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## Race as Species

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When people identify themselves and others as Americans, British, Canadians, French and so on, they use proper names. When they describe a group as a nation or a race, they classify it with supposedly similar groups and distinguish it from dissimilar ones. This is the origin of the idea of race as a belief or assumption that human individuals belong in races. The assumption that physical differences determine the contours of what are really social groups has been reinforced by popular English-language usage.

Any attempt to correct the resulting misunderstandings is more likely to succeed if it benefits from knowledge of how a word with such powerful biological associations came in the first place to be used as a designation for certain kinds of social group. In summarizing this, as other histories, it is important not to force the evidence into the moral categories of a later age. If some of the statements made in the 1850s were repeated today they might appropriately be called 'racist' with all the moral condemnation that implies. Any such description would rest on some assumption about the intention behind the statement. To come to any conclusion about a person's intention it is necessary to know quite a lot about that person's world and the knowledge that was available to him or her. People today may say things they believe correct but that in a future era may look decidedly dubious.

Yet members of a later generation can use new knowledge to get a better understanding of what went on in earlier periods. They can spot the blind alleys and concentrate on the developments that proved significant. The very notion of summarizing a history implies as much, though different writers may summarize it in different ways according to the story they seek to tell. This chapter

simplifies a complicated history by claiming that the notion that human races resemble animal species constitutes a thread that runs through two hundred years of writing about race and this helps the reader understand what the fuss was about.

### A two-dimensional concept

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the origin of the word *race* is obscure. It seems to come from the Old Norse, in which it meant a running or a rush of water. Many of its early meanings relate to a sense of movement either in space (like a horse race) or over generations, as in its use from the middle of the sixteenth century to denote a line of descent. When used to identify such a line it is two-dimensional, the vertical dimension being the distinctiveness over time (as in 'the race of Abraham') and the horizontal one being the distinctiveness at a particular moment in time (as in 'the Eskimo race').

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the English people's ideas about themselves and other peoples were dominated by the anthropology of the Bible. All humans descended from Adam and differences between them were to be explained genealogically. Such explanations could be of political significance. Thus in the fifth edition of a book first published in 1605 called *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, Richard Verstegan asserted 'Englishmen are descended of German race and were heretofore generally called Saxons.' The author went on to explain that 'the Germans are a most noble nation' because, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, 'the authority of the kings is not unlimited'; 'on minor matters, the chiefs deliberate; on larger questions the whole tribe'; and 'the King or chief is attended to more because of his authoritative persuasion than of any power to command'. Verstegan, who was supporting the parliamentary cause against the claims of the Stuart monarchs to rule by divine right, had constructed a genealogy that undermined these claims. It is an example of the way that, in this period, the word *race* was used in the sense of its vertical dimension. This was no aberration, for at much the same time it was being used in a similar fashion in the writing of French history. There *race* was a way of identifying the Franks and the Gauls, also in the course of an appeal to Tacitus, but this time to try to resolve disputes about the privileges of the aristocracy. So in both Britain and France the word had become a counter in internal politics, well before it was used in explanations of the differences between Europeans and non-Europeans (Banton, 1977:13–26).

Some thought that differences between peoples might also be explained genealogically. The Bible seemed to say that all humans descended from Adam and Eve, but some doubters found passages in Genesis that could support a belief that Adam was the ancestor of the Jews alone, and that his group was not the only one in the region at the time. The first belief was known as monogenesis; to it was opposed the doctrine of polygenesis, or multiple origins.

Genealogies embody the vertical dimension, but a group constituted by common descent is necessarily distinct from other descent groups, so the horizontal component of race as a classification is as inherent to the idea of race as the vertical one. Nevertheless the word could be used in ways that gave differing emphases to the two dimensions. This created an ambiguity that became troublesome in the eighteenth century when scholars abandoned the use of Latin to write in the vernaculars. When classifying plants and animals Linnaeus and his followers had distinguished *genus*, *species* and *varietas* as categories. Then in English and in French some anthropologists started to use *race* as a category without explaining its relationship to the existing categories. This was an ominous mistake. There was no avoiding the two-dimensional significance of the word *race* in ordinary language but scientific taxonomy needs to be systematic. If the Linnaean scheme of *genus*, *species* and *varietas* was in some way unsatisfactory it could be modified. It was wrong to try to insert into it another category without agreement about how it was to relate to the existing categories.

