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"Race" and the Construction of Human Identity

Author(s): Audrey Smedley

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AUDREY SMEDLEY

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, VA 23284-2040

## “Race” and the Construction of Human Identity

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Race as a mechanism of social stratification and as a form of human identity is a recent concept in human history. Historical records show that neither the idea nor ideologies associated with race existed before the seventeenth century. In the United States, race became the main form of human identity, and it has had a tragic effect on low-status “racial” minorities and on those people who perceive themselves as of “mixed race.” We need to research and understand the consequences of race as the premier source of human identity. This paper briefly explores how race became a part of our culture and consciousness and argues that we must disconnect cultural features of identity from biological traits and study how “race” eroded and superseded older forms of human identity. It suggests that “race” ideology is already beginning to disintegrate as a result of twentieth-century changes. [*race, identity, history, ethnicity, culture*]

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Scholars in a variety of disciplines are increasingly holding that “race” is a cultural invention, that it bears no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations, but reflects social meanings imposed upon these variations. If such a perspective is to be widely accepted, we are challenged to explore its ramifications and consequences. “Race” emerged as the dominant form of identity in those societies where it functions to stratify the social system. Scholars in psychology, anthropology, and other social fields need to examine in much greater depth the reality of “race” as identity in our society. We need to explore not only the consequences but the parameters and social correlates of “racial” identity.

Within the last several decades we also have seen numerous studies on “ethnicity” and “ethnic” differences. Most often we see titles of publications that cover both “race” and “ethnicity.” Some studies treat the two as if they are similar phenomena, perhaps differing only in degree. Others, such as Stephen Steinberg’s *The Ethnic Myth*, and Ronald Takaki’s various publications (1987, 1993) make a clear distinction between the two. My purpose in this paper is to do several things. One is to dramatize the significance of “race” as distinct from “ethnicity” by referring to historical data on human interactions in the past. The second is to raise to greater clarity the reality of race as a form of human identity by delving into some contemporary issues seldom confronted either by the public, the media, or the scholars who write about them.

### Problems and Issues of Identity: Ethnicity and Race

Reading the histories of societies in the ancient world can be very enlightening for those of us who do compara-

tive studies in history and anthropology. These histories reveal an extraordinary amount of interaction among peoples of different ethnic groups who occupied city-states, villages, and towns. Throughout the known Old World, trade was extensive, much travel was undertaken despite enormous hardships, battles were fought among neighboring and distant groups, alliances were established, and treaties of peace were made. During the expansion of imperial states, armies marched on foot or rode on camels, asses, horses, or elephants over tremendous distances. The image of Alexander of Macedon marching his army to the plains of Afghanistan, or sailing nearly halfway around the world to India, in the absence of steam engines and air power, seems an astonishing accomplishment. In times of relative peace, some individuals traveled widely and for many different reasons and they were received in alien lands with hospitality. They traded with one another, intermarried, and spread cultural knowledge from region to region.

All of this attests to the fact that interethnic interaction has a long history. We humans are not new to the challenge of trying to get along with “alien” others. What strategies were used in ancient times to accommodate or transcend differences? How did ancestral societies perceive and deal with humans who differed from themselves, both culturally and/or physically? In contemporary times many areas of the world are reeling with “ethnic” conflicts, and “ethnicity” seems to be a relatively new notion about human identities encumbered with elements of exclusivity, opposition, competition, and antagonism. Some groups define themselves in terms that appear rigid and unyielding and in opposition always to “the others.” In many

cases we have seen populations assert an almost permanent attachment to an ethnic or religious identity, as if such features of our social selves are determined by our DNA and cannot be transformed or diminished by any social mechanisms. We have seen the hardened nature of ethnic boundaries in places like the former Yugoslavia and Uganda transform neighbors and even kinspeople into hated enemies, subjected to unimaginable brutalities. At the same time more societies than ever before have become seemingly much more multiethnic since World War II as various peoples from largely Third World countries began searching for job and educational opportunities in the nations of Western Europe and the United States. In some cases, populations that were once deemed generally ethnically homogeneous are now unambiguously and irrevocably heterogeneous.

The media portrays a popular conception of these phenomena as if they were something new in the human experience, and many scholars in the social sciences treat multiethnicity as not only a modern phenomenon or a novel condition, but one that inevitably creates problems and potential, if not real, hostilities. Two broad categories of problems can be identified: one having to do with how people of different groups get along with one another; the other is the problem of how individuals and groups perceive who they are—the problem of “identity.” The sets of problems are clearly interrelated but not identical.

In the first category, there seems to be an underlying premise or assumption that people of different ethnic groups are in competition with one another so that conflict and hostility are inevitable. Another related and often unstated assumption is that different ethnic groups can have no common interests which makes any form of unity or even amity impossible.

It is the second problematic that this paper addresses, the one involving identity, an arena of problems that may be more peculiar to Americans, in terms of their individual conceptions of who they are, than to peoples of other nations. There seems to be a psychologically based assumption in our society that people must know who they are, that a solid and positive sense of one’s individual selfness (or “identity”) in a wider world of other “selves” is a necessary condition for good psychological health. We humans are apparently the only animal that anguishes over the question, “Who am I?” Perhaps the question arises because in industrial societies we lack a sense of bonding to a kinship group, a village, or other more limited territorial entity, and because our heavy focus on individualism disconnects us from others and fosters an abiding sense of isolation and insecurity. Whatever the cause, some lessons from history might provide a broader context in which to comprehend the dilemmas of human identity that we experience in the modern world.

## Historical Constructions of Identity

Historical records, including the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, evince scenarios of interethnic interaction that suggest some very different principles in operation throughout much of human history.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic groups have always existed in the sense that clusters of people living in demarcated areas develop lifestyles and language features that distinguish them from others and they perceive themselves as being separate societies with distinct social histories. Although some conflicts among different groups have been characteristic from the earliest recorded histories, hostilities were usually neither constant nor the basis on which long-term relationships were established.

