

RACE AS A SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT

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Perhaps no concept in the world of science is more in dispute than that of *race*. Some boldly assert their belief in doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority, often using their faith as justification for policies of imperialistic expansion and even of the forceful elimination of unwelcome minorities.¹

Others, however, with equal confidence attack the very validity of any such conception of race. They present evidence that all races are mixed and that, if ethnic groups are not approximately the same in innate capacity for development, at least there is so much overlapping of ability that the best of the less capable groups excel the average individuals of the superior groups. Racial pride is, consequently, a dangerous myth, an elaborate rationalization used to justify mistreatment or oppression of competitors and enemies.²

A part of this confusion is certainly the result of confusion about what is meant by the term race. The biologists and physical anthropologists are in fair agreement that the word should be used to indicate "a subdivision of mankind having certain inborn physical traits in common."³ Popular usage is, however, far less exact. A newspaper editorial refers to Americans as "a gullible race." A correspondent writes of the glories of the Smith family and concludes triumphantly, "We Smiths are not a nation; we are a race!"

Little wonder, then, that Huxley and Haddon were able to note at least six distinguishable uses of the word

¹ Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich, 1925).

² Jacques M. Barzun, *Race, A Study in Modern Superstition* (New York, 1937).

³ Alexander Goldenweiser, *Anthropology* (London, 1937), p. 13.

race, several of them so contradictory and illogical that these authors in despair deliberately avoid the term and substitute the expressions "ethnic group" and "people." Their defense is that race has now "lost any sharpness of meaning" and "is hardly definable in scientific terms," largely because of the "lamentable confusion between the ideas of *race*, *culture*, and *nation*."⁴

It should be remembered, however, that a word is not to be defined by what it should mean but rather by what people have come to use it to mean. The sociologist, accordingly, should take account of the situation as it is and avoid the danger of minimizing the importance of race consciousness because of a preoccupation with conflicts over terminology. Political leaders, agitators, men in the street certainly have a definite idea of what they mean by race. A concept, however erroneous, is of major sociological significance when it has become so vital that men will die in its defense.

In popular usage, a race is a group of persons whose supposedly common genetic origin is distinguishable in any way—by anatomical differences, language, dress, or other means of identification. This, it seems, is the definition that should be adopted by the sociologist, who is more concerned with social behavior than with logical terminology.

According to this conception, the significance of "racial" differences is that they constitute a kind of flag or uniform by which one may easily recognize associates, rivals, or enemies. One's attitude toward a stranger, consequently, depends upon the category into which he falls and not upon the means of arriving at this classification. Speech, costume, and other cultural stigmata may, therefore, be even more significant than observable physio-

⁴ Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon, *We Europeans, A Survey of "Racial" Problems* (London, 1935), pp. 108 and 262-63.

logical characteristics. In fact, mere anatomical traits are often less precise than cultural ones and hence more liable to result in confusing friend with foe.

Race consciousness is, then, like a uniform or other insignia in that it tends to improve group morale and to increase rivalry and aggression toward outsiders. The preaching of ethnocentric doctrines may, for example, silence dissenters almost as effectively as would a declaration of war upon a neighboring state. Racialism is, consequently, a symbol that normally strengthens social solidarity and reinforces prejudices existing against competing or antagonistic groups.

The concept described above has been suggested by several authorities in this field. Faris, for example, says, "A race with which people are in conflict is a group of people who are *considered* as a race and these thoughts or considerations are determinative in conduct and attitude."⁵

In his references to "social visibility" Donald Young also presents a concept very similar to that defended here. He also points out the importance of public opinion, even when it is unscientific and illogical. "With superb disdain for the findings of the scientists, popular belief lumps biological, language, cultural, political and other groups under the one heading of 'race' and behaves accordingly."⁶

In particular, W. O. Brown, following Reuter, Park, and Miller, has emphasized that "the transformation of race from a biological to a social fact is not a function of conditions inherent in human biology. Rather it can be understood only in terms of the social situations and culture of a given society."⁷

⁵ Ellsworth Faris, *The Nature of Human Nature* (New York, 1937), p. 341.

⁶ *American Minority Peoples* (New York, 1932), p. xiii.

⁷ "Race and Culture Conflict," in E. B. Reuter (editor) *Race and Culture Contacts* (New York, 1934), Chap. III.

If linguistic purists object to such sociological conceptions of race, a consensus may still be reached by agreeing that a race is primarily a group of persons with observable innate physiological differences, and, secondarily, associated with any characteristics that may permit easy identification.

A group of persons thus set apart as a "race" is a sociological reality, even though the alleged means of identification can be disproved by objective measurement. For example, an intelligent Kikuyu from East Africa may say that one way in which he can distinguish the neighboring Masai is by the peculiar bluish color of their gums, but he will not alter his behavior toward them even if he is shown that the basis of his discrimination is untrustworthy. It is sufficient for him that he can recognize a Masai when he meets one, however obscure or unreliable may be his methods of establishing the newcomer's identity.

In racial situations, then, the essential fact for the sociologist is whether or not an individual feels a psychic kinship with the members of a particular group and refuses to acknowledge a similar relationship to other groups that he can distinguish in some way satisfactory to himself. Anthropometric measurements are, consequently, of less significance than the individual's own previous experience or his acceptance of a cultural heritage that causes him to treat some persons as friends and others as outlanders, foreigners, or barbarians. Needless to say, these attitudes of amity or enmity rarely result from personal encounters with strangers; they are more frequently the outgrowth of traditional group friendships and antipathies. In other words, racial attitudes and the resulting patterns of behavior are psychosocial in nature and, as a general rule, are culturally predetermined.

The acceptance of race as a sociological concept rather than as an anatomical one will not, of course, solve the problems that have bedeviled anthropologists and biologists for more than a century. Do genetic groups have statistically reliable differences in intelligence or in temperament? If innate differences do exist, how much can they be modified by cultural conditions? Are "pure" races mere idealizations or are they realities obscured by centuries of intermixture? Such questions still remain to tax wisdom, patience, and scientific objectivity.

Nevertheless, the sociologist may make a definite gain by separating clearly the psychosocial from the biological aspects of racial problems. A general realization that race is more functional than structural and often indicates a certain point of view, usually culturally conditioned, rather than any measurable entity may help reduce the present confusion in terminology and permit greater clarity of expression, if not of thinking.

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