

# 'Race' and Difference: Orientalism and Western Concepts

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Western thought has historically used science to promote racial difference and superiority. This pursuit may adversely affect the approach to scientific research in modern genetics.

## Intermediate

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## Introduction

0878.1 Western thought has for centuries defined 'the Other' as different, inferior and worthy of subjection to colonialism, while simultaneously praising aspects of the exotic, the erotic and the primitive. These tensions have long been – and still remain – manifest in Western history, politics and literature and in present discussions of 'race relations'. This load, inherited from the various Western imperial and adventuring pasts, is an important component in the cultural backdrop of modern genetics.

0878.2 In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said set forth the impact of orientalism in creating an interface between science, politics and culture to justify European superiority over the Other. This multi-disciplinary synthesis enabled Europe to use the apparent objectivity of science to demonstrate empirical evidence of Western supremacy over the Other's deficiencies, giving Europe license – almost a moral duty – to govern and rule over its colonial subjects with complete impunity. Even though colonialism as a sovereign dynamic no longer exists, Orientalist-influenced scientific research is used by heterogenous societies to explain racial differences and shift the focus away from socioeconomic disparities caused by racism, claiming such inadequacies are due to scientific deficiency.

0878.3 Western notions of 'race' and difference have certainly been fueled by ignorance and fear. However, such perceptions have been coupled with a healthy corroboration from some of the foremost doyens of rational European thought. Names such as Darwin, Marx, Huxley, Rousseau and Malthus are firmly ensconced in the canon of Western scholarship, yet their views regarding the Other carry great weight, as they are supported with scientific and academic evidence. Several Western intellectuals exploited their studies in science, philosophy, economics, and even literature, toward legitimization of a dichotomy between a Europe that was superior mentally, morally, and otherwise, compared with a non-European counterpart. (See A0882.)

Karl Marx, one of history's leading, most 0878.4 influential political philosophers, and an ardent defender of the rights of the worker, condoned and understood Europe's imperialist policies in Asia, because he regarded Asiatic peoples inferior and worthy of such oppression. Marx endorsed the theories promoted by Pierre Tremaux, a French ethnologist, who claimed that the black races were the product of social devolution. Friedrich Engels, Marx's coauthor of communist policy, shared his partner's views in matters of race (D'souza, 1991).

Although at the opposite end of the political 0878.5 spectrum from Marx, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the USA and the drafter of its Declaration of Independence, had an ideological commonality with the German philosopher. Jefferson subscribed to the idea that Blacks were biologically inferior to Whites – this from the man who wrote the 'self-evident truth' that 'all men are created equal'. He was able to reconcile equality for the nation with his ownership of slaves (Gould, 1981).

## Racism in the Natural Sciences

Substantiation of racial difference on the basis of 0878.6 scientific evidence gained momentum during the colonial era. Providing the necessary moral, empirical and rational imprimatur to colonialism, 'orientalized' science served as the perfect response to the inquiries by those subjected to rule. One scorching debate in eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectual circles was whether monogeny or polygeny was the source of human creation. Monogenism – the belief that humankind originated from a single source – was far from being the sole ideology of the era. In fact, polygenism – various races evolving from different sources – was a prevalent belief even among the most

learned circles of intellectual thought. The British philosopher David Hume firmly believed that the various races evolved from parallel tracks of creation; moreover the white races were inherently superior to the others because they followed the best path (Gould, 1981).

0878.7 A key device for proving the theory of polygenism was craniometry – the study of skull size among the races. Samuel George Morton, the nineteenth century American empiricist, delved extensively into this pursuit. His research substantiated theories proposed by Louis Agassiz, the Swiss theorist, that larger cranial capacity meant increased intelligence. Whites, then Indians, followed by Blacks, was the descending order of skull size and, by extension, intelligence. Even within the so-called 'white' classification, there was further differentiation, with Anglo-Saxons at the top, Jews in the middle, and Hindus, or Indo-Aryans, at the bottom of the intelligence scale (Gould, 1981).

0878.8 Racial superiority requires racial distinction, separating various peoples into discrete ethnic groups. The eighteenth century 'father' of modern taxonomy, Carolus Linnaeus, classified the various 'categories' of human beings and proceeded to ascribe certain categories to each one: Native Americans (*'Homo sapiens americanus'*) were typified as being 'ill-tempered... obstinate, contented, free'; East Asians (*'Homo sapiens asiaticus'*) were 'severe, haughty, desirous'; Sub-Saharan Africans (*'Homo sapiens afer'*) were categorized as 'crafty, slow, foolish'. Not surprisingly, Linnaeus declared that Europeans (*'Homo sapiens europaeus'*) were 'active, very smart, inventive' (Olson, 2001).

0878.9 Charles Darwin, the pioneer of evolution theory, corroborated Linnaeus's observations, made a century earlier, concerning the generalized character traits of the various races. Darwin found the indigenous people of South America to be 'morose, taciturn'; while 'Negroes' were 'lighthearted, talkative' (Darwin, 1871). Evidently, there was not sufficient behavioral or emotional variation within ethnic groups for Darwin to observe. Even when Darwin attempted to place distance between humans and other primates in the scheme of the evolutionary process, he did so at the expense of racial insensitivity. Darwin believed that the chasm between man and ape would grow wider once certain 'intermediate steps' in the evolutionary path, such as chimpanzees and Hottentots, became extinct. He also felt that, although the various races had much in common, American aborigines (Native Americans), Blacks and Europeans 'are as different from each other in mind' as could be possible (Darwin, 1871).