One factor separates many in the contemporary world, at least some of our understandings of it, from earlier conceptions of human identity. That is that “ethnic” identity was not perceived as ineluctably set in stone. Individuals and groups of individuals often moved to new areas or changed their identities by acquiring membership in a different group. People of the ancient world seemed to have understood that cultural characteristics were external and acquired forms of behavior, and that “barbarians” could learn to speak the language of the Romans or the Greeks and become participants in those cultures, and even citizens of these states. Languages were indeed avenues to new social identities, and ethnic identity itself was fluid and malleable.

Until the rise of market capitalism, wage labor, the Protestant Ethic, private property, and possessive individualism, kinship connections also operated as major indices that gave all peoples a sense of who they were. Even in the technologically and politically most advanced societies of the ancient world such as in Rome, kinship was the important diacritic of connectedness to the social system. In all of the mostly patrilineal societies of the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean, the normal person was identified by who his or her father was. The long list of names of who begat whom in the Old Testament (Book of Genesis) attests to the importance, especially at the tribal and chiefdom levels, of genealogical identity.

Another important diagnostic of identity was occupation. Whether one was a farmer, carpenter, fisherman, tanner, brass worker, herdsman, philosopher, government official, senator, poet, healer, warrior, or harlot, was significantly salient in the eyes of the ancient world to require the label. Occupations determined to some extent how people were viewed and treated, as well as underscored their contribution to the society.

Throughout much of the period of the early imperial states, numerous groups were in contact with one another, and individuals often traveled from one region to another as traders, warriors, craftsmen, travelers, geographers, teachers, and so forth. From one end of the Mediterranean

to another, in spite of the lack of modern forms of transportation, many men and women were interacting in an inter-ethnic melange that included a wide range of cultures and peoples. From time to time, a conquest state would expand outward and incorporate some or most of this great variety. Populations did not necessarily lose any form of ethnic identity, but change was clearly understood as virtually inevitable as each society learned something new from the cultures of others. Judging from the Greek historians such as Herodotus, Strabo, and Thucydides, the Greeks were conscious of their borrowings from other cultures (see Godolphin 1942).

When Alexander conquered peoples and lands all the way to the Indus Valley in India, interacting with "civilized" populations, nomadic pastoralists, settled villagers, and a variety of hunting and fishing peoples, he exhorted his warriors to intermarry with the peoples they conquered in order to learn their languages and cultures. Garrisons of military men were stationed all over the Roman world, from Brittany to the Danube and the Black Sea, from Gibraltar to the Tigris/Euphrates valley and the Indian Ocean, and soldiers often took local women as wives. When the armies of the Moroccan king brought down the Songhai empire in 1591, his soldiers stayed on in the Western Sudan frontier area and intermarried with the local people. Most of northern Africa, including Egypt of the Delta, has been periodically invaded and ruled by outsiders for the last three thousand years or so. Hittites and Hyksos from the mountainous areas of Turkey, Assyrians, Persians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Babylonians, Romans, and various more recent Turkish and Arabian groups have settled in the towns of the coasts and interacted with the indigenous Berbers and other peoples like the Libyan groups, the Garamantes, the Carthaginians, Syngambrians, and many others. Less well known is the fact that both the Greeks and the Romans used mercenaries from inner Africa (Nubians, Ethiopians, Kushites, among others) in conflicts such as the Persian and Peloponnesian wars (Herodotus, in Godolphin 1942).<sup>2</sup>

Peoples of different cultures coexisted for the most part without strife, with alien segments often functioning in distinct roles in the larger cities. One-third of the population of Athens were foreigners as early as the Classical period, five hundred years before the Christian era (Boardman et al. 1986:222). And the city of Alexandria was (and still is) a heterogeneous, sophisticated, and complex community under the Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Arabs. Carthage was founded in North Africa by Phoenicians, but peoples from all over the Mediterranean world and other parts of Africa made their residence, or served as slaves, in this great trading city. Moreover, men and women of different ethnic groups intermarried frequently, largely because marriage was often used as a political or economic strategy. Men gave their daughters and sisters to other men, the historians tell us, because they desired political

and/or economic alliances with powerful and wealthy men, without regard to ethnic origins. Timotheus was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. Samson married a Philistine woman; Moses married an Ethiopian woman; and many leaders, and lesser men, of the Greeks and Romans married women not from their own societies.

Different societies and localized segments of larger societies were known either by their ethnic name for themselves or by the region, town, or village of their origins. That identities of this type were fluid is indicated by the depictions of individual lives. Paul of Tarsus traveled and preached extensively throughout much of the known Mediterranean world during the early Christian era and encountered individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. He even identified himself as a Roman on occasion when it was useful to do so. There are other examples of individuals in ancient writings who changed their ethnic identities for personal or private reasons.

Scholars who have studied African societies, especially African history, have also been aware of the malleability of ethnic identity on that continent. New ethnic groups have emerged out of the colonial period, and individuals have been known to transform themselves according to their ethnic or religious milieus. One may be a Christian in one context, and a Muslim in another, with no sense of ambivalence or deception. I have encountered this phenomenon myself. Most Africans spoke several different languages, and this facilitated the molding of multiple ethnicities by providing immediate access to cultural knowledge. In situations of potential or real conflict, allegiances could be firmly established without denial of the extrinsic nature of social/ethnic identities (Connah 1987; Davidson 1991).