Yet this is what happened. Some writers used *race* as a synonym for *species* as a class in the horizontal dimension consisting of anatomically similar humans who might be of distinctive origin. Others used it as a synonym for *varietas*, a class of persons who were the present representatives of a line of descent that must at some time have shared a common ancestor with persons belonging to other similar classes. In the mid-1780s the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Johan Gottfried von Herder both commented on the disturbing ambiguity. Kant distinguished between *Naturbeschreibung* (nature-description) and *Naturgeschichte* (natural history). The former was static, a classification at a moment in time that was based upon similarities between specimens ordered into genera, species and varieties. Where nature-description took up the horizontal dimension, natural history dealt with relations between genera, species and varieties over time and reflected the vertical dimension. Kant wrote: 'The wolf, the fox, the jackal, the hyena and the house dog are so many kinds of four-footed beasts. If one assumes that each of them has had to have a separate ancestry, then they are that many species, but if one concludes that they could all

have descended from the one stem, then they are only races thereof' (Greene, 1961:363n15; for reviews of writing about racial classification, see Banton, 1986, 1998a).

Lévi-Strauss (1952:5) maintained that the original sin of anthropology was its confusion of the idea of race in the biological sense with groups produced by human action. If any one writer bore a special responsibility for this it was his compatriot, the great French anatomist, Georges Cuvier. He popularized the horizontal sense of the word *race*, using it as a synonym for *variety*. When his magisterial work *Le Règne animal* of 1817 was translated into English in London in 1827, Cuvier's references (in the French) to *racés* were translated as *varieties*, but in the next English translation (published in New York in 1831) any attempt to correct possible misunderstandings was abandoned. The designation *race* was maintained. The leading English anthropologist of the period, James Cowles Prichard, protested in 1836 about the way a word that denoted a succession of individuals propagated from a given stock was being wrongly used to imply a distinction in the physical character of a series of individuals. His objection passed unheeded.

The long and unilluminating debate in nineteenth-century British and French anthropology about the status of the race concept came to no clear conclusion. To write about blacks, whites and yellows as if they were distinct species within the genus *Homo sapiens* was to represent the differences between them as similar to the differences between lions, tigers, leopards and jaguars as different species within the genus *Panthera*. Lions, tigers, leopards and jaguars were accounted distinct species because they did not interbreed. Much of the discussion at the time centred upon the mule, which is the sterile offspring of a horse and a donkey; the inability of mules to produce offspring was taken as proving that horses and donkeys were distinct species. Since it was evident that blacks, whites and yellows interbred and produced fertile offspring, the accepted criterion for the definition of species constituted an obstacle that was never overcome by those who maintained that they resembled separate species. They also found the public hostile to the suggestion that the human races were of separate origin. It might be thought that a theory of permanent differences would have been welcomed in the Southern states of the USA as offering an intellectual justification for the enslavement of blacks, but, up to the Civil War of 1861–5, that was not the case. Public opinion was committed to the belief that Adam was the ancestor of both blacks and whites. Justifications for slavery could be found in the Bible. In the early part of the century it was believed that blacks had been held back by the African environment and that they would eventually catch up with

other races. Only after the war did the theory of permanent difference get a hold.

Prichard and other advocates of the doctrine of monogenesis had to confront a different challenge, also centring on the Bible. The book of Genesis seemed to say that God had created the earth and the human species about six thousand years ago. In that event, and since everyone could see that children usually resembled their parents, how could the physical differences between blacks, whites and yellows have come about? Was it the influence of environment? There was no good evidence in support of such a hypothesis, which made the idea of separate creation seem more plausible. From a twenty-first-century perspective it looks as if the mid-nineteenth century was a period waiting for Darwin to disperse the clouds of confusion by discovering the principle of natural selection and explaining how evolution operated, though that was not how it appeared at the time.

### Racial typology

The first theory to attempt to account systematically for the physical and cultural differences between groups known as races was one best called the theory of racial typology. Formulated in the late 1840s and early 1850s by writers in France, Britain and the USA, it held that:

- 1 Variations in the constitution and behaviour of individuals are the expression of differences between underlying types of a relatively permanent kind, each one of which is suited to a particular continent or zoological province.
- 2 Social categories in the long run reflect and are aligned with the natural categories that produce them.
- 3 Individuals belonging to a particular racial type display an innate antagonism towards individuals belonging to other racial types, the degree of antagonism depending upon the relationship between the two types.

The typologists argued that just as kangaroos are found only in Australia, so are humans of the Australian Aboriginal type found only there, and for similar reasons. The natural world was divided into provinces, each with its distinctive fauna, including its own kind of humans.

