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978-0-521-45875-7 - The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars

Elazar Barkan

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The Nazi regime has compelled us all to recognize the lethal potential of the concept of race and the horrendous consequences of its misuse. After World War II the painful recognition of what had been inflicted in the name of race led to the discrediting of racism in international politics and contributed to the decline and repudiation of scientific racism in intellectual discourse. In charting the rise and fall of racial thought and racism, the growing body of historical literature has tended to focus on racist ideologues from the early part of the twentieth century, ignoring the actual process of the repudiation of racism.<sup>1</sup> Because racism nowadays is perceived as irrational and unscientific, its elimination from culture and science is deemed, at least implicitly, to have been inevitable: once Nazi atrocities had been revealed, racism was rejected. An extension of this view is the historical misconception that Nazi racism was renounced as early as the 1930s. In fact, the response in both the United States and Britain was neither immediate nor of sufficient strength to discredit theories of racial superiority. By 1938 only a small segment of the educated public had reformulated its attitude on the question of race in response to the Nazi menace.

This book examines the scientific repudiation of racism by reconstructing the discourse on race in Britain and the United States between the world wars. During this period, race was perceived primarily as a scientific concept, a perception which was

<sup>1</sup> Leon Poliakov in *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (New York: New American Library, 1971) places the myth at the center of Western culture, but does not devote any space to its decline. Standard works include: Thomas F. Gosset, *Race, The History of an Idea in America* (1963; New York: Schocken Books, 1965); Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1982); Michael Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition*, Comparative Ethnic and Race Relations Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hamilton Cravens, *The Triumph of Evolution, American Scientists and the Heredity – Environment Controversy, 1900–1941* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

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itself a legacy of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, racial theories which constructed a hierarchy of races with the Nordic at the top were considered factual, free of prejudice and generally pertinent to social and political analysis. Scientists were entrusted with the tasks of discriminating between fact and opinion and defining the social and political discourses of race. Accordingly, the focus of this study is upon the scientific community, in particular biologists and anthropologists. It compares national beliefs with professional ideas, demonstrating that the initial scientific repudiation of racism *preceded* the rise of Nazism and thus discredited a crucial source of high-brow racism. While the defeat of Nazism undoubtedly helped in disseminating the rejection of racist ideas, the rebuff of Nazi racism itself was not a *sui generis* response. The decline of scientific racism was due to changes in the sciences and of the scientists themselves, and was closely related to the politics of race in Britain and the United States.

## RACE AND RACISM

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “race” had a far wider meaning than at present, being used to refer to any geographical, religious, class-based or color-based grouping. Although sanctioned by science, its scientific usage was multiple, ambiguous and at times self-contradictory. The inherent confusion of the term has been recognized by The Oxford English Dictionary which notes its imprecise usage “even among anthropologists,” the lack of a “generally accepted classification or terminology” and the resultant “almost unlimited attributes and combinations.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the confusion, race was a respectable scientific category. Typologies and hierarchies of race were presented as self-evidently appropriate at the beginning of the century, and cultural analysis along racial lines conveyed no particular stigma. Although “racialism” denoting prejudice based on race difference, was introduced into the language at the turn of the century, there was little use for the term because racial differences were regarded as matters of fact, not of prejudice. Race was perceived to be a biological category, a natural phenomenon unaffected by social forces. The major social thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century did not articulate any critique of racial theories; even for self-proclaimed egalitarians, the

<sup>2</sup> OED, Supplement vol. 3, 1972.

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inferiority of certain races was no more to be contested than the law of gravity to be regarded as immoral. Before any social critique of racial thinking was possible, the belief in the biological validity of race as a concept had to be undermined. This occurred in the twentieth century during the interwar years, although doubts about the validity of race were present much earlier. While the OED included such derivatives as “racism” and “racial” for the first time only in 1972, it notes that the term “racial” began to be used frequently at the end of the nineteenth century. The use of “racism” as a derogatory neologism was first recorded in English in the 1930s but again the appearance of a neologism to denote racial prejudice suggests that the debunking of race theories and their crude political analogies began sometime earlier. Certainly, little more than a decade after the end of World War I the situation changed dramatically. Among leading scientific circles in the United States and Britain, race typology as an element of causal cultural explanation became largely discredited, racial differentiation began to be limited to physical characteristics, and prejudicial action based on racial discrimination came to be viewed as racism.

