



Reviews: Theory of seeing

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Robert Wald Sussman,

The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea, Harvard University Press:
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Robert Wald Sussman has written a powerful and erudite history of racism. An anthropologist by training, Sussman adeptly portrays the ‘persistence of an unscientific idea’ over the past 500 years in Western Europe and the United States. The book is structured around what Sussman considers two dominant strains of racist thought: *pre-Adamite polygenism* (which holds that ‘superior’ Western civilization derives from a different set of ancestors than other ‘inferior’ races) and *degenerate monogenism* (which contends that all races derive from a common ancestor, but some races have since degenerated under adverse conditions). With this theoretical couplet in hand, Sussman unpacks the history of racism by revealing how a multitude of scholars and agitators developed the ideology of race from the Spanish Inquisition through the Enlightenment, Social Darwinism, eugenics, and Nazi genocidal policies, to modern-day IQ racism.

The fundamental premise of the book is that in the biological sense there are no such things as human races. Although ‘race’ most certainly exists as a social category that shapes life chances in fundamental ways, most biologists agree that to speak of racial difference between human beings is to speak of arbitrary and incoherent distinctions. These distinctions quickly collapse upon closer inspection, making little sense of the diversity of human populations. We are all of *Homo sapiens*. The American Anthropological Association asserted as much in a statement on race in the 1990s. As the biologist Richard Lewontin has shown, taking some of the human-made ‘racial’ categories at face value shows that they display insignificant genetic variation *among* racial groups compared with the substantial degree of variation *within* racial groups. The biologist Alan Templeton recently demonstrated that race is a sociopolitical category of perception and action that lacks a sound biological basis.

With this premise in hand, it follows that all the science of race is founded on a fiction. With astounding attention to historical detail, Sussman shows just how pervasive racial

classification and denigration has been in Western thought over the past half-millennium. The Catholic Church on the Iberian Peninsula was suffused with racism in the 16th century as Jews were hounded for possessing an 'impurity of blood' (p. 12). The opening of the New World entailed a massive outpouring of violence and bloodshed as the native populations were conquered, paving the way for the development of racial classifications to justify the subjugation of the natives. The heroes of the Enlightenment also fell under the spell of racial thought. One noted proponent of the polygenic theory of racism, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, believed there were either four and five different races, none of them civilized save for the society of white men. Immanuel Kant also threw his lot in with the cause of 'scientific' racism, classifying human beings according to four racial categories based on skin color and climatic conditions. The philosopher from Königsberg was a champion of free will and self-emancipation, but only for whites. 'The black person . . . [can] be denied full humanity since full and "true" humanity accrues only to the white European,' wrote Kant (p. 28).

By the 19th century, Darwin's evolutionary theories had been perverted and appropriated by Social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer, who believed that helping the poor and the frail was tantamount to interfering with nature's work 'survival of the fittest' – a term coined by Spencer, not Darwin. In France, Joseph Arthur Gobineau wrote an influential tract that hailed the superior 'Aryan race.' In this way, Social Darwinism contributed to two political innovations. First, the ideology of the 'survival of the fittest' lent itself to the concept of *laissez-faire* economics by which state regulation and intervention in social life could be considered 'dysgenic.' Second, allowing the 'weak' and the 'inferior' to reproduce was viewed by racist ideologists as inefficient and degrading to the stock of humanity, a conclusion that helped propel the 'selective breeding,' sterilization, and, ultimately, extermination campaigns of the eugenics movement. Thus, Sussman convincingly shows how the intellectual pedigree of the horrors of the Holocaust can be traced back nearly half a millennium.

Racism and intelligence

But the ideology of race did not pass with the disclosure of the Nazi campaign of extermination. Instead, race had gained a new and apparently respectable countenance in modern studies of intelligence. Lewis Terman, a Stanford psychologist, developed the Stanford–Binet intelligence test in 1916, the precursor to modern-day IQ tests. Terman developed the concept of 'mental age' by which test participants who scored beneath a certain threshold could be classified as 'feeble-minded . . . morons, idiots, and imbeciles' (p. 92). The concept of a readily accessible and universal concept of intelligence was immensely important to the development of professional psychology, which sorely needed a way to legitimate its existence as a 'hard' science. Seemingly rigorous testing and computation of immutable human traits promised to deliver just such respectability.

The racism of intelligence gained ground in the 1970s. Arthur Jensen, a professor of educational psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, published an influential article on race in the *Harvard Educational Review*. Jensen argued that the 'intelligence of blacks was congenitally inferior to that of whites' (p. 235), and, consequently, public education for African Americans was a waste of precious resources. He joined

forces with the Nobel laureate and physicist William Shockley, who contended that welfare state policies were 'allowing genetic defectives to proliferate' (p. 236). By 1969, their work had found its way into the mass media, resulting in blatantly racist newspaper articles that asked, 'Can negroes learn the way whites do?' (p. 238).