In addition to identities that are predicated on place of birth, membership in kin groups, or descent in the male or female line from known ancestors, language spoken, and lifestyle to which individuals have been conditioned, another feature critical to individual identity in the state systems was social position. Aristocrats seemed to have been recognized even beyond the boundaries of their immediate societies. And certain men were widely famed for their specialized skills or crafts that set them above others. Every society had its large body of commoners and usually a great number of slaves captured in war or traded in when this enterprise became a common regional feature. Slaves were usually outsiders, but slavery was not considered by law and custom a permanent condition as slaves could be manumitted, redeemed by kinspeople, or could purchase their own freedom (Smedley [1993]1999: ch. 6). While enslavement was considered an unfortunate circumstance and most slaves did the menial and onerous tasks of society, the roles of slaves varied widely. There are numerous examples of slaves rising to political power in the ancient states of the Mediterranean and in the Muslim world. Often they held positions as generals who led

armies of conquest and were frequently rewarded for their successes. Whole slave dynasties like the Mamluks in Egypt reigned in various areas of the Muslim world (Hitti 1953).

With the appearance of the proselytizing universal religions, Christianity and later Islam, that became competitors with one another for the souls of all human groups, a new focus of identity was gradually and increasingly placed on membership in a religious community. During the Middle Ages of Europe, Christians and Muslims were competing not only for land and souls, but for political power and influence. And various sects that developed within each large religious community complicated matters by fostering internal dissension and even warfare inter alia. Whether one was Sunni or Shiite, Protestant or Catholic, was a critical determinant of one's identity locally and in the wider world. As with other aspects of ethnicity and ethnic differences, individuals often changed their religious affiliation under circumstances prompted by self-interest, or self-preservation, as in the case of the 300,000 or more Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism in Medieval Spain during the Inquisition (Castro 1971). Yet Christians, Jews, and Muslims had lived together in relative amity, and even intermarried, for several hundred years after the Muslim conquests and before the rise of the Christian kingdoms to challenge Muslim power.

What was absent from these different forms of human identity is what we today would perceive as classifications into "racial" groups, that is, the organization of all peoples into a limited number of unequal or ranked categories theoretically based on differences in their biophysical traits. There are no "racial" designations in the literature of the ancients and few references even to such human features as skin color. Frank Snowden has demonstrated that ever since at least the second millennium B.C., the peoples of the Mediterranean world have interacted with other groups having a variety of physical traits that differed from the Italians and Greeks. Artistic depictions of Africans of clear "negroid" features have been found, and numerous statues and paintings throughout the classical era show that physical variations in different populations were recognized and accurately depicted (Snowden 1983).

Except for indigenous Americans, members of all three of the large geographic areas that came to be categorized as "races" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid) interacted in the ancient world. Chinese porcelain vases have been found widely distributed in the East African coastal trading cities, indicating trade between these peoples at least two thousand years old. The peoples of the Malagasy Republic represent a mixture of African and Asian (Indonesian) ancestry dating back several thousand years. Greek sailors sailed down the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean and met East Afri-

cans long before the Christian era. The peoples of the Mediterranean regularly traded with dark-skinned peoples of the upper Nile valley (and all those in between), northwest Africa, and the contrasting lighter-skinned peoples of Northern Europe. Various states of the Mediterranean called upon and used Ethiopian warriors as mercenaries in their armies, as we have seen. Some of the more desired slaves were very fair-skinned Slavs (from whom the term *slave* was derived) who were traded down the Danube by German tribesmen. Northern European slaves were shipped as far away as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the Muslim capital at Baghdad (Davis 1966).

What seems strange to us today is that the biological variations among human groups were not given significant social meaning. Only occasionally do ancient writers even remark on the physical characteristics of a given person or people. Herodotus, in discussing the habits, customs, and origins of different groups and noting variations in skin color, specifically tells us that this hardly matters. The Colchians are of Egyptian origin, he wrote, because they have black skins and wooly hair "which amounts to but little, since several other nations are so too."<sup>3</sup> Most writers explained such differences as due to natural environmental factors such as the hot sun causing people to be dark skinned. No structuring of inequality, whether social, moral, intellectual, cultural or otherwise, was associated with people *because of their skin color*, although all "barbarians" varied in some ways from the somatic norm of the Mediterranean world. But barbarians were not irredeemably so, and, as we have seen, nothing in the values of the public life denied the transformability of even the most backward of barbarians.

We in the contemporary Western world have often found it difficult to understand this phenomenon and assume that differences in skin color must have had some important meaning. Historians have tried to discover "racial" meanings in the literature of the ancients, assuming that these writers had the same attitudes and beliefs about human differences found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America. The reason for our myopia has to do with our deeply entrenched conditioning to the racial worldview (Smedley 1993, 1998). When "race" appeared in human history, it brought about a subtle but powerful transformation in the world's perceptions of human differences. It imposed social meanings on physical variations among human groups that served as the basis for the structuring of the total society. Since that time many people in the West have continued to link human identity to external physical features. We have been socialized to an ideology about the meaning of these differences based on a notion of heredity and permanence that was unknown in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages.

## Race: The Modern Conception of Human Differences and Human Identity

In the eighteenth century this new mode of structuring inequality in human societies evolved in the American colonies and soon was present throughout the overseas territories of the colonizing countries of Western Europe. "Race" was a form of social identification and stratification that was seemingly grounded in the physical differences of populations interacting with one another in the New World, but whose real meaning rested in social and political realities. The term *race* had been used to refer to humans occasionally since the sixteenth century in the English language but was rarely used to refer to populations in the slave trade. It was a mere classificatory term like *kind*, *type*, or even *breed*, or *stock*, and it had no clear meaning until the eighteenth century. During this time, the English began to have wider experiences with varied populations and gradually developed attitudes and beliefs that had not appeared before in Western history and which reflected a new kind of understanding and interpretation of human differences. Understanding the foundations of race ideology is critical to our analysis.

English settlers in North America failed to assimilate the peoples whom they conquered; indeed they generally kept them at great length and social distance from themselves (Morgan 1975; Nash 1982). Indigenous Indians were different in both cultural and biological features, but this was not the necessary and sufficient reason for the English habits and policies of separateness. They had had a long history of enmity with earlier peoples, especially the Irish, on their very borders and had generated out of their hostility with the Irish an image of "savagery" that became institutionalized as a major part of public consciousness about "the other." The policies and practices of the English in Ireland functioned to keep those Irish who refused to accept English domination segregated from themselves. Failing to even attempt an understanding of Irish customs and institutions, the English expressed an abiding contempt and hatred for both Irish culture and people that reached a crescendo during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the English were also settling in the New World. It was an extreme form of ethnocentrism or ethnic chauvinism that some historians believe came close to being racial (Allen 1994; Canny 1973; Liggio 1976).