One reason for this decline was a lack of epistemological foundations for racial classification, a lack which led to endless irresolvable inconsistencies and contradictions. For example, a popular anthropological method for delineating races was the measurement of skulls and other bodily features. Despite visible exterior physical differences among, say, Orientals, Whites, Blacks, and Amerindians, it became apparent to anthropologists that racial typology was incapable of any consistent demarcations, and the classification quandary made formal taxonomy impossible. Furthermore, numerous distinct populations did not conform to accepted categories, and any classification became hopelessly entangled with themes of ethnicity and nationality, encouraging many scholars to deny the possibility of a “science of race.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to the unresolved dispute over the relative impact of heredity versus environment and the proliferation of disciplinary approaches, ethnicity and culture further obscured the subject of race. Thus, as a social category which refers to a supposedly recognizable entity based on primordial biological properties, notions of race sustained its popular appeal

<sup>3</sup> An early version and a classic is Ashley M. F. Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth; The Fallacy of Race*, foreword by Aldous Huxley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942; fifth edn, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

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and is still widely invoked. It is for this reason that one can talk about attitudes towards race, even at a time when scientific opinion rejects the usefulness of race as a classificatory tool. While intuitively the present role of racial ideas in society may counter the sense that scientifically race has declined, the distinction between race as a scientific idea and as a social category needs to be borne in mind.

The decline during the 1920s in the scientific respectability of applying racial-biological perspectives to cultural questions left the field open to commentators who were interested in the subject for broadly defined political motives and not merely for intrinsically scientific reasons. The competing disciplinary attitudes – including a scientific rejection of the validity of racial typology – collided with a rise in political prejudice within Europe. This polarized the debate over race, and facilitated the debunking of what came to be viewed as racism. The discrediting of race prejudice was a result of the conscious efforts and commitment of a minority of scientists who pursued their goal through scientific research and writing, as well as through academic politics. In most respects, these scientists belonged to the core of the scientific establishment, but to some extent they remained social and political outsiders. This duality and tension particularly explains their relative sensitivity to race.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE STUDY OF RACE

Traditionally, the science of race belonged to physical anthropology which became popular in the mid nineteenth century, reached its zenith at the turn of the century, and its nadir in the years before World War II. With physical anthropology losing ground during the first half of the twentieth century, race came to be addressed by scientists from a number of new fields – genetics, social and cultural anthropology, sociology and psychology. Many were involved in the eugenics movement, which was much concerned with racial questions. By the 1930s, however, fewer scientists were devoting their career solely to the scientific study of race: “raciology” was a vanishing vocation. Despite the growing stature of genetics as the science of heredity, human genetics offered no explanation of the physical distinctions vital to racial classifications. Physical anthropologists accumulated data which had no epistemological justification, nor did their data yield results that could sanction com-

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parisons meaningful beyond local variations. Sociologists, for professional reasons, were only too happy to avoid reducing social differences to racial taxonomy, but had to leave the critique of the biological foundation of race to biologists and anthropologists. Psychologists seized on the professional quandary over race rather early, and by the mid-twenties began to discredit the notion of inherent mental differences between racial groups. In none of these areas was the study of race part of the disciplinary canon. Typically, while the scientists and scholars I discuss in the book were central to the discussion on race, for most of them the study of race was not their main endeavor.

My comparison between the American and British scientific communities suggests that historical and geographical conditions, more than internal scientific considerations, determined their specific views on race. The degree of racial sensibility – lesser in Britain than in the United States – affected ideas about race. Scientists addressed the concept of race in relation to their social and institutional traditions. This may seem self-evident to the reader because the topic of race nowadays is viewed as overtly political. Yet, the central role of politics to the concept of race in this study should not lead to a reductionist conclusion that science determined politics, nor the reverse, that politics determined science. Rather the two were strongly intertwined. The scientific “base,” “structure,” “*longue durée*,” was inexorably compounded with the political “superstructure,” and “events.”

In the long run the need for scientific validation constrained both racists and egalitarians. Developments in science helped more to discredit unfounded claims than to clarify the idea of race. For example, according to a theory popular in the first two decades of the century, physical and social characteristics, such as height, intelligence, color, or behavior, are inherited through a single gene. However, laboratory work in genetics at the time distinguished between phenotype and genotype, and indicated that heredity was much more complex. A physical characteristic was shown to be generated by numerous genes with greatly varied consequences. Within a scientifically accepted spectrum, individual scientists opted for certain versions of the numerous coexisting explanations and claims. But, once a theory was categorically proved wrong, no political commitment in an open society could sustain it. Falsification was thus important in closing off opinions. But non-

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falsification was not a proof, it merely left the theory as a tool in the political field.

