

A HISTORY OF RACE IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES

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Summary

Biological races do not exist—and never have. This view is shared by all scientists who study variation in human populations. Yet racial prejudice and intolerance based on the myth of race remain deeply ingrained in Western society. Here, the author explores how race emerged as a social construct from early biblical justifications to the pseudoscientific racial studies of today.

The author traces the origins of modern racist ideology to the Spanish Inquisition, revealing how sixteenth-century theories of racial degeneration became a crucial justification for Western imperialism and slavery. In the nineteenth century, these theories fused with Darwinism to produce the highly influential and pernicious eugenics movement. Believing that traits from cranial shape to raw intelligence were immutable, eugenicists developed hierarchies that classified certain races, especially fair-skinned “Aryans,” as superior to others. These ideologues proposed programs of intelligence testing, selective breeding, and human sterilization—policies that fed straight into Nazi genocide. The author examines here how opponents of eugenics, guided by the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas’s new, scientifically supported concept of culture, exposed fallacies in racist thinking.

Although eugenics is now widely discredited, some groups and individuals today claim a new scientific basis for old racist assumptions. Pondering the continuing influence of racist research and thought, despite all evidence to the contrary, the author explains why—when it comes to race—too many people still mistake bigotry for science.

1. Introduction

1.1. Early Racism in Western Europe

Early Christians, Hebrews, and the Greeks allowed out-groups to overcome their alleged inferiority by converting to the “superior” or dominant group, or through the process of assimilating (Longhurst 1964). The Greeks, for example, allowed so-called barbarians to learn to speak, write, think, and live as Greeks. However, in the fifteenth century, the Spanish introduced a new form of racism. In order to squelch the large, rising number of Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism and who were gaining status financially and in the church, Old Christians were separated from New Christians, or *conversos*, on biological grounds. Anyone with Jewish ancestry in the previous five generations was considered a New Christian and was subject to a number of restrictions, including an inability to attend college, join certain religious orders, or hold government positions. Certificates of “purity of blood” were issued to non-Jews to prove that an individual was not a member of this “inferior” group.

1.2. The Spanish Inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition was established to ensure that those of Jewish ancestry were kept apart and out of the mainstream of society. Although it was mainly directed at Jews, the inquisition also focused on Christianized Muslims and Gypsies and later moved to Asia and America, where it targeted indigenous peoples (Popkin [1974] 1983; Kamen 1998; Murphy 2012). In Spain, the inquisition was formally established in 1478, although it built on earlier inquisitions in other places. When it moved to Rome in the sixteenth century, although still persecuting Jews, the inquisition expanded its focus to include Protestants, homosexuals, people accused of witchcraft, freethinkers, public intellectuals, and people considered to be quirky or “gadflies” (Murphy 2012).

The inquisitions discriminated against and separated one group from another without allowing any legal means for the discriminated group to assimilate. Unlike earlier inquisitions, the Spanish Inquisition did not focus on religion alone but expanded to include ethnicity or race, introducing the notion of *limpieza de sangre*, or “impurity of blood.” “It was about classes of people rather than just categories of belief” (Murphy 2012, 70). Furthermore, it was run by those in political power. It was political: religion, ideology, and race or ethnicity were ruled and defined by the state. Minority or conquered peoples could not change their identities; they could not convert or assimilate into mainstream society. Although these discriminating practices began as a result of economic and political conditions, “scientific” theories justifying this kind of racism began to appear in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, and after the discovery of America, they were expanded to justify similar racist ideas toward Native Americans, Asians, and, later, enslaved Africans. It is interesting to note that Columbus’s voyage to America was at the peak of the Inquisition in Spain. It was financed mainly by *conversos*, and there were *conversos* among the ships’ crews. In fact, a large number of Jews who had refused to be baptized were leaving Spain at that time (Murphy 2012).

The initial cause of anti-Semitism in Spain and Portugal may have been jealousy of the power, wealth, and influence of some Jews (and others) in early Spanish society.

However, it also could be explained and justified by biblical explanations of Jews as the killers of Christ and eternal enemies of Christianity (Cohen 2007). But when the Spaniards and Portuguese began to colonize America, the people they conquered and whose land they were taking had no established role in European society. Prior to this, travelers and explorers saw continuity between neighboring peoples as they traveled slowly through adjacent areas instead of traveling long distances to entirely new regions—basically jumping continents (Brace 2005; Jablonski 2012). New rationalizations had to be made to justify mistreating the peoples Europeans encountered and new theories formed to explain their place in the universe.

