Cappadocians, Lydians, Afghans, Indians, Macedonians, Arabs, Somalis, and Ethiopians. Surprise, surprise, the blackest come last.

Empires have a penchant for classifying their subjects. Doubtless there are administrative reasons: some conquered societies furnish goods, some furnish soldiers. But over and above practical exigencies, there seems to be an imperative to classify subject peoples almost as an end in itself. Or rather, the end is to magnify the exploits, glory, and power of the ruler. Classification, as an imperial imperative, invites stereotyping.

Persepolis has seen other empires, other conquests, a fact to which graffiti on the remaining walls of the city (rendered mostly by bored British soldiers from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who identify themselves by their names, dates, and regiments) attests. There is only one inscription to rival Xerxes' own: an enormous diamond carved into the side of the only standing entrance door of the royal gate. It is inscribed,

STANLEY
NEW YORK HERALD
1870

In the unvarnished words that describe Henry Morton Stanley in the 1911 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “In geographical discoveries Stanley accomplished more than any other explorer of Africa, with which continent his name is

indissolubly connected. Notwithstanding his frequent conflicts with Arabs and Negroes, he possessed in extraordinary degree the power of managing native races; he was absolutely fearless and ever ready to sacrifice either himself or others to achieve his object." This is the man who made the Congo Belgian. Managing native races was the name of the game for Stanley and for Xerxes' imperial staff.

The category of race may be found in all empires. The Chinese, for sure, even in the era of the People's Republic. The five stars on the flag denote the five peoples of the Republic, whose equality was constitutionally enshrined after 1949. The Han are only one of the five stars. Tell that to the inhabitants of the western provinces, whose equality ends at a star on a flag.

Here we have another answer to the 'first question,' about the pervasive tendency to regard people of different races as essentially different kinds of people. That tendency is produced by the imperial imperative, the instinct of empires to classify people in order to control, exploit, dominate, and enslave. The racial concepts of the Western world are as contingent as those of the Persian Empire, but both are the products of the same imperative.

Empire helps create stereotypical 'others,' but by definition any group of anything has items outside itself. Every form of human life is social. People live in groups. Groups need internal bonds to keep them together, as well as external boundaries for group identity. The internal bonds are furnished by the practices that maintain ties among individuals and subgroups. In many cases, the external boundaries are furnished by what Mary Douglas aptly identifies as pollution. Rules of pollution define who

one is not, and hence provide a sense of self-identity and self-worth: *we who are not polluted*. Every stable group has pollution rules.

So as not to offend others, I shall give my own example. The most important group boundary for English-speaking Canada is with the United States. At present our central pollution rule has to do with the social net: *We* are gentle and caring; *you Americans* are indifferent to the sufferings of the poor. We have universal health care; x percent of Americans have no health-care plan at all. (We produce all sorts of large numbers for x – this is part of our folklore, not our science.) We make peace; you make preemptive war. Et cetera, guns, crime – the list of pollutants goes on.

This conception of the defiling other is a sociological universal. One wonders if in the titanic duel between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals the two groups were sufficiently similar that the future human race needed pollution rules to keep each separate from the other lot. I have heard it suggested that one of the early evolutionary advantages to language was that different groups of people could use a 'bad,' i.e., different, accent to avoid mingling.

Evolutionary psychologists may propose some sort of just-so story for the survival value of pollution rules. Better to consult the foremost expert, Charles Darwin himself, in *The Descent of Man*. It is truly a humbling read: the wealth of information, the variety of considerations, the caution about conclusions – the imaginative framing of tentative hypotheses overshadows anything written since about his topics, including race. He canvasses many explanations for racial variety, but in the end favors sexual selection of, among other elements, like for like. It is still an open question, inadequately considered, whether, for exam-

ple, sexual selection trumps pollution rules, or vice versa.

How much more powerful pollution and the imperial imperative become when history puts them together! Pollution rules are important for maintaining the imperial group intact. As soon as pollution rules break down, men of the master group sire children with women from subjugated groups, and a new kind of person – the half-breed – emerges. The etymology of words such as ‘Eurasian’ embodies this phenomenon. We learn from the trusty 1911 *Encyclopaedia* that ‘Eurasian’ was “originally used to denote children born to Hindu mothers and European (especially Portuguese) fathers.” There are pecking orders between conquerors, as well as among the conquered – and this British word was a put-down meant to keep the Portuguese in Goa in their place. Note also the dominance order between the sexes: a Hindu father and a European woman would yield, at least in the official reckoning, a Hindu, not a Eurasian.