Robert Knox, a strident typologist, opened his 1850 book *The Races of Men* with the proclamation: 'That race is in human affairs

everything, is simply a fact, the most remarkable, the most comprehensive, which philosophy has ever announced. Race is everything: literature, science, art – in a word, civilization depends upon it.’ Knox was a Scotsman, but his book was published in London. Readers there may have thought that they had heard something like this already, for in his novel *Tancred* (1847) the future British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli made one of his characters wind up a similar discussion of the historical success of the English with the conclusion: ‘All is race; there is no other truth.’ According to Knox’s version of typology humans needed to understand the ways in which they were limited by natural laws; it was useless for a race to try to colonize a territory for which it was not adapted. In France Arthur de Gobineau sketched an even more pessimistic version, arguing that race-mixing had gone past the point of no return so that Europeans could look forward only to progressive degeneration and mediocrity, benumbed in nullity like a buffalo grazing in the stagnant waters of a marsh.

In subsequent decades a related idea that the British, the Germans and the Nordics were the contemporary representatives of a superior race, the Aryans, received a cordial welcome in West European societies being transformed by industrialism. New sections of the population were learning to read and to take an interest in developments overseas. They were receptive to a message that flattered them. Writers like Houston Stewart Chamberlain rewrote history as the story of racial superiority, while the forerunners of the Nazis selected the parts of Gobineau’s writing that suited their purposes and ignored the rest.

How the idea of race was used to build a philosophy that could, in simpler form, be used to mobilize less educated sections of the population can be seen from the writing of the Nazi movement’s chief ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg (1970:101–8). Holding forth on the subject of Nordic religion, he presented love and pity, honour and duty, as the driving values of almost all races and nations capable of culture. Nowhere was the struggle for primacy between love and honour more tragically evident than in the conflicts between the Nordic races and their surroundings. The Vikings were said to be without breeding, uninhibited by cultivated reflection upon purpose, but motivated by a sense of personal honour that drove them to new regions in which there was land to master. Christianity did not understand the idea of honour, even if the leaders of the church sought power in the same ways as other princes. It was racial-*Volkish* thinking that inspired the Vikings and protected them from the greatest of dangers, race-mixing, and therefore from descent into racial chaos.

This is not to say that Hitler himself accepted all of Rosenberg's ideas. In *Mein Kampf* he had set out a simpler scheme, dividing humankind into 'culture-founders', 'culture-bearers' and 'culture destroyers'. The bearers of cultural development were 'the Aryans', who needed to preserve 'racial purity' to fulfil their mission. In later years there were Nazi leaders who felt quite out of place in the audience for Wagnerian operas but were there because the Führer gave them to understand that these embodied values central to their movement. The Nazis were careful in the use they made of Darwinian ideas of race; they drew more upon racial typology because that gave them greater freedom to manipulate the idea.

### Selectionism

Natural selection accounted for the characteristics of species and sub-species. Darwin wrote of certain kinds of butterfly as 'geographical races, or sub-species' being 'local forms completely fixed and isolated'. Because they were isolated they did not interbreed and so 'there is no possible test but individual opinion to determine which of them shall be considered as species and which as varieties'. Darwin used the word *race* in the same sense as Kant and Prichard, but he introduced a new understanding of the process of change.

There was a rush to apply Darwin's ideas to the study of society, giving rise to an intellectual movement that has been called social Darwinism. Some individuals within this movement (like Sir Arthur Keith) drove its ideas to an extreme in formulating what may be named the selectionist theory of racial relations. It held that:

- 1 Evolution may be assisted if interbreeding populations are kept separate so that they can develop their special capacities (as in animal breeding).
- 2 Racial prejudice serves this function and in so doing reinforces racial categories in social life.
- 3 Therefore racial groups are products of evolutionary processes of inheritance and selection.

It should be noted that whereas the typological theory implied that pure races had existed in the past, the selectionist theory implied that they were in the process of creation. Blacks, whites and yellows were not species, but over the course of centuries they could become them. The typological theory had stressed the horizontal dimension of the race concept, implying that the correct classification of

individuals and groups would explain why it was that some races were technologically more advanced. The selectionist theory stressed the vertical dimension. Writers of a later generation have described both theories as examples of scientific racism, but the name fits the selectionist theory much better.

