From theories of polygeny and classificatory systems for human kinds used in the justification of colonialism, genocide and enslavement, through to grave-robbing craniometry, the display of ‘primitive’ humans, and surgical experimentation without anesthesia on the bodies of slaves, the violence done by the early putative sciences of race should disabuse us of prelapsarian origin stories about the objectivity or inherently progressive nature of modern science. Race science forged a trail with more or less devastating consequences around the world for a century and a half. At the beginning of the 21st century, there is a widely shared consensus that there is no such thing as biological race, and yet there is also a pressing sense that the intersection between science and race, and especially between medicine and race, must not be ignored. To begin to extricate social scientific and scientific research from this seeming contradiction, it is necessary to pay attention to new and not so new ways in which science and race are co-imbricated. There are at least three strands that demand attention: racist ideologies continue to draw purported support from scientific sources; global science and technology markets dependent on processes of racialization are growing; and race-differentiated disease profiles require research into the interaction between biology and race.

References


Race Science
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peoplehood in the nineteenth century . . . . Philology laid the basis of racial science, stressing kinship and genealogy, and downplaying theology and Christian universalism . . . . What had been explained by climate or culture came to be explained by innate differences.’ By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the heyday of eugenics, theories eliding modern ways of classifying people with biological race categories reached their apogee. The sciences of race appeared to reveal in nature the very hierarchies that industrializing, colonizing, capitalist societies needed to justify the new status quo: success as evidenced through class competition (awkwardly, though, reproductive fitness as judged by high birth rates never coincided with capitalist elites), and intelligence (as judged primarily by one’s position in various metropole-oriented pedagogical and knowledge circuits, such as the university). Even in this period, however, when hierarchies described by scientific race theories were widely considered factual and unbiased, and legitimate to use in political and social planning, scientific usages of race were many and contradictory. The enthusiasm with which Hitler’s National Socialists embraced Old and New World eugenics and race science signaled not just the zenith but the beginning of the end of a general acceptance of the scientific naturalization of categories of peoplehood (Kuhl, 2002).

The demise or so-called ‘retreat of scientific racism’ is a core Western epistemic corollary of Allied victory in the Second World War, notwithstanding the fact that it began well before the 1930s, and did not receive widespread acceptance until the 1950s. As Elazar Barkan (1992: 1) wrote in his book of the same name, ‘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.’ The famous series of UNESCO (1969) statements on race, the first of which were issued in the early 1950s, is commonly taken to bookend the period of the retreat of scientific racism. Group difference as measured in biology retreated into statistical rather than correspondence epistemology and away from appearance and social group membership and into the sub-phenotypic realm of population genetics. The 1950s also signaled the high point of environmental determinism. In understanding the re-biologization of race in the age of genetics, it is significant that the dialectic that defeated late 19th and early 20th century race science was one of nature versus nurture. In contemporary biological and medical practice, race is primarily invoked in ways that find the distinction between nature and nurture harder than ever to make, let alone stabilize. In many of the new biologizations of race, it does not help to emphasize nurture over nature, because both are seen as in play together.

In recent times, the discovery that, in biological terms, within-group differences are greater than between-group differences has become a mainstay of the near consensus in the academy (if not elsewhere) that race is not biological. The failure of any single biological criterion to act as a necessary or sufficient condition for an individual to be classified as belonging to one group rather than another also signaled the wrong-headedness of the inquiry into biological race. The results of the Human Genome Project and other studies in population genetics have made their way into popular culture as alibis of the essential biological oneness of humankind, and of the single unified descent thesis known as ‘Out of Africa’ (Haraway, 1997). Nonetheless, the three kinds of re-imbrications of race and science listed above are signature aspects of global science and technology in the genomic era.

First, racist science, that is, scholarship involving scientific and social scientific methodologies that appears to lend support to racist ideologies or to racist governance, has a tendency to come back. This can be seen, for example, in the publication in the USA of The Bell Curve and racialized accounts of intelligence; in theories about group propensities to commit crime; in the potential for genetically based insurance discrimination and violations of privacy; and in the patenting of genetic and cellular processes and organisms without benefit to the population from which the biological materials were extracted (Reardon, 2005). A consensus that there is no scientific or biological race serves only to further mask the continuation of these kinds of claims.

Second, where science and technology are globalizing, as well as where they are failing to globalize, racialization is often part of the differentiation of epistemic pathways and of markets. This is evident, for example, in the transnational and domestic stratification of the organ donation and gamete and embryo markets (Ong and Collier, 2005; Thompson, 2005). In the case of gametes and embryos, the cells themselves are raced in ways that affect not just their availability and who can benefit from them, but the market value and the perceived kinship to recipients of the cells, even when detached from the donor. The transnational division of labor in the sciences and the technology sector throw up countless examples of
racialization occurring as part of the growth of science, technology and medicine, and vice versa.

Finally, the early 21st century is a period in which, in some rich liberal democracies, citizens have begun to make individual and group based claims on the direction of the development of scientific and medical knowledge. Citizen activism and biosociality make up well known aspects of the contemporary face of AIDS, certain orphan diseases, genetic prospecting, and pushes for human stem cell research, for example (Epstein, 2004). Increasingly, too, national and international professional, government and legislative bodies have come to see group based medical specificity as a means to counter health care disparities and rising health care costs (Winkler, 2004). This has generated its own kind of consensus: if we do not investigate race-differentiated disease profiles with race as a variable, how can we possibly hope to alleviate disproportionate and premature susceptibility to suffering and death of some groups over others? While each medical specialty in different cultural settings deals with different conundrums as to the scientific ontology of race, the necessity to address what race means and how it might be measured and taken into account is widely felt (Anand, 1999).

This brief sketch of the rise, fall, and return of race science suggests a need to refocus global vigilance in scholarly and political action. We know that there is no such thing as a scientific concept of race, and yet it is increasingly urgent to investigate the intersections between science and race. As a way of exiting from this political and epistemic dilemma, I suggest that we move the inquiry from this impasse – from asking whether biological race is real or not – to one where we ask how and when and for what purposes and whose gain race is biologized and biology is racialized?

References


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