Although numerous explanations were expounded, two major theories emerged, became prominent, and exhibited remarkable staying power: the pre-Adamite and the degenerate theories (Popkin [1974] 1983). These theories first centered on the question of whether Native Americans were traceable to migrations of biblical people that had somehow become degenerate or were not descendants from the biblical world at all but had a separate origin. In this latter theory, American Indians were not descendants of Adam and Eve but had an independent, earlier origin—they were pre-Adamites.

The conquistadores justified their maltreatment of Native Americans by claiming they were subhuman and incapable of having abstract ideas and of running their own world. They also were deemed incapable of morality and unable to become Christian. These views were promulgated by Spanish theorists such as Sepulveda and Oviedo in the early sixteenth century (Popkin [1974] 1983; Brace 2005). In 1512, Montesinos, a preacher in Santa Domingo, opposed the mistreatment of the Indians and insisted that they were human. Bartholemé de Las Casas, who became bishop of Chiapas, became an advocate of this cause and debated Sepulveda and his followers for almost half a century (Hanke 1949; Popkin [1974] 1983; Brace 2005). He claimed that “all people in the world are men . . . all have understanding and volition . . . all take satisfaction in goodness and [feel] pleasure with happy and delicious things, all regret and abhor evil” (quoted in Popkin [1974] 1983, 129).

The first professor of philosophy in the New World, Alonso de la Vera Cruz, argued that Spaniards did not have the right to subjugate the Indians, and Pope Paul III, in 1537, declared that “the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic faith, but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it” (quoted in Hanke 1949, 73). However, the church could not stop the conquest of America and the mistreatment of Native American peoples. Even though the Spanish government and the church eventually declared that the Indians were fully human, the mistreatment of Native Americans did not subside.

As the inhumane conquest of America continued, racial theories remained crucial in justifying the treatment of the local peoples and, a bit later, the enslavement of Africans who often were needed to replace the rapidly dying indigenous Americans as a work force for exploiting the New World. The early Spanish debate was simply a preview of things to come. The two main theories used to explain human differences, pre-Adamite and degenerate, that the Spanish and Portuguese had first proposed in the sixteenth century were later adopted mainly by the English, Anglo-Americans, and the French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These theories then provided the basis of

racist thought in regard to people of color and Jews for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, the threads of these two theories survived Darwinian times and the modern synthesis of evolutionary theory. Furthermore, they are still with us today, both in the general public and in Western science.

2. The Degeneration Theory of Race from Ancient Times to Darwin

Although the pre-Adamite or polygenic theory had a following throughout the period covered here and became the dominant theory in the mid-nineteenth century, the degeneration theory of race was the most accepted version in earlier times. Rather than challenging the biblical account of human origins, a generally unpopular approach, this theory assumed that all humans were created by God beginning with Adam and Eve. The nonwhite varieties were thought to be inferior and needed the guidance and control of rational, moral men (i.e., white, European Christians). Their condition was considered to be caused by some degenerative process that was related to climate or conditions of life, to isolation from Christian civilization, or to some divine action explained in the Bible (Popkin [1974] 1983). This was, in fact, the more liberal point of view, since proponents of this approach believed that these degenerates could be remediated by giving them the benefits of European education and “culture,” especially by missionizing them to Christianity.

After the debates between the church and the conquistadores discussed above, one of the earliest well-known proponents of the degeneration theory was John Locke. Locke was the seventeenth-century architect of English colonial policy who drafted the constitution for the Carolinas. He accepted the biblical account of human origins but believed that the equality at creation and the endowment of natural rights to all humans no longer had to be applied because the American Indians were not using their land properly. He also believed that they should lose their liberty because they had unjustly opposed the Europeans. Locke justified the maltreatment and slavery of nonwhites based on what he considered their personal failures (Locke 1690).