0878.10 Pioneering medical breakthroughs have also fallen prey to racial biases, no matter how seemingly innocuous and unintended. Dr John Langdon Haydon

Down gave his name to the syndrome that he discovered. However, the colloquial name ascribed to the disease is less parliamentary. 'Mongolism' is still used in many circles today. Down syndrome is characterized by certain physical features present in those afflicted. Dr Down identified these as being reminiscent of 'Oriental' or 'Mongolian' traits; this implies that Mongolian features are indicative of disease or degeneration compared with the more socially and medically acceptable Indo-European attributes (Gould, 1981). (See A0660; A0711; A0857.)

## Intelligence and Race: The Great Divide?

Several factors have been used to 'measure' racial superiority, perhaps none as much as intelligence. 0878.11 Although skull size was studied as a biological indicator, a more direct approach through cognitive testing has also been used. Sir Cyril Burt is regarded as the father of intelligence tests. His research into the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) among races has been used as a standardized, objective method of substantiating mental capacity among various races (Gould, 1981). However, the justification for racial hierarchy through the use of such methods was not limited to the Victorian era. Within the last 20 years, several ideas, initially propounded in the last two centuries, have gained new currency. Intelligence tests such as those previously studied by Sir Cyril Burt have been examined recently by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve*. The two researchers delineated their theory that intellectual capacity differs among people and groups, particularly those defined along ethnic lines (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). With several graphs and other illustrations, the book seeks to present its case in a clinical, scientific manner. The underlying result and analysis is no different than that posited by Burt 200 years earlier. In today's society, manipulation of scientific data may not be for the purpose of subjugating a particular group – contemporary American society would not allow it – however, access and opportunity are the current issues concerning a society. Scientific legitimating of superiority and inferiority places such disparity on pathological terms. Building on the work of 'classicists' such as Burt, *The Bell Curve*, for example, posits that Asians have greater IQs, in the aggregate, than do Whites, followed by the Blacks. Although Whites do not necessarily occupy the highest echelons of intelligence, as they did in the research conducted 150 years ago, the black groups have made no progress at all, according to such findings (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

Predictably, *The Bell Curve* created vigorous debate about the conclusions drawn within the text. Several noted American scientists, academics and leading intellectuals responded strongly to the assertions put forth by Herrnstein and Murray. In *The Bell Curve Wars*, essays by these luminaries reply to and refute the claims made in the earlier book. Much of the consternation was due to a concern that the book's results would be misused to disrupt American interracial dialogue; history had certainly provided the impetus for worry. During the early part of the twentieth century, American lawyer and naturalist Madison Grant suggested that US social problems were brought on by immigration and urban ghettos, concluding that such malaise resulted from genetic inadequacies within the constituent groups.

In the USA, race relations have been strained despite passage and enactment of civil rights legislation. Recently, remedial measures such as Affirmative Action programs have been repealed at the state level. In addition, critics of such programs cite such seemingly racially neutral aspects as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a major college entrance exam, as a true measure of a student's potential for academic performance. However, even this exam is criticized for having a cultural bias. Allegations have been raised that the questions reflect a white, middle to upper-middle class, suburban leaning. Those not privy to such a background are at a distinct disadvantage. Although on one level of abstraction the test appears to be an objective measure of intelligence, there is a more insidious dynamic at work in the subterfuge.

Controversial interpretation of scientific data with racial implications has not been confined to a bygone era; contemporary leaders in the field of genetics have continued the tradition. Dr James Watson, who codiscovered that deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) had a double-helix form and who founded the International Human Genome Project, has made statements alluding to the anthropological differences of populations, outside the realm of medically beneficial genetic research. In November 2000, Dr Watson argued that there was a direct correlation between an individual's skin pigment and libido. The darker the person, Watson argued, the greater their sex drive (Aidi, 2001). (See A0693.)

Racial disparity and exclusion may occur indirectly. Initially, the US government's official policy concerning stem cell research stated that federal funding for embryonic stem cell research would extend only to the 64 'lines' in existence. Of these, 49 are of 'white' origins, while the remaining 15 come from clinics in South and Southeast Asia (Entine and Satel, 2001). Africans and other minorities, therefore, are not adequately represented within these lines, decreasing the opportunity for those groups to have research

conducted on their behalf for endemic medical issues. Although the US policy is limited to public funding only, the chances for private funding to be available for such research, especially concerning the suspect groups, is bleak at best. Under- or unrepresented groups will become further marginalized in any spectrum of genetic and racial diversity. (See A0689.)

## Conclusions

Given the history of racial divisiveness with scientific support, there is considerable effort being made to preempt the misuse of genetic research for such a pursuit. The American Anthropological Association, for example, has issued a statement on race, declaring that any differences across racial lines are due not from biological bases; rather, historical, social, economic and political matters are the causal factor. Yet despite such institutional efforts, a school of thought still pervades, redolent of the past, firmly interested in trying to show links between race and genetics.

Due to historical manipulation of scientific research for racially hierarchical purposes, certain stigmatized groups have been reluctant to participate in recent human genome endeavors. This apprehension is founded upon fear that the line separating biomedical genetic research, the study of ethnic trends and predispositions to certain diseases, and anthropological research, the study of ethnic differences in behavior and intelligence, is either vague or nonexistent. The former may be benign, even helpful, in ameliorating the health conditions of entire populations, whereas the latter is seen as merely a newly fashioned vehicle for the reinforcement of the Orientalist perspective.

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