Another strand within the social Darwinist movement was that embodied in the doctrines of eugenics. Its founder, Sir Francis Galton, collected evidence to show that a streak of genius ran in certain families. There were other families that produced a more-than-average number of intellectually backward or physically handicapped children. Was it not desirable to encourage childbirth among those biologically best endowed (positive eugenics) while improving the environmental conditions surrounding reproduction in the poorer classes and preventing reproduction by those likely to give birth to handicapped children (negative eugenics)? The eugenics movement had a scientific aura that appealed to social reformers. In the United States eugenics provided a rationale for arguments that immigration policy should be based upon quotas favouring persons from countries where the population had the best biological inheritance. In Europe it was an important influence upon the political culture of the period in which racial theories were at their height (Mazower, 1998:77–101). In Britain before World War I there were fears that insanitary conditions in the cities were causing physical decline, and a movement for ‘racial hygiene’ advocated elementary measures for the promotion of good health. The need for national efficiency became a slogan crossing party lines. Sweden and Switzerland maintained policies for the compulsory sterilization of the unfit until the 1960s. While the birth of a deformed or handicapped child can be an individual tragedy for a family, it also poses questions about the causes of physical handicap. In some African cultures the birth of a deformed child can be taken as indicating that the mother has committed adultery. More generally, such misfortunes contribute to folk beliefs about inheritance and can be an indirect influence upon racial thought.

The establishment of population genetics in the 1930s completed Darwin’s revolution of 1859 by showing that inheritance has to be analysed statistically. For the typological theory to be persuasive it would be necessary to find discontinuities between racial gene pools, but research reveals only differences of degree, sometimes measured as ‘clines’. The new understanding was expressed in the statement ‘there are no races, only clines’. There are important differences in the inheritance of certain medical conditions between the groups popularly called races. Further research in behaviour genetics, in socio-biology and in evolutionary psychology may well



show that processes of selection are relevant to the explanation of some kinds of group difference. Any problems that such discoveries may appear to cause will not be resolved by condemning nineteenth-century scientific mistakes. The troubles may lie in the popular understanding of so-called racial differences.

### **Popular usage in English**

Botanists and zoologists assign specimens to classes in the course of developing theories to account for their special characteristics. In human social life individuals may be assigned, or assign themselves, to classes that are popularly called races, and that may in some degree correspond to biological classes. There may be disputes about whether an individual has been assigned by others to the correct class or about whether the classes themselves are correctly defined. In so far as a recognition of so-called races helps explain their characteristics, much depends upon whether individuals identify themselves with such groupings.

The popular understanding of a word like *race* is influenced by an interaction. When the mass media write about an individual's social attributes they need to use expressions that will be understood by their readers. When the legislature drafts laws to regulate conduct they need to do likewise. The decisions they take then influence popular understanding. If the legislature prohibits discrimination 'on racial grounds' it will define those grounds and, inevitably, lend authority to a certain conception of race. In similar fashion, if the government holds a population census and requires members of the public to identify themselves in terms of racial or ethnic origins, this will have an important influence.

The language employed in the first US Civil Rights Act in 1866 may well have been fateful. It declared that all persons born in the United States were citizens thereof, and that 'such citizens of every race and color . . . shall have the same right to make and enforce contracts' and to do various other things. This may have been the first time that Congress used the word 'race' to designate groups in this way and to refer to the protection of constitutional rights 'without distinction of race or color'. The Act could have referred to citizens of every colour; it was not obliged to use the term 'race' as well and thereby to add legal authority to the idea that individuals belonged in racial categories. Though it recognized a plurality of races in the USA it was primarily concerned to establish the equal rights of blacks and whites. It reinforced the assumptions that all (or most) citizens were either black or white, that these classes or

groups were properly called races, and that the individuals within them were further divided according to their ethnic origin.

Thereafter the use of 'race' as a designation for sub-groups within the population of the US became a feature of everyday speech that is rarely challenged. To an observer on the other side of the Atlantic who has not had the opportunity to make a systematic study of this usage, it looks as if the distinction between black and white became the paradigm case for the US understanding of the nature of race. In situations of tension between two groups identified by race there is likely to be a high level of agreement within each group, and disagreement between them, as to what the main issues are, and, because of the tension, they will be political issues. Tensions were strongest in the Deep South, so it was this region that most often called the tune. The white Southern definition of race, exemplified in the rule that one drop of African blood meant that a person was accounted black, was taken over by blacks as well and was spread to other regions of the country and of the world. By naming socio-political groups *races* the usage implied that some hereditary factor distinguished them in perpetuity from other similar groups and magnified the differences between groups.