"Savagery" was an image about human differences that became deeply embedded in English life and thought and provided a foil against which they constructed their own identity as "civilized" Englishmen. They brought this image of what savagery was all about with them to the New World where it was soon imposed on the native populations when they, too, began to resist English encroachment. Savagery carried with it an enormous burden of negative and stereotypic characteristics grotesquely

counterposed against the vision that the English had of themselves as a civilized people. Every new experience, along with a growing technological superiority, widened the differences and denigrated all other peoples who were not part of the civilized world. The concept of "civilized" polities in contrast to savagery and barbarism was beginning to take hold in much of Western Europe, and in this sense Englishmen were not much different from the rest of the Western world. But English notions of their own superiority were enhanced by their technological, material, and political successes, by their earlier successful split from the Catholic realm, by the early rise of merchant capitalism, the development of new forms of wealth, notions about individual freedom, property rights, and self-sufficiency, and by a growing sense of their own uniqueness even among other Europeans. This was summed up in the myth of Anglo-Saxonism (Horsman 1981).

"Race" emerged as a social classification that reflected this greatly expanded sense of human separateness and differences. Theodore Allen (1997) argues that the "invention" of the white race took place after an early, but unsuccessful, colonial revolt of servants and poor freedmen known as Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Colonial leaders subsequently decided it would be useful to establish a division among the masses of poor to prevent their further collaboration against the governmental authorities. As African servants were vulnerable to policies that kept them in servitude indefinitely, and European servants had the protection of English law, colonial leaders developed a policy backed by new laws that separated African servants and freedmen from those of European background. Over the next half century, they passed numerous laws that provided resources and benefits to poor, white freedmen and other laws that restricted the rights of "Africans," "mulattoes," and "Indians."

Calling upon the model of the Chain of Being, and using natural differences in physical features, they created a new form of social identity. "Race" developed in the minds of some Europeans as a way to rationalize the conquest and brutal treatment of Native American populations, and especially the retention and perpetuation of slavery for imported Africans. As an ideology structuring social, economic, and political inequality, "race" contradicted developing trends in England and in Western European societies that promoted freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights. Europeans justified this attitude toward human differences by focusing on the physical features of the New World populations, magnifying and exaggerating their differences, and concluding that the Africans and Indians and their descendants were lesser forms of human beings, and that their inferiority was natural and/or God-given.

The creation of "race" and racial ideology imposed on the conquered and enslaved peoples an identity as the lowest status groups in society. Myths about their inferior

moral, intellectual, and behavioral features had begun to develop and these facilitated proscription of any competition with Europeans. By the mid-eighteenth century, Negroes had been segregated from poor whites in the laws of most colonies and transformed into property as slaves in a state of permanent bondage.

Edmund Morgan (1975) also interpreted the actions of the early colonists in the process of establishing "racial" identities as stemming from the propertied colonists' fear of poor whites and possibly slaves engaging in rebellions together. Colonial leaders consciously formulated policies that would separate poor whites from Indians, blacks, and mulattoes and proceeded to provide the white poor, whom they had hitherto treated with contempt and hatred, with some privileges and special advantages.<sup>4</sup> In time, class divisions diminished in the minds of poor whites and they saw themselves as having something in common with the propertied class, symbolized by their light skins and common origins in Europe. With laws progressively continuing to reduce the rights of blacks and Indians, it was not long before the various European groups coalesced into a white "racial" category whose high-status identity gave them access to wealth, power, opportunity, and privilege.<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century virtually all Americans had been conditioned to this arbitrary ranking of the American peoples, and racial ideology had diffused around much of the world, including to the colonized peoples of the Third World and among Europeans themselves.

### "Race" as Identity

In the United States the biophysical features of different populations, which had become markers of social status, were internalized as sources of individual and group identities. After the Civil War, although slavery ended, race and racial ideology remained and were strengthened. African Americans particularly had to grapple with the reality of being defined as the lowest status group in American society and with the associated stereotyping that became increasingly part of the barriers to their integration into American society (Conrad 1969). And Native Americans had to try to reinvent their identities, whether in towns or isolated on remote reservations where traditional lifestyles were no longer possible. American society had made "race" (and the physical features connected to it) equivalent to, and the dominant source of, human identity, superseding all other aspects of identity.

The problems that this has entailed, especially for the low-status "races," have been enormous, immensely complex, and almost intractable. Constant and unrelenting portrayals of their inferiority conditioned them to a self-imagery of being culturally backward, primitive, intellectually stunted, prone to violence, morally corrupt, unde-

serving of the benefits of civilization, insensitive to the finer arts, and (in the case of Africans) aesthetically ugly and animal-like. Because of the cultural imperative of race ideology, all Americans were compelled to the view that a racial status, symbolized by biophysical attributes, was the premier determinant of their identity. "Race" identity took priority over religion, ethnic origin, education and training, socioeconomic class, occupation, language, values, beliefs, morals, lifestyles, geographical location, and all other human attributes that hitherto provided all groups and individuals with a sense of who they were. The dilemma for the low-status races was, and still is, how to construct a positive identity for themselves in the light of the "racial" identity imposed on them by the dominant society.

