

RETHINKING ETHNICITY AND RACE

- I. HOW HAVE RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES BEEN UNDERSTOOD AND USED?
- A. Various used by different professionals. Author James Shreeve provides an example from the forensic sciences. "Age, sex, stature, and race are the cardinal points of a preliminary forensic report, the cornerstones that support the reconstruction of a specific human identity."<sup>1</sup> But of the four, race is most subject to interpretation and contestation.
1. Medical anthropologists and other medical professionals use the term race to organize data and to analyze such data. There are studies, then, that purport to show differences in susceptibility to disease between races. [But what are these data really showing? For example, the high incidence of high blood pressure among African-Americans or high alcoholism rates among Native-Americans?
- Aren't these data really telling us as much about socio-economic status and environmental conditions as about a purported "racial susceptibility?
- II. WHAT IS RACE?
- A. General Consensus that we are all members of the same species: Homo sapiens.
1. Shreeve offers this rough definition: "race is the part of one's -person's variation on the theme of humanity created by the interplay of geography and inheritance.
- B. Historically, anthropologists viewed concepts of races as fixed types, each of which was pure and distinct. [As such, a person of any given race would be taken as "representative" of that race, since each race had its own characteristics. Think of Linnaeus and Blumenbach.]
1. The idea of "cluster of physical characteristics" and "bushel- basket" scheme still exist when we think about the shared physical characteristics that generally, but not completely, correlate to geography.
2. "The straightforward biological fact of human variation is that there are no traits that are inherently, inevitably associated with one another. Morphological features *do* vary from region to region, but they do so independently, not in packaged sets."<sup>2</sup>
- C. But is it "silly," as one biological anthropologist has argued, to suggest, that there are no races?
- D. There are human morphological (structure, form) differences and similarities, to be sure, but is "race" the right word to use?
- E. According to a study conducted by geneticist Richard Lewontin of Harvard, approximately 6% of human variation can be attributed to "race."
- F. Here's a more recent attempt to define race provided by a leading researcher in the Human Genome Project, Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza: "A race is a group of individuals that we can recognize as biologically different from others. To be scientifically "recognized," the differences between a population that we would like to call a race and neighboring populations must be statistically significant according to some defined criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> James Shreeve, "Terms of Estrangement," Discover, November 1994, p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.58.

The threshold of statistical significance is arbitrary. The probability of reaching significance for a given distance increases steadily with the number of individuals and genes tested."<sup>3</sup>

### III. A HISTORICAL CASE: BLUMENBACH'S BLUNDER

A. Blumenbach, one of the greatest and most honored scientists of the Enlightenment, developed taxonomy of the human races.

1. His "final taxonomy of 1795 divided all humans into five groups, defined by both by geography and appearance - in his order, the Caucasian variety, for the light-skinned people of Europe and adjacent parts of Asia and Africa; the Mongolian variety, for most other inhabitants of Asia, including China and Japan, the Ethiopian variety, for the dark-skinned people of Africa; the American variety, for most native populations of the New World; and the Malay variety, for the Polynesians and Melanesians of the Pacific and the Aborigines of Australia."<sup>4</sup>

2. Blumenbach taxonomy was based largely on an earlier one created by Carolus Linnaeus (*Systema Naturae*) in 1758. However, the Linnaeus' taxonomy had 4 races, while Blumenbach's had five. According to Gould, this slight alteration had huge ramifications.

B. The most significant difference is that Blumenbach introduced a notion of hierarchy, according to Gould. The idea of races provided by Linnaeus corresponded to the conventional cartography of the day.

1. Blumenbach's alteration changed the axis of "races" from conventional cartography to another axis that included hierarchy although B was one of the more "progressive" thinkers of his time on the idea of race. He, for example, believed in the unity of the human species. He also believed in the relative superficiality of racial variation.

C. Nonetheless, Blumenbach's taxonomy also "singled out a particular group as closest to the created ideal and then characterized all groups by relative degrees of departure from this archetypal standard. He ended up with a system that placed a single race at the pinnacle, then envisioned two symmetrical lines of departure away from this ideal toward greater and greater degeneration."<sup>5</sup> Beauty was the criterion that Blumenbach used to make his judgments re: degeneration.

The key point is that race, as it has been widely and historically deployed, has not been limited to physical appearance. Values are assigned and evaluations made about an individual's moral character, intelligence, and temperament, based upon membership in one group or another.

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<sup>3</sup> Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, "The Geometer of Race," *Discover*, November 1994, p.66.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.69.