In the age of Theodore Roosevelt and Taft, according to Lauren (1996:68) US political leaders were as much inclined to imperialist rhetoric and to prophecies of racial war as any politicians in Europe. The sociology of race relations which developed in the US between World Wars I and II offered a more sober assessment. Nevertheless, it tended to accept the folk, or popular, conception of race, highlighting the consciousness of racial difference as a variable. It was not until after World War II, with the publication of a magisterial treatise by a Trinidadian-born author (Cox, 1948), that the legitimacy of the folk concept as a term in a sociological analysis was seriously called into question. Cox's argument is described in chapter 10.

On the eastern side of the Atlantic there was no situation such as that of the Deep South to crystallize popular attention. Some have thought that a racial ideology was fashioned on the imperial frontier and brought back to the metropolitan country, but the historical evidence does not support this hypothesis. It was the intellectuals at home who formulated racial theories. As already mentioned, there was the seventeenth-century thesis based on Tacitus that the English were 'of German race', and the eighteenth-century environmentalist theory, based on the writings of travellers, that Africans were inferior because they had been held back by the unfavourable environment in which they had developed, whereas

in a new environment they could catch up with Europeans (Barker, 1978). Popular use of the word *race* in nineteenth-century Britain was also influenced by events nearer home. Movements in many European countries that demanded greater political rights for the ordinary people took forms that were usually called nationalist. Race was commonly a synonym for nation. In explaining what stimulated him to write his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, Gobineau referred explicitly to 'the great events, the bloody wars, the revolutions' of 1848. That year was described by T. H. Hodgkin, the English physician and philanthropist, as 'remarkable for the savage atrocities which have signalised those wars of races'. Whether a man like Hodgkin thought he explained the character of the conflicts better by calling them wars of races is difficult to determine, for in the middle years of the century the word was used in so many ways, as in a reference to 'the race of lawyers'. Charles Kingsley could assert that 'there is no more beautiful race in Europe than the wives and daughters of our London shopkeepers' and 'undergraduates are an affectionate race'.

In Britain, arguments about race sometimes overlapped with arguments about West Indian slavery and the motivation to work. The abolitionists had thought that once freed from coercion black labourers would work harder because they would be working for themselves. Yet it turned out that ex-slaves put a high value on their leisure and were not motivated by the prevailing wage levels. The report that cane crops in Demerera were rotting for want of harvesters drove Thomas Carlyle to despair. In 1847 he was but recently back from a visit to famine-struck Ireland. In his notorious 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' he maintained that all men must work, if not voluntarily, then by compulsion. The British had overestimated the power of a free market and by 'emancipating' the West Indies had turned them into a black Ireland, 'like our own white or sallow Ireland, sluttishly starving from age to age on its act of parliament "freedom"'. Arguments about British policy in Ireland often made use of racial doctrine. Frederick Engels, writing of the condition of the English working class in 1844, maintained that the Englishman, 'who is not yet wholly uncivilised', expected a higher standard of living than the Irishman, who, by competition, could drag the Englishman's wages and standards of living down to his own level.

Conflicts within Europe, of a kind that would now be called nationalist, may have done most to stimulate use of the idea of race to explain events. Discussing the rise of nationalist sentiment in the Balkans, E. A. Freeman (1877:211) remarked:

It is only in quite modern times, under the direct influence of the preaching of the doctrine of race, that a hard and fast line has been drawn between Greeks and Bulgarians. That doctrine has cut two ways. It has given both nations, Greek and Bulgarian alike, a renewed national life, national strength, national hopes . . . but . . . it has arrayed them against each other.

The doctrine of race to which Freeman referred was one that asserted that political life had to be based on the map of nationality. Everyone was to be grouped with others of the same descent and governed as part of a homogenous unit. It was, he wrote, 'a learned doctrine . . . an inference from facts which the mass of mankind could never have found out for themselves'. Unlike some others, Freeman did not see race as an unconscious determinant of group behaviour. A little later, in his 1906 book *Macedonia: Its Races and their Future*, H. N. Brailsford was still using a contemporary idiom when he wrote about 'the muddle of racial conflicts' in the Balkans. Ideas of race were not then identified with differences of colour.