In recent decades, one response to this dilemma on the part of some African Americans has been Afrocentrism (which is not the same as an older version of "Negritude" that black intellectuals had developed earlier in this century). And for some Indians a new form of "Nativism" has emerged, harkening back to a Native American lifestyle. Afrocentrism seeks to reidentify with the peoples and cultures of Africa and to elevate Africans to a position of esteem by emphasizing valuable aspects of African cultures. Some Afrocentrists also make assertions about the positive qualities of African people and seek to recognize and objectify Africanisms in the behavior of African-descended peoples who have been scattered all over the New World. Many assume or operate on the premise that all peoples who descended from Africans during the diaspora maintain certain behaviorisms that mark them off from other peoples. Their arguments seem similar to that of the biological determinists in the dominant society, but most would probably not go so far as to assert a genetic basis to certain "African"-originated behaviors. Those who take the position asserting a common African personality or behavior reflect the degree to which the ideology of "race" has been implanted in them. Like most Americans, they find it difficult to think beyond the racial worldview and draw upon the same strategies as white racists in claiming superior features for "African" people. At the same time, there are many Afrocentrists who are very conscious of the fact that theirs is a political position and that they are using the same biological arguments as racists, the people whom they theoretically oppose. They fail to realize that operating within the racial worldview, accepting its premises that biologically distinct races exist, each with unique cultural/behavioral features, and simply denying inferiority while asserting African superiority does nothing to change the racism in our society.

However, we also must understand that what Afrocentrism is really intended to do is to restore a sense of pride and dignity to ordinary African Americans, regardless of how whites and others regard their positions. By looking to the "real" Africa, studying her history, learning about

and being involved in certain rituals and festivals that focus on African arts, dance, dress, music, and so on, some activists feel that they are engendering this pride and helping to remove the contempt and denigration that has accompanied our ideas about Africa in the past. They understand that for too long African Americans have been conditioned to the same negative beliefs about Africa and Africans as have whites and others and that there is a need to eliminate the self-depreciation and self-hatred that black Americans have experienced with regard to their African ancestry.

A similar situation obtains with many Native American people, especially those activists who must counter the stereotype of the savage Indian and the denigration of native cultures. Indians have also ingested the elements of the racial worldview; and they have felt the brunt of disempowerment and oppression and of alienation from a once established and viable community. They too are endeavoring to construct a new image of Indians as a people of achievement, pride, determination, and worthiness. Some claim that Indians were creators of beautiful art forms and democratic and egalitarian governments and were preservers of the great bounties of nature. Many argue for restoring the "spiritual" qualities of the Native Americans, imagining a gentle ethos that governed a special relationship to nature. The concern for nature resonates with many people and militates against the materialism and consumerism of the larger society.

Although many Native Americans live on or near reservations, the reality is that in most areas it has been largely the federal government that determined who is or is not a Native American by the amount of "Indian blood" they presumably have.<sup>6</sup> The Indian Allotment Act (Dawes Act) was passed in 1887 ostensibly to transform Indians from members of tribal societies into citizens and landowners. It also established that all those persons receiving land allotments be of one-half or more Indian ancestry.<sup>7</sup> In this century, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has provided a new measure of one-fourth Indian blood in assessing who is or is not an Indian, particularly to control who has the right to live on a reservation and/or to receive benefits and services from the government (Jaimes 1994:49). And it is the BIA that issues certificates certifying whether one is or is not Indian. Indian communities have opposed the "blood quantum" criterion as a racist policy. But much of the dilemma that Indians have faced is that they have never been able to define their own identities, even though treated (at least superficially) for most of our history as if they were foreign autonomous nations.

This has created numerous frustrating problems for individuals and divisiveness in and among Indian societies. It has led to conflicts over, and among, various degrees of "mixed bloods," along with accusations of illegitimacy and fraud. Most of all, it has contradicted the practices of Indian tribes in determining for themselves who their

members are. As the idea of "race" was not traditional to Indian societies, membership had been based on other factors, primarily birth, descent, and adoption. The policy of specifying degrees of Indian identity by "blood quantum" is indicative of the distortions that the ideology of race has forced on all Americans.

In contemporary times, however, there are more pragmatic and political considerations in those situations where being an Indian means sharing in some of the newly generated wealth from oil discoveries in Oklahoma, or the royalties from gambling casinos now so widespread. Contested identities have become fairly commonplace in those areas where such benefits have become available, even though many "mixed bloods" have often functioned as whites. (It is important to note that in the ranking system of the racial worldview, Indians were ranked somewhat higher than blacks but much lower than whites.)

### The Non-Problem of "Mixed-Race" People

One of the more tragic aspects of the racial worldview has been the seeming dilemma of people whose parents are identifiably of different "races." Historically, "race" was grounded in the myth of biologically separate, exclusive, and distinct populations. No social ingredient in our race ideology allowed for an identity of "mixed-races." Indeed over the past century and a half, the American public was conditioned to the belief that "mixed-race" people (especially of black and white ancestry) were abnormal products of the unnatural mating of two species, besides being socially unacceptable in the normal scheme of things. The tragedy for "mixed" people is that powerful social lie, the assumption at the heart of "race," that a presumed biological essence is the basis of one's true identity. Identity is biology, racial ideology tells us, and it is permanent and immutable. The emphasis on and significance given to "race" precludes any possibility for establishing our premier identities on the basis of other characteristics. In this sense it may be argued that the myth of "race" has been a barrier to true human identities.

The unfortunate consequence of race ideology is that many of the people with this "mixed-race" background have also been conditioned to the belief in the biological salience of "race." Their efforts to establish a "Mixed-Race" category in the American census forms show a total misunderstanding of what "race" is all about, and this is, of course, a major part of the tragedy. Their arguments imply a feeling of having no identity at all because they do not exist formally (that is, socially) as a "biological" category.

The fact is that from the standpoint of biology, there have been "mixed" people in North America ever since Europeans first encountered indigenous Americans and the first Africans were brought to the English colonies in the 1620s. The average African American has about one-quarter of his or her genes from non-African (nonblack)

ancestors, although most estimates are likely to be conservative (cf. Marks 1995; Reed 1969). There is a greater range of skin colors, hair textures, body sizes, nose shapes, and other physical features among black Americans than almost any other people identified as a distinct population. Virtually all of them could identify as of "mixed-race." But the physical markers of race status are always open to interpretation by others. "Race" as social status is in the eye of the beholder. "Mixed" people will still be treated as black if their phenotypes cause them to be so perceived by others. Insistence on being in a separate classification will not change that perception or the reaction of people to them.