In the eighteenth century, many of the early, well-known natural historians attempted to explain just why these peoples were such failures. These degeneration theorists attempted to explain “that the factors that led some peoples to change from white skinned to dark involved ways of life that were far inferior to those of Europeans” (Popkin [1974] 1983, 133–134). The French nobleman, politician, and political philosopher of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu (Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, 1689–1755) was among the first to develop an elaborate climate theory in his *De L’Esprit des Loix* (1748). He believed that climate and geography affected the temperaments and customs of a country’s inhabitants and thus accounted for differences among humans and their cultures. However, these differences were not hereditary, and if one moved from one climate to another, one’s temperament would change (Bok 2010). Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), the founder of modern biology and the person who developed the system of zoological classification of species still in use today, also believed in the unity of mankind. Linnaeus’s goal was to systematize the naming of all the plants and animals God had created and put them in order: all species were created as fixed and separate species whose perfect representations were to be found only in the mind of God (Brace 2005). “Linnaeus and his contemporaries simply

took that general view and provided a more specific picture of all aspects of the world arranged in a series of steps running from God at the top down through the various entities of the living world to the inorganic. . . . This arrangement was referred to as the *Scala Naturae* or ‘Great Chain of Being’” (Brace 2005, 28).

Using this concept, Linnaeus published twelve editions of his famous *Systema Naturae* during his lifetime, and in the tenth edition (1758) he established the binomial nomenclature in zoology, the starting point for all zoological nomenclature since. He classified all living organisms into named units in descending order of increasing distinctiveness and began the two-name classification of genus and species for the basic name of an organism. Thus, he devised the term *Homo sapiens* for humans and, in fact, considered all humans to be members of the same species. Based on anatomical similarity, he placed humans in the order Primates, along with apes and monkeys (and bats). Linnaeus then classified varieties of humans in relationship to their supposed education and climatic situation (see Figure 1).

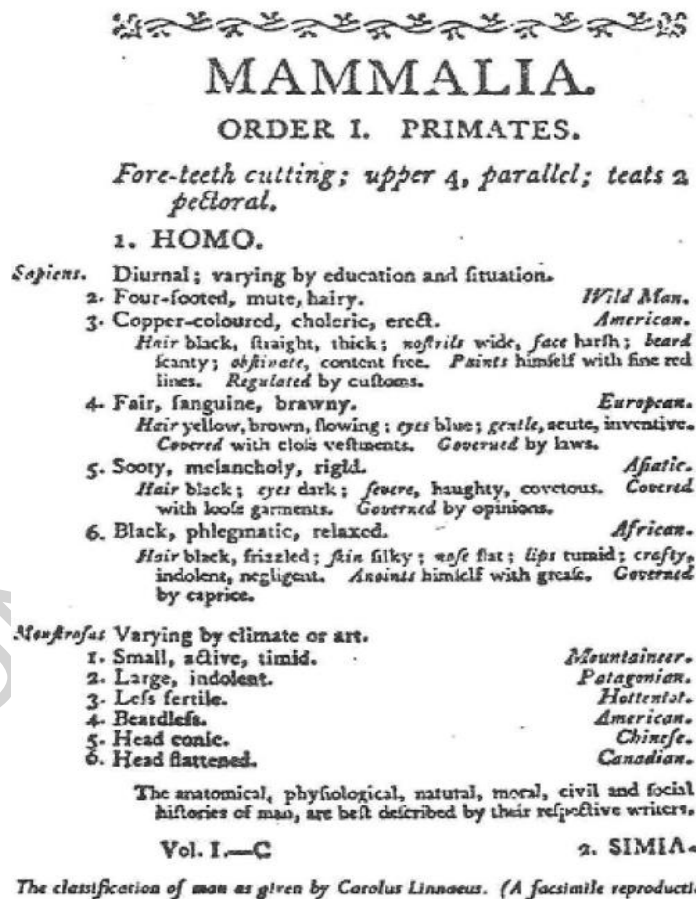


Figure 1. Classification of humans in the order of Primates by Linnaeus in the 1700s

As usual, those who did the classifying, white Europeans, were seen as the superior variety. As did Montesquieu, Linnaeus believed the differences were due to climate and social conditions.