At the end of the nineteenth century the idiom of race was sometimes used as a mode of collective self-congratulation. Joseph Chamberlain, on appointment as secretary of state for the colonies, could proclaim that one of his qualifications for office was that: 'I believe in the British race. I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races that the world has ever seen. I say this not merely as an empty boast, but as proved and evidenced by the success we have had in administering the vast dominions which are connected with these small islands.' Three years later Lord Roseberry could ask: 'What is Empire but the predominance of Race? How marvellous it all is! . . . Do we not hail, in this, less the energy and fortune of a race than the supreme direction of the Almighty?' Chamberlain seems to have been appealing to a conception of race as comprising the people of the United Kingdom, English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish, and to their political qualities. Whether he thought these qualities to be biological in origin is uncertain. Roseberry seems to have thought that differences between peoples were part of God's design.

References to a 'race problem' or a 'colour problem' multiplied but remained inchoate, in part, perhaps, because there was no political pressure to crystallize thoughts about the subject. The conflict between the interests of Africans and settlers of European origin in South Africa might have had such an effect, but at the end of the century British opinion was more concerned by the political conflict between the Boers and the settlers of British origin. At that time it

was more usual to refer to Boers and Britons as races than to write of black and white races. Some of the confusion stemmed from an inability to separate the idea of a problem into its component elements. For example, the British Institute of Philosophical Studies held a meeting in 1926 on 'The Problem of Colour in Relation to the Idea of Equality'. The first contribution was from Sir Fredrick Lugard, a distinguished former colonial administrator. He emphasized the importance of starting with a precise definition of the nature of the 'Colour problem', but regretted that it was difficult to find two people who could agree on such a definition. Without explaining what he understood by colour prejudice, he asked whether it was intuitive or acquired; was it a natural law restricting miscegenation; was it reciprocated by the Coloured races towards the Whites; did it operate between the Coloured races themselves? Nor was he confident about the definition of race, for he wrote of the Southern races of Europe, and of the Nordic races, as if in these circumstances it was not important to differentiate races from nations. Looking further afield, he also wrote of the Portuguese creating 'virile half-caste races' and of Negroes in the United States as a distinct race. He spoke of the desirability, in circumstances such as those of the USA, of each race 'pursuing its own inherited traditions, preserving its own race purity and race pride' (Lugard et al., 1926:8). Neither of the other contributors to the same symposium, Morris Ginsberg and a labour expert, H. A. Wyndham, gave any clear meaning to the concept of a colour problem. Ginsberg reviewed the evidence on the inheritance of intelligence; he discussed the idea of equality and questioned Lugard's advocacy of 'equality in things spiritual; agreed divergence in the physical and material'. Wyndham contended that if racial groups in South Africa and elsewhere could attain economic equality this would bring a solution to 'the problem of political control'.

That there should have been so little clarity about the nature of the 'colour problem' is interesting. Much of the history and sociology of imperialism was taken for granted, such as the proposition that the expansion of European power had been bound to lead to European control in regions of economic interest to the colonizers. There had been other empires in which people from one ethnic group ruled those of another. Were the results any different because the Europeans were of a skin colour different from that of those they came to rule? Were the results any different because the idea of race was so widespread? In the European empires of modern times, political superiority was associated with a difference of colour or race, but the association may have been fortuitous. In the terminal phase of European imperialism its critics exploited the association.

Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, reflecting on her service in the early years of the UN, wrote of the intense feeling among persons from Africa and Asia 'that we, because our skins are white, necessarily look down upon all peoples whose skins are yellow or black or brown. This thought is never out of their minds' (quoted Lauren, 1996:241). In such a sentence it is the word *because* that should prompt reflection. Maybe most people of European origin did look down on most Africans and Asians, but was it simply because of their skin colour? Many Africans and Asians may have believed this, but the differences of colour may have mattered to whites because they signalled differences in living standards and culture. Much of the resentment over racial inequality, and much of the criticism of colonialism, sprang from resentment over unequal development. This led the UN in 1986 to proclaim a right to development and to insist that it was a human right, even if it was of a different character from the right to be protected from discrimination. Sometimes it is difficult to separate the idea that humans belong in races from concerns about unequal development.

In the British as in other empires, control was exercised by a very small officer class. In British India there was one Briton to 3,000 Indians, in Nigeria one to 2,000 Nigerians (Mason, 1970:64). Officer classes tend to keep themselves apart socially and to cultivate ideas that help them function as a team and justify their privileges. Depending heavily upon mutual trust and loyalty, they have to put pressure on any of their own number who might deviate from group norms. The admission to their circle of persons from the ranks of the ruled – whether in the colonial service or in the armed forces – is regarded as very tricky. The first British anti-discrimination law was one passed in 1833 when parliament included in the Government of India Act a clause that stated that no native of India 'shall by reason only of his religion, place of birth, descent, colour, or any of them, be disabled from holding any place, office or employment' in the East India Company, but those who were supposed to give effect to this law found excuses for ignoring it (Lester and Bindman, 1972:383–418).