What compounds and complicates matters is another lie that is one of the basic tenets, or constituent components, of the racial worldview: the myth that biology has some intrinsic connection to culture. Some advocates of a new "mixed-race" category have argued that they want to recognize the "culture" of their other parent. For example, in a black/white mixed marriage, a black parent presumably has "black" culture, and the white parent has "white" culture. These advocates fail to realize what anthropologists have long known, that there is no relationship between one's culture or lifestyle and one's genes or biological features. All native-born Americans share some basic cultural similarities, and the ancestors of modern African Americans have been "American" longer than the ancestors of most European Americans.<sup>8</sup> It is the ideological myths of the racial worldview that prevent us from seeing how very much alike culturally black and white Americans are. (This is not to suggest that there are not differences in the way blacks and whites experience our culture and lifestyle variations that reflect social-class differences and the isolation of inner-city populations.)

On the other hand, if one parent did come from a very different cultural background (e.g., recently emigrated from Asia), a child does not automatically have that culture because of the biology of the parent. Humans acquire culture; it is learned behavior. In order for Tiger Woods (a golfing star) to have Thai culture, he would have to *learn* the language and the elements of Thai culture. One can learn these without having a single gene from a Thai parent. Moreover, there is no reason why one should learn the cultures of ancestors merely because of some genetic or genealogical connections. None of us have the cultures of any of our ancestors two centuries ago because all cultures, including American culture, have changed, some of them drastically, during that time. Cultures constantly change without any corresponding changes in biological features.

Americans should understand clearly that humans learn cultural features from one another all the time because that has been one of the most profound experiences of human, and especially American, history. What prevents us from understanding this is that component in the ideology of

"race," as we have seen, that holds that each race has separate, biologically determined patterns of cultural behavior. The racial worldview, with its emphasis on assumptions of innateness and immutability, makes it possible to interpret all forms of human behavior as hereditary. In fact, it almost mandates such a perspective because of powerful forces within our culture that preserve and promote hereditarian ideas. The belief in racially determined cultural behavior, despite all evidence to the contrary, is perpetuated in American society by the popular media and as a part of folk wisdom about human differences. Witness the inordinate attention to and sales of Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994). This belief has been a necessary component of the ideology of "race," because it helps to perpetuate the notion that major differences between "races" exist.

People who consider themselves of "mixed race" and experience some form of psychic stress because they feel they have no identity in American society, perhaps more than most, need to have understanding of this history.

### The Tragedy of Urban Black Youth Identity

This leads us to consider another element of the tragedy of racial ideology and the way it structures and constricts human identity. That is the degree to which individuals in the low-status minority "races" have absorbed and acquiesced unconsciously to the folk beliefs. Many blacks accept without question the idea that there are drastic differences between "white" culture and "black" culture. Some attempt to constantly underscore their differences from "white" culture by behaving in a manner that contrasts with whites (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). This deliberate and provocative alienation from a dominant culture that is thought to be "white" has inhibited the development of, and access to, the wide range of options available to minority youth in American society. In recent decades this has been a particularly acute problem imposed especially on black youth who have been convinced by the media and propagandists of racial differences that the only identity worth having lies in excelling in sports or entertainment.<sup>9</sup> The racial worldview holds that blacks cannot achieve in any intellectual endeavor, and this has so infected our consciousness that even young black children are entrapped in the myth and inhibited from expressing intellectual curiosity.<sup>10</sup>

Fields like anatomy, biology, genetics, chemistry, botany, zoology, physics, mathematics, geology, geometry, and many others have been virtually closed to blacks as the vistas of too many black youth have been constricted largely by public opinion and peer pressure not to "act white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Gibson and Ogbu 1991). "Research" and "science" are almost unknown words in many inner-city public school systems. The irony is that this restricting of the intellectual potential of

particularly black boys has taken place during the past three or four decades even as our society has expanded and opened many doors of opportunity.

Lulled by a cultural ethos promoting narcissism and pleasure, many black youths have fashioned for themselves a new kind of identity, in opposition as much as possible to that which they perceive as "white." "Blackness" has been defined in many ways in terms of that which is banal and outrageous by middle-class standards. But this is not seen by black youth as a matter of social-class differences; it is a matter of what they see as a true "racial" identity. Saturated by hype and the glamorizing of sports and entertainment figures who promote superficial style without much substance, too many black youth now cling to a fabricated identity whose most obvious characteristic is consumerism.<sup>11</sup> Those institutions that used to reflect the qualities of life that gave meaning to black communities have been greatly eroded: the church, kinship and kin-people, neighborhoods with caring elders; the preacher, the teacher, the music teacher, the barber, the storekeeper; the dignity and sense of achievement associated with work.

It was not only slavery that robbed African Americans of their identity. Far more powerful and telling has been the cruelty of racism. Many historians note how strong and vibrant black communities and families were after the Civil War, despite the threats of lynchings and the other barriers imposed by laws, practices, and customs stemming from racial ideology (Gutman 1976; Staples 1971). Freed blacks anticipated opportunities to be educated, to obtain jobs, to work hard and make the same advances that whites made. They were Americans and saw themselves as participants in the American dream. They were freed at a time when the United States was transforming itself into a major industrial giant and there were jobs available for anyone willing to work. Given the labor shortages in the North, the nation had a "unique opportunity to integrate black workers into the industrial mainstream" (Steinberg 1989:173). Instead, America excluded black workers from industrial jobs that were the keys to progress and advancement and turned to white immigrants from Europe. After Reconstruction, the South, with the aid of northern industrialists, and dependent on black labor to produce its cotton and other valuable commodities, returned blacks to an impoverished and dependent position of virtual forced labor in the fields through tenant farming and sharecropping. Policies and practices were developed to prevent blacks from competing with white labor and from learning new industrial skills that might place them in a more favorable economic situation. It was not just that blacks were needed to work the fields of the South. The racial worldview, fortified by the science of the mid-nineteenth century that had diminished "the Negro" to a separate species of humans, "a lesser form of being," so dominated white thinking that it would have been impossible for

whites, even newly immigrant ones who soon learned the racial ranking, to live and work together with Negroes.<sup>12</sup>