In the following pages, I investigate this construction of scientific conventions of race within the social context of the professional community. In this reconstruction, I explore how individual scientists integrated science and politics in the formulation of the concept of race. It was scientists as individuals who elected whether or not to participate in public debate, and to adopt one perspective over another. There were no strict conventions of behavior, rather there were various accepted professional positions from egalitarianism to racism. The scientists discussed in this book were selected because they actively participated in the debate on race, and their positions on the issue are examined in part through their biographies. In considering how formative experience contributed and shaped the individual scholar's attitude to race, I look at age, professional and social aspirations (and rivalry), ideological commitments, chosen medium, and idiosyncrasies. These factors have all proved to be significant in suggesting an explanation as to why one scientist chose a certain perspective in preference to another in the debate over race.

Yet, while dealing with individuals, my focus remains on the scientific community. Ideas or individuals exist only as part of a discourse. I examine individual contributors to the discussion in an attempt to show the disparate viable scientific options. In this manner, a number of scientists may emerge as heroes in the fight against racism, but stardom depended upon an individual's professional standing, not merely on the adoption of a substantive position. The impact of each scientist on the evolution of the concept of race was determined by social criteria – the scientist's professional position and exposure. Left-wing circles in England and intellectuals in New York provided a congenial atmosphere to scientists who debunked scientific theories which supported racism as a response to contemporary politics. Hence these are discussed in greater detail, especially in the third part of the book. In these sub-cultures, scientists nurtured their new egalitarian positions even before they reached out to their peers and the public.

While either anthropology or biology could have served as a focal sub-discourse to explore the shift against racism, many members of these disciplines never participated in the discussion on race. My comparison of two scientific disciplines in two countries therefore

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enables me to examine those factors which transcend the specific features of each community. Anthropologists in the United States and biologists in Britain provided the leadership in discrediting racism. This suggests that neither the national nor the disciplinary discourse was sufficient to determine a scientist's position on race. Thus, in addition to the intrinsic interest of the biographical details of individual scholars, it is of methodological importance to understand the individual positions on the issue of race not only in the communal context, but also from a personal perspective.

Through analyzing the work and lives of the protagonists, it is possible to separate the scientifically acceptable and culturally respectable from claims that were being gradually discredited as racism. Scientists, however, are not always eager to elucidate publicly, nor to probe for themselves, the non-scientific motives involved in a certain research theme. It is necessary, then, to set the image of "scientific objectivity," projected by biologists and anthropologists against their personal commitments and political views. I focus on centers and elites within the scientific community, but at the same time seek to avoid whiggish or synoptic treatment: I do not present science in terms of preordained progress, nor do I build an edifice of a coherent body of knowledge about race as elucidated by scientists who were at the forefront of their discipline and held similar opinions. None the less, "pure" science swayed the racial views of its practitioners. This approach of reconstructing the discourse on race led me to include various contemporary participants, whose long term contributions have vanished, while leaving out a number of major anthropologists and biologists who were silent on the issue of race.<sup>4</sup>

In the last hundred years scientists are primarily "specific" professional intellectuals: that is, their credentials stem from knowledge of their discipline which at times they use in the political arena. Thus, their political status (both within and outside academia) depends on their professional standing. There are, however, few scientists who retain the status of intellectuals, that is they constitute a "universal" breed and are "acknowledged the

<sup>4</sup> T. H. Morgan and Sewell Wright are conspicuously absent. Both supported the eugenics movement in the early twenties but had no specific or unique view. Thus while their racial and eugenic views are of interest in a study of their own science, they are less so in a study of race. Bronislaw Malinowski played a minor role in the refutation of racism relative to his contributions to anthropology; hence, the minimal attention he receives despite his centrality to the discipline.

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right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice," even on topics where their credentials are not pertinent.<sup>5</sup> During the interwar years a number of scientists enjoyed wide popularity and played the role of universal intellectuals, but the status of most scientists depended upon their professional position, with a great diversity within each generation in their approach to politics, especially among scientists who constituted the "center."

The distinction between scientists who are considered experts – scientific intellectuals – and those who are viewed as universal savants depends in part upon their degree of involvement. The least engaged were those who commented on the subject only occasionally. Those who opposed race dogmatism recognized the dominance of culture in explanations of racial differences, but they did not devote any special effort towards criticizing the pervasive use of racial typology in general discourse. Instead they provided tacit support for attempts to undermine the connection between science and race dogmatism. A second group consisted of those who participated in some professional anti-racist activities, may have published in professional journals, but did not assume the role of leaders of public opinion. The third group, the hard core, included those who published in the popular/political press, a number of whom devoted monographs to the refutation of racism. All of them became politically committed to the fight against scientific racism.