In 1885 a Polish sociologist, Ludwig Gumplowicz, had written of the process 'by which tribes became peoples, peoples nations, nations grew into races' that underlay 'the perpetual struggle between races for dominance, the soul and spirit of all history'. That white solidarity would evoke the solidarity of the far more numerous non-white population was a prospect of which the next generation was acutely conscious. F. Ashton-Gwatkin, the author of a 1921 British Foreign Office memorandum entitled *Racial Discrimination and Immigration*, put it bluntly: 'Great Britain, the

Dominions and the United States are all equally interested in avoiding a discussion of the subject' because the 'white and the coloured races cannot and will not amalgamate . . . one or the other must be the ruling caste' (Lauren, 1996:109; Füredi, 1998:4). Discussion would only increase racial consciousness and accelerate the progression towards the ultimate confrontation. Frank Füredi assembles much evidence in support of his argument that while a sense of race gave Western elites a confidence in themselves and a coherent view of the world, it made them worry about whether their race was maintaining its quality, and generated great apprehension about the long-term future. The reaction to Nazi race science was in his view less important than fears about the development of race consciousness among the non-white peoples of the empire. Füredi believes that this was a major problem for British and US foreign policy, and that it was the more troublesome because it could not be discussed in public.

Chinese and Japanese feelings that whites looked down upon them had been exacerbated by the immigration policies of the US and Australian governments. They underlay the Japanese proposal, advanced at the Paris peace conference in 1919, that the Covenant of the League of Nations should include an affirmation of racial equality (Lauren, 1996:58–63). The Japanese delegation presented a resolution: 'The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of States members of the League equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction either in law or fact on account of their race or nationality.' Many delegations were sympathetic; when others demurred, drafting amendments were proposed, but every solution was resisted by the Australian prime minister; the British delegate, although generally unopposed, was unwilling to overrule him (Lauren, 1996:82–107; McKean, 1983:16). Twenty-five years later there was a repeat performance at the Dumbarton Oaks conference (which considered plans for the creation of the United Nations and established the IMF and the World Bank). China proposed that in the Charter of the UN 'The principle of equality of all states and all races shall be upheld.' Initially the proposal was resisted, but later a similar objective was achieved by the wording of the second and third paragraphs of the Charter's first Article (Lauren, 1996:158–60).

That the Foreign Office should have used the word *discrimination* in 1921 is itself remarkable, because that word was rarely used in the discussion of racial relations until after World War II and the word *racism* entered the English and French languages only in the 1930s. One reason why the report of the Institute of Philosophical

Studies discussion in London in 1926 reads so strangely to a modern reader is that what he or she will perceive as the issues had not been identified in the 1920s. Just as political pressure crystallizes issues, so philosophical analysis is needed to refine them. Political pressure may encourage the study of issues regarded as problems but it rarely offers any incentive to the examination of the concepts used in popular debate. The search for an escape from the language trap within the idea of race requires scholarly imagination and inspiration.

Nazi racial policies had a crystallizing effect in some quarters. Huxley and Haddon's 1935 *We Europeans*, published in the same year as the Nuremberg laws, was only partially successful in separating what was at one time called biological race from social race. In retrospect, the book seems a weak response to a major threat, but for its time it was a path-breaking advance. Perhaps the most shocking feature of the Nazi era was the ease with which Germans were persuaded to retract their moral boundaries. Jews, Gypsies, mentally handicapped people and homosexuals were made to appear 'other', outside the boundary of humans who had a moral claim upon other humans. The doctrine of racial superiority played a major part in a process of social and moral exclusion, and the suspicion must linger that, in similar circumstances, other nations would have been as ready to revise their moral ideas as the Germans were. If doctrines can exert such influence within nations, the international community must be able to react.

The British Colonial Office was preoccupied with the practical problems of particular colonies and reluctant to consider abstract principles about racial equality. After the fall of Singapore in 1942 its officials had to work desperately to influence policy-makers in the USA who wanted a promise that after the war India and the colonies would become independent. They devised a new political language for a post-war world; imperialism was to be transformed into a partnership for promoting development and welfare, while the metropolitan power was to protect the minorities that might suffer were sovereignty too quickly transferred to representatives of the largest ethnic group (Wolton, 2000). The transformation was driven by international politics and these changed the significance given to the word *race*.

