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## THE PROBLEM OF "RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT"

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### Introduction

We often fall short in teaching about "race as a social construct." We use this phrase to teach that race is a set of ideas about human difference rather than an irrevocable fact of human biology. Because race is taken to be a kind of biological fact by our students, teaching that race is "a social construct" works as a discursive strategy to shake their thinking. But we seem to forget our own, most basic anthropological knowledge—that *all* ideas beyond the idiosyncratic are "social constructs" insofar as they are shared cultural knowledge. Unless we are prepared to explain how human beings are to abandon the most basic cultural instinct—creating categories to explain the world—then we need to say something more about "race" if we are going to argue against its applicability in explaining human diversity.

A more complete argument is needed, such as: race is 1) a social construct that is 2) poorly descriptive of the phenomenon it seeks to describe and 3) has a long history of devastating consequences for individuals. The first part of this argument dislodges race from the realm of irrevocable biological fact. But it is the second and third parts of the argument that give us reason to seek alternative ways of understanding and describing humanity. If we only teach that "race is a social construct," we also run the danger of reinforcing the false dichotomy that social and cultural phenomena are somehow fictional, flexible, made-up and unreal, whereas biological phenomena are presumed to be factual, irrevocable and real. Race is a very *real* social construct with very real consequences, not to be dismissed lightly.

### Race Redux

The idea of race continues to reassert itself in popular and academic discourse. A widely circulated op-ed piece, "A Family Tree in Every Gene" by

Armand Marie Leroi, provides a recent and disturbing example. Originally from the *New York Times*, it was republished in Singapore's *Straits Times* on March 17, 2005. Since first reading the article in Singapore, I have also heard a Dutch academic cite Leroi's argument for the "reality" of races at an academic conference in Shanghai. In the *NYT* article, Leroi, an evolutionary developmental biologist and author of *Mutants: On Genetic Variety and the Human Body* (2004), argues that the "consensus" about race being a social construct is unraveling. Race, he writes, is not a worthless idea, but rather "merely a shorthand that allows us to speak sensibly ... about genetic rather than cultural or political differences." If experts such as Leroi fail to grasp the implications and inadequacies of applying racial categorization, then surely we need to clarify the argument.

Leroi's article implies that there is a difference between ideas that are "social constructs" and ideas that reflect "reality." His primary evidence that race is the latter sort of idea is a study published in *Science* in 2002 by Rosenberg and colleagues. In that study, the researchers applied a mathematical clustering procedure to a worldwide sample of genotypes from nearly 2,000 individuals. The results show that the procedure can produce clusters that correspond to major continental groups. But they *also* show significant clines between groups. Moreover, there is no "purity" of *any* population in the entire sample. In other words, some "European" individuals are sometimes classified as "Africans," some "East Asians" as "Middle Eastern," some (native) "Americans" as "East Asians" and so on. The results do not transparently reflect reality, nor do they prove that "races" exist.

### **Scientific Social Construction**

Leroi's own writing concedes this fact repeatedly. For example, "*looked at the right way*, genetic data show that races do exist" (italics added). In other words, it is a matter of perception, and I would add, agreement on how to look at the data. "There is nothing very fundamental about the concept of major continental races; they are just the easiest way to divide things up. Study enough genes in enough people and one could sort the world's population into 10, 100, perhaps 1,000 groups." Again, it is arbitrary, and specifically a matter of scale. The authors of the *Science* article in fact do just this, using their clustering algorithm—in which the number of clusters is determined by the researchers *a priori*—to divide the sample into two, three, four, five and six groups. At two, they get a nice cline anchored by the "African" and "American" populations. At six, one of the "races" is a small population in Pakistan (Kalash), while another is all Africans.

Conceptually, race is about division and difference. The motivating logic of racial classification is to place individual bodies into differentiated groups. While some of Leroi's argument follows this logic (for example, sorting people into five continental races), he devotes a lot of space to apologizing for this logic

("identification of racial origins is not a search for purity") and undermining the logic ("what fraction of your genes are African, European or East Asian"). The question is—why use a concept which has an underlying logic at odds with genetic evidence? Why insist on a concept that must be grossly distorted in order to fit the facts (as in this case—racial categorization has to be undermined in order to fit the facts of "multiracial" people)? Leroi's defense is that race is "a shorthand that seems to be needed." But in fact, there are better, more useful, more accurate ways to talk about our genetic inheritance than race; and ones that do not necessarily have "the problematic, even vicious, history of the word 'race.'"

### **An Alternative Line of Thinking**

Where needed, a term and concept such as "lineage" would be preferable to "race." I am not so naïve to believe that lineage could not be put to many of the same socially divisive and inhumane purposes that have haunted the history of the concept of race. A change in terminology is not going to fundamentally change all the conditions and impulses that accompany the horrors of race, ethnicity, nationalism and similar ideological schemes. But to me, lineage offers to be more useful than race for all of the reasons that Leroi outlines—descriptive, utilitarian and aesthetic.

First and foremost, lineage is descriptively better than race. Race implies that everyone belongs to one and only one group. Everyone has two immediate lineages—from one's mother and from one's father. And one's lineage multiplies with each receding generation. Considered in this way, one's lineages emphasize the plural inheritances that make up each of us as an individual. Fractions (or rather, multiples) make sense in terms of lineage in a way that they do not in terms of race.

Knowing one's lineages would also be far better than being classified as belonging to a race on the utilitarian (medical) grounds that Leroi discusses—which is indeed an important reason to have some way, like race, to trace or identify genetic inheritances that may have real consequences for medical treatment. The best way to proceed would be to identify the specific genetic traits in individuals that have consequences for a particular procedure or drug and forget about race or lineage altogether. Finally, on the aesthetic grounds that Leroi discusses (and which I think are the very least of reasons to maintain race, lineage or any other concept), whereas race implies dividing people into groups, lineage implies *connecting people through lines* (of descent).

### **An Aesthetics of Isolation?**

Race, as Leroi and others use the term, is a function of genetic isolation. The last bastion of Leroi's defense is that groups of human beings have undergone enough genetic isolation that it is legitimate to use the term race to

characterize that isolation. Once again, we are back to social construction—it is a case of whether or not this is to be the socially agreed upon way, specifically within the academic community, to describe the diversity that does arise in every lineage. The extent of isolation has in fact been relatively limited and not enough among contemporary *homo sapiens* that anything akin to speciation has occurred. Speciation has a functional definition within biology. Different species cannot mate and have viable offspring. But race (or sometimes, “subspecies”) has no such functional definition from a biological perspective. It is an epiphenomenal description of genetic diversity.

The most disconcerting aspect of Leroi’s “aesthetics” is that it celebrates this isolation and implicitly characterizes interaction among human beings as a destructive force. Leroi contextualizes his arguments in the possible “loss” of “racial stock” due to the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. The social, cultural and political struggles of people such as those living in the Andamans and elsewhere who may wish to preserve a certain way of life deserve our respect. But Leroi’s suggestion is a defense or perpetuation of isolation for its own sake and for the sake of “preserving racial stocks.” In this the echoes of the 19th century, when “Negritos” and others were “collected” and put on display in world exhibitions, are far too disturbing to ignore.

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