There were forms of racial repression, often subtle but experienced as a constant threat to their humanity, that prevented African Americans and Native Americans as free human beings from realizing their potential qualities and gifts and left them dejected and vulnerable to the hedonistic trends within our culture. In the early twentieth century several generations of black men and women, bruised and weakened by the scorn and contempt of white racism, not only lost hope but many descended into despair. Music and dance became palliatives to the pain of rejection as full human beings; alcohol and drugs were even more effective. Thus the racial identity imposed on African Americans was successful in keeping too many of them in the role of the underdogs of American society. Similarly, Native Americans are among the poorest and least educated of our population. For most of the twentieth century, they have also suffered from the extremes of alcoholism and diseases such as tuberculosis. Indeed, no people have suffered more in American society (Pearce 1988).

Many minority youth today not only are suffering the consequences of the oppressive and mean-spirited policies of white America, but they are descendants of men and women whose spirits were broken by these practices and who too often turned their pain and frustrations inward. It is not enough to emphasize black resistance and overcoming oppression. There are too many African Americans and Native Americans who do not have the skills to enter mainstream arenas, who seem to have dropped out of the social system, or who are incapable of dealing with the reality of modern life: those into the drug culture, the undereducated, those in our jails and prisons, or the homeless. We need to understand how to remove the barriers that have kept them down.

Too few people have studied the phenomenon of the transgenerational retention and transmission of an ethos of hopelessness. But some filmmakers have documented the heartbreaking stories of black men and women who suffered unbearable discrimination in our nation's industries.<sup>13</sup> And others have told the painful stories of the hopelessness suffered by so many on Indian reservations. Their sons and daughters felt their pain and the degradation they have experienced. We need to study this phenomenon and to understand what these kinds of experiences have done to the self-image and self-esteem of low-status minorities.

### **Transcending the Restrictions of "Racial" Identity**

Today scholars are beginning to realize that "race" is nothing more and nothing less than a social invention. It has nothing to do with the intrinsic, or potential, qualities of the physically differing populations, but much to do

with the allocation of power, privilege, and wealth among them. *This conceptual separation of actual physical variations within the species from the socially invented characterizations of them represents a major paradigm shift in how many scholars now think about the human experience.* Anthropologists and biologists no longer see "races" as discrete populations defined by blood-group patterns or "types" defined by averages of statistical measurements. Biophysical variations are seen as continuous and gradual, overlapping population boundaries, fluid, and subject to evolutionary changes. In like manner, scholars honestly examining the history of American attitudes toward human differences have concluded that "race" was a social invention of the eighteenth century that took advantage of the superficial physical differences among the American population and the social roles that these peoples played, and transposed these into a new form of social stratification. The symbols of race identity became the substance.

Recognizing the reality of the racial worldview and how it developed as a sociocultural reality requires a whole new way of looking at human diversity in all of its many forms. It means that (1) we can better recognize and comprehend accurately and objectively the natural causes of human physical variations around the world without attempting to homogenize people into limited "racial" categories; (2) we can liberate ourselves from the need to utilize physical differences in apprehending human identities; (3) freed from the myths of racial determinism, we can now improve our understanding of the true nature of culture and cultural differences and begin to view the processes of cultural change in a more accurate light; and (4) we can begin to understand the real nature of "race" as a social construct and to deal with the problems that racial identities have imposed on people.

For example, using this new perspective, we would be able to avoid the problems encountered when scholars examine the African Diaspora and attempt to determine which peoples are legitimately black products of this massive process of displacement. Several years ago, two Asian students who had recently immigrated to the United States came to me confidentially after class with a puzzle. They wanted to know why were people like Hazel O'Leary (just appointed as U.S. Secretary of Energy) and Thurgood Marshall, Justice of the United States Supreme Court, identified as "black" in American society when it was obvious that they were not. I explained some of the history of the idea of "race" and the interactions among peoples in the New World. I also pointed out that there is a great deal more to the identification of African Americans than similarities in physical traits, that in fact, biological variations have little to do with the social categories of race. Indeed the people of the African Diaspora are a biogenetically diverse category of people who have an identity derived from common experiences of exploitation and

racism. It is far more accurate and more fruitful to scholarship, and possibly to the future of humankind, to define African American people by their sense of *community, consciousness, and commitment* than by some mystical "racial" essence. It is the Community into which they were born and reared, a Consciousness of the historical realities and shared experiences of their ancestors, and a Commitment to the perspectives of their "blackness" and to the diminishing of racism that is critical to the identities of the Thurgood Marshalls and Hazel O'Learys of our society. The social categories of "race" have always encompassed more than mere physical similarities and differences. Theodore Allen tells us in the acknowledgments to his two-volume excoriation of white racism that he has learned to say, "I am not white" (1994).

Even without all of the intermixtures of peoples, some Americans have already experienced a high level of uncertainty about the "racial" status of individuals with whom they have had some interaction. Many peoples in the world, from Morocco to the Persian Gulf, to the islands in the South Pacific Ocean, have physical features that cause them to be "mistaken" for black Americans. In that broad band of the earth called the tropics we find indigenous peoples with tan to brown to dark brown skins, and hair that may be frizzly, kinky, curly, or straight. As more and more of these peoples either travel to the United States or are encountered by Americans on missions abroad, Americans must deal with their perceptions of these peoples. Some time ago, in the space of about eight months, I met a Samoan, a person from the New Guinea area, and a number of Arabs who in the course of conversations have indicated that they have been "mistaken" for blacks.<sup>14</sup> Many peoples from the southern regions of Saudi Arabia look very much like their neighboring Africans across the Red Sea, having evolved in the same climate and latitude (and having intermingled over eons of time). To try to maintain racial categories based on physical features in the face of the real world of human biological diversity, I suspect, will be increasingly difficult.