Young Europeans in the latter part of the twentieth century were inclined to disparage any suggestion that the maintenance of social distinctions associated with rank could help maintain discipline, but many human rights reports to the UN in recent times have drawn attention to the problem of impunity, referring to localities in which troops and armed police can abuse members of the public



without any expectation that they will be disciplined for so doing. The parties may now be of the same colour, but the corruptions of power remain. Though democracy requires the elimination of any exclusiveness based on ascribed characteristics, like those of race, few political tasks are more difficult than engineering a gradual sharing or transfer of power from one group to another. The British tried again at the time of decolonization in the late 1950s to Africanize their colonial service, but an analysis of the options open in practice to the European district officer in East Africa (summarized in Banton, 1983:174–5) demonstrated that goodwill was not enough. There are limits to the social engineering of human relations.

### The tangled web

What Sartre called the practical affirmation of white superiority seems unproblematic, but this chapter must surely conclude with doubts about the relation between the practical and the theoretical affirmations.

There could be no doubting white supremacy as a matter of fact. European expansion into other regions of the world was an expression of unequal development, a phase in the process of globalization. Technologically and economically the European region was far ahead. The long-term effect of its expansion may be eventually to reduce regional inequalities, but its medium-term effect has been to increase consciousness of them, for the regional inequalities have been recreated in the parts of the Third World that white influence has reached. In some parts the Europeans wanted the land for their own settlement and they adopted genocidal measures when dispossessing the indigenous peoples. Some colonialists sought ideological justifications for their actions; others were not bothered. In other parts the Europeans were more interested in trade and they imposed their own rule on top of the political system they found in place. They had a much greater capacity for collective action; when required, they could summon troops from elsewhere or signal for a gunboat. The indigenous peoples could not co-operate to the same extent and imperial policy was to keep it that way. It was expressed in the Roman maxim: *divide et impera*, divide and rule.

As the designation *white* indicates, the rulers and the ruled were distinguished by their appearance. They differed in many respects, in language, religion, skills and so on, but it was complexion that came above all to serve as the sign of where a person belonged in the new social order. Those who tried to describe that order

frequently called upon a word that had acquired biological connotations, *race*, to identify a whole cluster of non-biological differences. This gave extra plausibility to the claim that there was a theoretical affirmation of white superiority. That claim had two components. First it pointed to the propagation of doctrines, particularly those here called selectionist, that interpreted the superior development of the countries inhabited by whites as the product of biological evolution. Second, and more contentiously, it maintained that these doctrines served a political function in that they raised white morale, rationalized the means used by the whites to secure their rule, and lowered the morale of those they dominated.

The doctrines in question conceived of human races as species or groups in the process of becoming species and supported the belief that white superiority could be traced to biological causes. But the word *race* was used in other senses also. When used as a name for a sub-species it supported the belief that the group differences were of environmental and cultural origin. Often the word was used in a way that had no biological content. As theories, the racial theories of the nineteenth century were attempts to account for the unequal development of nations and peoples. They probably contributed to white arrogance, even among those who recognized that unequal development was too complex an observation to be explained by any single theory. The notion that, for whatever reason, they were superior to Third World peoples doubtless gave the whites extra confidence and made them more effective rulers. For the subjugated peoples, especially those who did not profess a major religion like Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism, and were militarily weak, the magnitude of the inequality in development could have a shattering effect and stimulate bizarre attempts to account for it, like the 'cargo cults' of the Pacific and the Ras Tafari movement in Jamaica. Many of the effects of contact between unequally developed peoples seem to have been independent of the colonial context in which many of them occurred, and independent of the propagation of racial doctrines.

The theoretical affirmation of white superiority was often an affirmation of a temporary superiority, for there was an acceptance that the new empires might last no longer than earlier ones. This acceptance was recalled every time congregations sang a popular hymn with its lines: 'Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane.' It is probably right to conclude, with Füredi, that many whites expected and feared a developing solidarity among the non-white peoples. They may have seen this as the Number One problem for the future, but they did not describe it as a race problem. The claims, advanced by a minority, that whites were

naturally superior were undermined by the serious fears of racial decline that were given elaboration by the eugenics movement, and by a general scepticism about attempts to explain the unequal development of different world regions as the product of inheritance.