The French noun *métis*, derived from a Portuguese word originally used for Eurasians, dates back to 1615. In French Canada it signified the children of white fathers and native mothers. Early in the nineteenth century it was adopted in English to denote the offspring of French Canadian men, originally trapper/traders, and native women. In other words, ‘Eurasian’ and *métis* alike meant the children of males from conquering groups of lower status and females from the totally subjugated groups – and then the offspring of any of those children.

For a few generations, one can be precise in measuring degrees of pollution. At that the Spanish and Portuguese Empires excelled. First came ‘mulattoes,’ the children of Spanish or Portuguese men and South American Indian women. With the importation of black slaves from West Africa, the label was trans-

ferred to the children of white masters and black slaves, and then to mixed race in general. The *OED* says it all: the English word is derived from Portuguese and Spanish, “*mulato*, young mule, hence one of mixed race.”

The Spanish *cuarteron* became the English ‘quadroon,’ the child of a white person and a mulatto. The few quotations given in the *OED* are a record of colonial history. Here is the first, dated 1707: “The inhabitants of Jamaica are for the most part Europeans . . . who are the Masters, and Indians, Negroes, Mulatos, Alcatrazes, Mestises, Quarterons, &c. who are the slaves.” The next quotation in the list is from Thomas Jefferson.

And so on: from Spanish the English language acquired ‘quintroon,’ meaning one who is one-sixteenth of Negro descent. The 1797 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has it that “The children of a white and a quintroon consider themselves free of all taint of the negro race.” More importantly, from an 1835 *OED* citation, “‘The child of a Quintroon by a white father is free by law.’ Such was recently the West-Indian slave code.” Better to have a white father than a white mother.

In real life, interbreeding was endemic, so such classifications were bound to become haphazard. Only one option was left. The American solution was definitive. One drop of Negro blood sufficed to make one Negro. Which in turn implied that many Americans could make a cultural choice to be black or not, a choice turned into literature in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and, more recently, in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*. The one drop of blood rule perfectly harmonizes the imperial imperative and the preservation of group identity by pollution prohibitions.

Why is there such a widespread tendency to regard people of different races

*Why race
still matters*

as essentially different kinds of people? That was our first question.

I have argued that naturalism of the sort taken for granted by John Stuart Mill has more going for it than is commonly supposed, and I have also explained why it may make sense in the context of medicine to regard races as statistically significant and also statistically useful classes. But neither of these forms of naturalism explains the widespread tendency to regard people of different races as essentially different.

There is the cognitive answer, that essential distinction by race is the result of a universal human kind module. I have discounted that, and have also dismissed what I call ogre naturalism, which claims that races are real Kinds. Note, however, that if there is any vestige of truth in any type of naturalism, that could only reinforce the effect of other considerations.

We are left with Cornel West's genealogy of modern racism, pollution rules, and the imperial imperative. Together they describe the foundation of the racial predicament of the Western world. The imperial imperative employs a particular type of pollution rule to reinforce caste distinctions and degrees of subjection within an empire. The racial essentialism of the European empires and their American continuation are to be regarded as a special case of the imperial imperative.

One specific feature of modern racism – race science – results from a central aspect of modern European history. From a world-historical point of view, only one feature of early modern Europe stands out. It is the coming into being of modern science. The first stage of West's genealogy of modern racism is wholly embedded in that period when early modern science developed. As biology emerged in the second stage, around

1800, so did race science, that strange blend of evolutionary biology and statistical anthropology. In the heyday of positivism, race science repainted old pollution rules, the ones selected as suiting the imperial imperative, with a veneer of objective fact.

There are two strands of thought in the human sciences, the one universalist, the other emphasizing contingencies. They seldom harmonize. Here they do. West's genealogy is a wholly contingent account of the reasons for the pervasive tendency to regard racial distinctions as essential. In contrast, the use of pollution rules is a universal technique for self-stabilizing a human group. Classification of peoples by a category of race is an integral part of the control necessary to organize and maintain an empire, and it employs pollution rules. These observations suggest a fruitful way to combine contingent and universal theories that help to explain why the category of race remains so pervasive.