There is another option, one that we have not yet claimed in the establishing and referencing of our human identities. We cannot ignore the fact that since the fifteenth century, what has happened in the Americas, and to varying degrees in many parts of the Third World, has been the fusion of genetic materials from all of the great continents. So-called "racial" mixture has occurred extensively in Latin America, and to a lesser extent in North America, so that most people are descendants of ancestors from Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and in many places like the Caribbean, from Asia also (Graham 1990; Morner 1967). Throughout the colonial world, complex genetic mixtures among various peoples have taken place; and increasingly Europeans at home are participants in, and products of, new genetic combinations with individuals absorbed into their societies from distant lands.

In addition to the increasing genetic heterogeneity of individuals and groups, there is the obvious fact that cultural features have traveled all over the world independently of the spread of genetic material. In the midst of the Sahara desert, signs proclaim "Coca-Cola," everyone from the Siberian tundra to the Melanesian forests wears "jeans," African clothing and designs are found from Paris to Sydney, Australia, and Americans eat more pizzas and tacos (burritos, tortillas, etc.) than almost any other people outside of Italy and Mexico. White boys wear dreadlocks, and Chinese and other Asian, and increasingly African, ethnic restaurants are found around the world. Fast foods, music, dance, dress, Hollywood films, whole industrial complexes (including the world of computers), and a wide range of political, religious, and social beliefs have diffused around the world. Few cultures have not experienced the impact of such massive infusion of new traits.

The peoples who have resulted from all this continuous blending of genetic features and cultural traits are truly "universal" human beings, regardless of what languages they speak or cultures they participate in. The concept of "universal" human beings might very well in time obviate racial categories (but not ethnic identities) and may help to bring about the elimination of all such designations. Many persons will come to recognize themselves as "universal" human beings, and there should be perhaps an early census category that proclaims this reality. What anthropologists must do is to make sure that the ideas of "ethnicity" and "ethnic identity" do not become perceived as hereditary, permanent, and unalterable, but remain fluid forms of identity that will make us all "multicultural."

### Notes

1. Reference materials for this section were taken largely from the following: Boardman et al. (1986), Godolphin (1942), and Snowden (1983). But I have read widely in ancient history and am aware that such materials are not generally considered part of the anthropological repertoire. We need to realize that historical materials are widely available to all, and we should encourage students to avail themselves of them, especially since American students have been shown to be woefully ignorant of history and geography.

2. Herodotus lists more than two dozen different nations that fought on the different sides in the Persian wars: Arabians, Ethiopians, Armenians, Thracians, Libyans, and many others.

3. The Persian Wars, Book II, p. 130, in Godolphin (1942).

4. Morgan claims that the Virginia Assembly "deliberately did what it could to foster the contempt of whites for blacks and Indians" (1975:331).

5. For insightful analysis of this process, see also Allen (1994, 1997).

6. The tragic and disastrous American policy toward Indians from the beginning has been one in which Indians were removed from their lands, forced to make treaties that Europeans promptly broke, and their lands were again expropriated. This vicious cycle contributed to not only the genocide of scores of

Indians, but their eventual settlement on some of the poorest lands in the country. See Berkhofer (1978), Hoover (1976), and Pearce ([1953]1988), among many others.

7. There were always ulterior motives involved in the passage of the Dawes Act. Some Westerners clearly recognized that an unstated intention of the promoters of the act was to provide a legal mechanism of taking reservation land away from Indians and allocating it to whites. Several provisions of the law allowed forfeiture of the land under certain conditions, most of which the Indians could not provide. Within fifty years of the passage of the act, the Indians had lost sixty percent of the land allotted to them (Hoover 1976; Takaki 1993:238).

8. Bohannon and Curtin (1995:13) have observed that half the ancestors of African Americans were already here in the United States by 1780 while the median date for the arrival of European ancestors was "remarkably late, 1890s." We need more of this kind of honesty in recognizing historical realities on the part of scholars in all disciplines.

9. Sports is a cultural arena that has been highly and publicly racialized. So powerful is the stereotype of black athletic prowess that it has spread around the world, affecting virtually all sports activities. For a searing and revealing indictment of how the conditioned obsession with sports has damaged the outlook of black youth while preserving the stereotypes and myths of race, see Hoberman (1997). The even more tragic fact is that black boys who cannot excel in sports tend to have a diminished sense of who they are and seem unaware of the other options for excelling that might be available to them.

10. I am referring here to the works of some psychologists and sociologists who have focused on the coping mechanisms found largely in the black underclass. See especially Ogbu (1978, 1982), Gibson and Ogbu (1991), and other works by Ogbu.

11. The image of black youth shooting one another for a pair of athletic shoes or a jacket has mesmerized the public over the past several decades. Such incidents reveal not just a warped sense of values, but the confusion of their identities with the clothing they wore and the failure of our culture to help such youth develop a sense of individual worth.

12. For a history of the process by which science confirmed and buttressed the racial worldview, see Fredrickson (1987), Haller (1971), Smedley ([1993]1999), and Stanton (1960).

13. I am thinking particularly of the powerful film, *Struggles in Steel* (California Newsreel), which has been shown on public television. It is a story of discrimination against black workers in the steel industry made by a steelworker, Ray Henderson, and filmmaker Tony Buba, 1996.

14. See Morsy (1994). When Arabs began to migrate to the Detroit area several generations ago, many were frequently mistaken for blacks. This became an acute problem in the area around Dearborn, Michigan, where many of them settled. There had long been a law in Dearborn that prohibited blacks from being in the city after sundown. The Dearborn police, among others, were often very confused.

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