

**A tiny slice of the history of the concept of *race*.**

*Readings:* Blumenthal, Stocking.

If rich in connotation, the idea of race as blood is conceptually opaque, and in its political applications all too literally and horribly bloody. But we should still be able to define and to understand the broader meaning the term once carried. (Stocking 1993, 6)

*Questions:*

- i. What is a race?
- ii. What is the/our concept of race?
- iii. (How) should human beings be sorted into groups, i.e., classified?
- iv. What are the causes of racial differentiation?
- v. What are the consequences of racial differences and/or racial differentiation?

Begin with (iii): especially during periods of exploration and conquest, it becomes evident that groups of human beings differ widely in appearance, behavior, thought. What sense can be made of this?

Stocking notes four traditions in racial thought:

*Ethnological*

For both scholar and citizen, "race" was still a catchall that might be applied to various human groups whose sensible similarities of appearance, of manner, and of speech persisted over time, and therefore were evidently hereditary. (Stocking, 7)

Giddens: It was not that he had no concept of nation that could not be distinguished from race. It was rather that he used both terms to refer to degrees of a single concept of kinship which, though it was divided into levels, was essentially undifferentiated as far as the dynamic of its process was concerned. (Stocking, 8)

*Lamarckian*

Evolutionary novelties arose as organic responses to external causes, and the resulting progressive variations in organic structure were transmitted to following generations. The underlying mechanism was obviously the inheritance of acquired characteristics... (Stocking, 10)

Lamarckianism made it extremely difficult to distinguish between physical and cultural heredity. What was cultural at any point in time could become physical; what was physical might well have been cultural. (Stocking, 10)

*Polygenist*

Polygenism seems to me best treated, along with monogenism, as a specific historical expression of one of two enduring alternative attitudes toward the variety of mankind. Confronted by antipodal man, one could marvel at his fundamental likeness to oneself, or gasp at his immediately striking differences. One could regard these differences as of degrees of kind, as products of changing environment or immutable heredity, (Stocking, 11)

...each of these racial entities was the bearer of an essence that expressed itself in the achievements of the race, and whose purity must be maintained in order to preserve the civilization it had created. (Stocking, 12)

*Evolutionist*

If the antagonistic traditions of polygenism and Lamarckianism could coexist without apparent

tension in many late nineteenth-century writers, it was because the fourth tradition, evolutionism, far from simply ending the mid-nineteenth-century debate between monogenism and polygenism, had instead made possible an accommodation between them. By and large, evolutionism tended to view the causes of racial differences in Lamarckian terms; but in regard to their nature, evolutionism may be interpreted as simply placing the synchronic hierarchicalism of polygenism in a diachronic framework. The differences between human races were viewed in terms of their places on a temporal evolutionary continuum of physical and cultural development. The increased time scale of evolutionism made it possible, while still regarding mankind as ultimately unified, to see the differences between races as so deeply rooted in time as to be almost primordial. (Stocking, 12)

Anthony Appiah on *Racialism*:

...there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, that allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racialist view, a sort of racial essence; and it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of what the nineteenth century called the “Races of Man,” account for more than the visible morphological characteristics—skin color, hair type, facial features—on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. (Appiah “Racisms,” 5; also *In My Father’s House*, 13)

*More Questions*

- How do the four traditions Stocking outlines yield racialism as an account of human diversity?
- What are the implications of racialism?

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Racisms.” Chapter 1 in *Anatomy of Racism*. Edited by David Theo Goldberg. University of Minnesota Press, 1990. © University of Minnesota Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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