

# Current Controversies

## Racism is Real, But is 'Race'?

By Robin Collins

It has become more difficult to distinguish the racism of the bigots from the racialism of the anti-racists. Advocates of social justice, particularly in North America, often reinforce the concept of 'race' as if it were a real category. How did this come to pass?

The scientific consensus is that 'race' is an arbitrary collection of biological characteristics used to superficially sort humans into categories, such as "Negroid" "Caucasoid", "Mongoloid" and "Australoid". Georges Buffon in 1749 (probably without malice) described six human varieties. Others would later claim 200 separate races existed. Seeing human groupings in stereotypes has a long history. The medicine wheel in the mythology of some Indigenous people creates four quadrants: "White (intellect), Asian (emotional), Indigenous (spiritual) and Black (physical)". The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans also practiced this discrimination. Race categories were particularly useful for justifying slavery and empire-building.

Humans are notably not sorted by eye colour or height. The preferred 'race' qualifiers (skin colour, hair type, nose shape and ancestry) are plucked from the many available attributes that make up the human genome. But these tell us little that is interesting because there are no important causal linkages between genes for individual physical appearance, and those for group behaviour or group achievement potential.

Biological siblings and parentage can show tendencies and unusual talents (and deficits) passed from generation to generation that cannot be explained away simply as coincidences. The fast-



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est Olympic sprinters are almost all of West African descent, and marathons are most often won by Kenyans and Ethiopians. This is not by chance. In both cases the athletes have inherited muscle structures or body types and related genes that, combined with intense training, provide significant advantages for running sports.

*Scientific knowledge provides no basis for believing that the groups of mankind differ in their innate capacity for intellectual and emotional development*

However, as geneticist David Reich wrote in 2018, "differences in genetic ancestry that happen to correlate to many of today's racial constructs are real." Because across human populations we know this is true, Reich cautions, therefore "the genetic influences on behavior and cognition will differ across populations, too." But given those differences are more numerous within groups than between them, why do we delineate 'races' in the first place?

Not without reason, we have come to assume that those who actively foment divisions based on in- and out-group distinctions have ulterior motives. Controversy often arises when social circumstances are uneven. Racists will seize upon these different outcomes to make claims about group categories as if they were immutable and biologically determined.

### NOT RACE BUT ETHNIC GROUP

In 1950, UNESCO issued its Declaration on Race, which stated that "it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term 'race' altogether and speak of ethnic groups." In sociology an ethnic group is any population of people sharing a common cultural heritage, history, or descent. And it is the hybrid nature of all human populations that distinguishes them from 'races' or subspecies and makes them capable of both deriving from or integrating into other human populations. The 1951 revised declaration clarified that "scientific knowledge provides no basis for believing that the groups of mankind differ in their innate capacity for intellectual and emotional development." We speak of the "human race."

One of the thinkers behind the Declaration, anthropologist Ashley Montagu, for decades challenged the validity



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of race as a concept. His best-known work, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, first appeared in 1942 and is still in print. He fought relentlessly for the idea that cultural diversity (not racialized categories) and trying to make humans more humane, should be the focus of our energies.

There were some who disagreed with this general argument because, as in the view of Ronald Fisher, a statistician and professor of eugenics who contributed to the UNESCO commission at the time, the “practical international problem is that of learning to share the resources of this planet amicably with persons of materially different [genetic] nature.” In other words, he believed race was both real and important.

In the current (1978) version of the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, it was recognized that group differences in achievement “are entirely attributable to geographical, historical, political, economic, social and cultural factors. Such differences can in no case serve as a pretext for any rank-ordered classification of nations or peoples.” That seemed to settle the question.

### SOCIAL CONSTRUCT BUT IDENTITY POLITICS

But a problem arose more recently when many of those who seemed to reject race as a biological (essentialist) determinant and came to see it instead as a social construct, then reverted to *race promotion* to address the plight of disadvantaged groups. Worse, some pushed back hard against those progressives who continued to embrace a

‘colour-blind’ post-racial worldview. The much-quoted Ibram X Kendi, for example, in his influential #1 best-selling book, *How To Be An Anti-racist* (2019) bizarrely claimed that “the most threatening racist movement is not the alt right’s unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular American’s drive for a ‘race-neutral’ one.”

There also are people who deny that any racial discrimination still exists, despite the data. Explanations for disparities, however, are divided up by those who see racism as the *fundamental* problem, and others who see it as secondary, or something that has to a large extent been addressed. Where some welcome a process of racial reckoning, others perceive this as an over-correction and zealous obsession with identity. Many are disturbed to see racialism (or tribalism) spreading like wildfire and perniciously also undermining academic scholarship.

*There are calls for deracialization—eliminating race and racialization, as far as possible*

In a recent panel discussion on *The Ethics of Black Identity*, well-known (conservative) economist and podcaster Glenn Loury said that he’s all for downplaying “identity categories like race in favor of species-level identification. We’re all human beings, and we should all have the opportunity to lay claim to the fruits of human achievement, whatever their origin.” In a strikingly coherent debate about subtle distinctions, all panelists mostly agree transracial humanism (colour blindness and avoidance of racialism) is “the way of the future.” Where they differ is over whether racial (Black) identity is useful at least temporarily for purposes of building necessary solidarity and community cohesion. “Tolstoy is mine as much as Charles Mingus is mine” states Loury. “Yet I cannot simply define away my

blackness. It’s at the core of my self-understanding.” But at the same time, he asks, “Can the history of blackness in America serve as a foundation for future prosperity? Or are we clinging to out-moded categories that limit our human potential?”

### SHOULD NEVER ENTER YOUR MIND

Shelby Steele, (also a conservative thinker, and author of *The Content of Our Character*, a groundbreaking book that challenged affirmative action programs more than 30 years ago) is more skeptical about black identity, and “white guilt”-driven social policies based on an assumption of black inferiority. Steele has often highlighted the problem of academic success being portrayed as “acting white” and of single parenthood contributing to poverty. He responds to Loury: “[T]oday we black people, our biggest problem is modernity. [...] And maybe there’s a little racism in there somewhere, but the real problem is, in California last year, black kids who graduated from high school read at an eighth grade level.” Steele has argued for decades that seeking solace in ‘racial pride’ is no solution: “The matter of being Black should never enter your mind.”

Greg Thomas (yet another conservative writer) in the *Journal of Free Black Thought*, muses that: “In small pockets of the intellectual heterodoxy there are rising calls for deracialization—eliminating race and racialization, as far as possible, from our sense of self and our public life. Most certainly a minority position, this radical idea faces an uphill battle...”

Ashley Montagu also knew the frustration of defending a radical humanist viewpoint. He nevertheless concludes *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* with this (liberal) inclusive message: “Every human is incomparable, unique, universal, and fundamentally alike in all the qualities that make us human.” ■

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