The last group, which combined a professional with a general appeal, comprises most of the academicians examined in this book. They were not necessarily the most important contemporary scientists in their field (though many were), nor were their contributions in the long term the most substantial. Rather, their significance stems from the special needs of addressing professional and general audiences simultaneously. This proved most effective in shaping the scientific discourse on race, and their writing became authoritative. At their best they combined the status of a universal intellectual with that of the scientist, the expert.<sup>6</sup> With the growing turmoil and increasing political stakes surrounding racism, a larger number of scientists resorted, under the guise of

<sup>5</sup> Foucault separates the professional from the intellectual along generational lines. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 126–133.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault's term (*Power/Knowledge*, pp. 126–133) for the scientist is the "absolute savant."



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science, to political propaganda. Fighting racism was a glorious use of scientific credentials, but was none the less political.

The common denominator for those involved scientists who discredited racism was that while they belonged to the establishment, they were also outsiders. This group, mostly university teachers belong to a homogeneous genteel milieu, was differentiated, however, along lines of ethnic marginality, gender, geography, politics and ideology.<sup>7</sup> In these scientific elites, humble background was not a formal hurdle, but affiliation with the intellectual aristocracy in England, such as J. B. S. Haldane or Julian Huxley, proved a distinct advantage. Both Haldane and Huxley were insiders on account of their social professional position, while their politics placed them outside the mainstream. The status of partial outsider encouraged a greater sensitivity to racial attributes, and led to active criticism of racism. The United States had neither a comparable aristocracy nor politically radical scientists. Instead, the core of the discipline was determined largely by geographical proximity to major academic centers. Distance and lack of communication continuously frustrated close interaction. Geography in and of itself was important; New York was the center of racial discourse in the United States. California was too far away from the center for even the most prominent of its scientists to participate in the national scientific-intellectual discourse on race.

While biology was relatively homogeneous socially and politically, the presence of Jews and women in anthropology was significant. Gender and ethnicity played an important part in sorting out convictions on race. While Jews, the single most eminent minority in the scientific community, were institutionally and scientifically – though not so much socially – insiders, they were discredited on the question of race for having a subjective, minority, agenda. There was a general distrust in intellectual discourse for “special interests.” This served to delegitimize Jewish authorities in the fight against racism.<sup>8</sup> Black social scientists produced distin-

<sup>7</sup> Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), the theoretical parts and especially “British Intellectuals in the Mid Twentieth Century,” pp. 135–153, and his “Center and Periphery” in *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 93–109; Joseph Ben-David, *The Scientists’ Role in Society*, with a new introduction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971, 1984), especially the introduction and chapter I; Robert K. Merton, “The Perspective of Insiders and Outsiders,” in *The Sociology of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Merton, “The Perspective of Insiders and Outsiders,” *The Sociology of Science*; for comparison with later views on subjectivity, see also George De Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross,

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guished work, but their unique influence was felt primarily within black sociology. Before World War II, their impact on the black community was greater than on the wider society and negligible within the scientific community. Among the few women who belonged to the scientific establishment, the most renowned were anthropologists. Within the dominant group – upper class Englishmen and Wasps, the crucial factor in determining a position on race were ideology and political affinity, but the rule of thumb that left-of-center scientists were more likely to renounce racism applied only since the 1930s.

The role of scientists as intellectuals was evident first of all within the scientific community. Their impact on public opinion was largely indirect and at times enigmatic. It is possible to think of the transformation of the concept of race within sub-discourses. The initial construction took place within a relatively cohesive group of scientists based upon “tacit knowledge” and social “intuitions” which shaped relations within the community – it was then disseminated to a wider public.<sup>9</sup> Intermediate stages between the public discourse and the internal disciplinary discussion were within the educated public and among scientists in general. The group of scientists within each discipline, subdiscipline or speciality, represented different sub-discourses. However, individuals belonged concurrently to several groups according to sociological classifications which included ethnicity, class and geography. Hence, for an idea to receive legitimacy, it first had to be accepted within a peer group, and then disseminated by its members to other spheres. The ideas which eventually led to the shift in the concept of race originated at several different levels, and, depending on the circumstances, were then relayed to other groups.

This book describes the rejection of racism in science by focusing in the first part on the growth of skepticism concerning the validity of racial theories that developed initially among anthropologists. This skepticism resulted from their recognition that study of the biological fundamentals of racial heredity was beyond the range of

*Ethnic Identity, Cultural Continuities and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Joyce Lander (ed), *The Death of White Sociology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Talal Asad (ed), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 195. The switch from race to ethnicity could correspond to a shift in paradigms in Kuhn’s sense of “the entire constellation of beliefs, values . . . shared by the members of a given community” (p. 175), but this terminology can not be sustained since there was no science of race, and raciology even in its hey-day was not an academic discipline.