A network of white supremacist think tanks, publishers, and foundations like the Pioneer Fund, the Foundation for Human Understanding, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, and American Renaissance worked assiduously over the following decades to promote a racist agenda. Nowhere is their influence more in evidence than in the area of 'immigration reform,' an innocuous label that masks the degree of racial animus that has motivated the closing of borders and removal of state services for noncitizens. Perhaps no academic work did more to move racism from the Klan rally and into the university lecture hall than Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's book on the 'bell curve' in the 1990s, which asserted that blacks were less intelligent than whites. But this was just the tip of the iceberg of a decade of renewed racial hostility in the United States. 'Blacks just have fewer inhibitions, a greater readiness to express anger, an impulsiveness,' Michael Levin, a philosopher at City University of New York, said in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine (p. 258). Such statements were legitimated by quasi-scientific work that connected race and intelligence. But as Sussman persuasively shows, both concepts are biologically unreal. There is no such thing as race, and there is no such thing as universal and immutable intelligence. Studies that purport to assess their linkages are therefore studying the connections between two fictitious categories. What is considered intelligence is always a function of a particular society, and one's mental capacities are always a product of environmental conditioning. Both race and IQ tests can therefore safely be renounced to the scrapheap of history.

The role of culture

If there are plenty of villains in Sussman's tale, there are also a few heroes. Franz Boas, the German-American anthropologist, is presented as the first anthropologist to break with the racial animosity of the colonialist project. Boas deployed the concept of *culture* in place of heredity to explain differences in human behavior and social organization. 'The concept of culture, which Boas, his students, and other social scientists tirelessly elaborated and defended, ultimately undermined the concept of racism,' Sussman states (p. 164).

Here Sussman's argument seems strained, verging on the hagiographical. First, culture performs many of the same functions in the folk sociology of reality that race carried out some decades ago. Studies of the 'new racism' and 'cultural racism' of the 1980s and later have shown that racism has proven itself surprisingly malleable, replacing biological determinism with the immutability of cultural properties (never mind that this is a contradiction in terms because culture is by its very definition an artificial human product that is *cultivated*). Thus, Muslim immigrants to Europe are not congenitally inferior, the new racists can contend, but they are burdened with a cultural or religious baggage that makes them ill-suited to the demands of modernity. The concept of culture and the hero of its tale, Franz Boas, are defended at a high cost: understanding how the notion of culture was *perverted and appropriated* by the new and seemingly respectable racists of our day. Today's racists do not need race to win arguments.

Second, Boas alone was not sufficiently powerful to bring about the downfall of eugenics. Sussman recognizes the implausibility of the explanation. 'Obviously, it was not Boas and the anthropological concept of culture alone that led to the downfall of eugenics as conventional wisdom in American (and Western European) science, academics, and popular thinking' (p. 200). But there is little more than hand waving to suggest what else should count. In this sense, the work lacks a theory of social change.

The pitfalls of intellectual history

Sussman's book is first and foremost an *idealistic* (in the philosophical sense) and *intellectual* history of racism. It is a history that contains all too few institutions, practices, policies, and ordinary people. The ideologues and demagogues are surely only part of the story. Racist ideas were shaped not merely by the dialectical exchanges of so many words – this is the *scholastic fallacy* – but in the lived realities and political practices of particular social orders as well. For instance, it seems peculiar to speak of the racial stigmatization of African Americans as a largely intellectual phenomenon, cooked up in so many circulated texts, without studying the economic institution of slavery, which generated such a widespread *demand* for those very ideas. Reading Sussman's account one might be forgiven for believing that racial stigma against African Americans arose somewhere around the *fin de siècle* with the advent of the eugenics movement, a largely elite-produced intellectual phenomenon that flowed straight out of the books and pamphlets of the day and into the minds of ordinary folk. Slavery receives passing mention on five pages in the course of the book's 374 pages.

Racist categories are not for the most part intended to be scientifically coherent and defensible. They are developed for practical use and act as rationalizations to defend particular social arrangements. Scientists may therefore demolish the myth of race without making a dent in the armor of racialization. The point of race is in part to produce and defend a particular social distribution of power and resources, not to win academic debates. In this sense an intellectual history of racism is bound to be something of a facile exercise so long as it lacks a sociological *Verstehen* of the practical operation of race.

At times, there is an almost conspiratorial vision of social reality, as if racism was the product of a series of committees and printed words, and as if Great Men alone throttled history forward. 'Historically, race and race concepts in the West were driven by [a] . . . consortium of intellectuals, politicians, and financial backers,' Sussman writes (p. 307). Today there are 'new and sinister consortia around us' that are hard at work manufacturing racial animosity, Sussman argues. How plausible is this? In the grand scheme of US racial inequality it would seem that entities like the Pioneer Fund, *American Renaissance* magazine, and scientific racists have not by and large been the primary producers of racial inequality. Despite the tireless outpouring of magazines and funds (which, in the grand scheme of professional research, amount to a mere pittance), organized racism has at times been more a symptom of underlying forces than a primary driver of racial inequality.

Nevertheless, *The Myth of Race* is an incisive and comprehensive work, breathtaking in its learnedness and ambition. It presents a sure-footed survey of 500 years of Western racism.