A contemporary of Linnaeus was the French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707–1788). Buffon offered the most complete explanation of human variation of his time in the fourth and fifth volumes of his forty-three-volume *Histoire Naturelle*, written from 1785 to 1787: “Humans are not composed of essentially different species among themselves, but on the contrary there is only one sole species of man which has multiplied and covered all the surfaces of the earth, [and] has been subjected to different changes due to influences of the climate, differences in nutrition, and those of manner of life [lifestyle], by sicknesses, epidemics, and also by the various infinite mixture of individuals more or less similar” (Buffon 1785, 180, the author’s translation).

The German physician and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), often thought of as the father of physical anthropology, was a disciple of Linnaeus and idolized him (Gould 1996). Like Linnaeus and Buffon, he was a monogenicist who believed that all humans were created by God and that all humans were the same species. He also insisted that there were no sharp distinctions between groups and that supposed racial characteristics graded continuously from one people to another (Gould 1996; Montagu 1997). He was among the first to use the term race but believed that divisions of human groups were somewhat arbitrary and were used for the convenience of the classifier (Farber 2011).

Following Buffon, in 1775, a year before the American Revolution, Blumenbach published *De generis humani varietate nativa* (*On the Natural Variety of Mankind*), in which he stated that he had constructed his human racial classification simply as a matter of convenience. This book became a standard beginning reference point for discussions about human races (Farber 2011). In a greatly expanded third edition, written in 1795, he wrote: “Although there seems to be so great a difference between widely separate nations, that you might easily take the inhabitants . . . [of different regions] . . . for so many different species of man, yet when the matter is thoroughly considered, you see that all do so run into one another, and that one variety of mankind does so sensibly into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them. Very arbitrary indeed both in number and definition have been the varieties of mankind accepted by eminent men” (quoted in Montagu 1997, 62).

Blumenbach went on to specify five varieties of humans associated with major regions of the world. His five varieties—Caucasian, Mongoloid, Ethiopian, American, and Malay—became widely accepted by the educated community, and with some slight variations they are still in use today. In his scheme of the varieties of mankind, Blumenbach developed two major ideas that have endured in the history of racism and, unfortunately, also are still with us today. First, he coined the term Caucasian to refer to people of European descent and in doing so defined them as the most beautiful, the closest to representing God’s image, and the “original” humans from which other varieties had degenerated. He developed this on purely aesthetic grounds and, of course, on his own views of aesthetics. “Blumenbach’s descriptions are pervaded by his personal sense of relative beauty, presented as though he were discussing an objective and quantifiable property, not subject to doubt or disagreement” (Gould 1996, 411).

Second, even though he had expressed the difficulty of drawing lines between varieties of humans, he accepted the underlying paradigm of the day, as had Linnaeus, Cuvier,

and Buffon, that one variety was indeed better and preferable to another in relationship to God's original creation. In fact, unlike Linnaeus and Buffon, his varieties were set up not simply in a geographic system but also in a hierarchical one. Blumenbach, with his five varieties of humans, set up a racial geometry with two lines degenerating through intermediary stages from a central Caucasian "ideal" (see Figure 1.2). Stephen Jay Gould (1996, 405) believed that Blumenbach's hierarchical model of human races was a major factor in the creation of the modern racists' paradigm: "The shift from a geographic to a hierarchical ordering of human diversity marks a fateful transition in the history of Western science—for what, short of railroads and nuclear bombs, had more practical impact, in this case almost entirely negative, upon our collective lives and nationalities? Ironically, J. F. Blumenbach is the focus of this shift—for his five-race scheme became canonical, and he changed the geometry of human order from Linnaean cartography to linear ranking by putative worth."

Gould believed this ironic because although many of the monogenists were opposed to slavery and the mistreatment of the "degenerated" varieties of mankind and believed they could be "regenerated" in one way or another, Blumenbach was among the least racist and one of the most egalitarian of the Enlightenment scholars. In fact, he had a library in his home devoted to the writings of black authors and praised the "faculties of these our black brethren." He campaigned for the abolition of slavery (a view not popular in his day) and, interestingly, asserted the moral superiority of slaves to their captors (Gould 1996). Nevertheless, in the end, Blumenbach ended up with a system with one single race, Caucasian, at the top. He assumed that race to represent the closest to "original" creation and then envisioned two lines of departure from this ideal toward greater and greater degeneration. As Brace (2005, 46) emphasized: "For the next two centuries, those who have attempted to 'classify' human biological variation have inevitably built on the scheme proposed by Blumenbach."

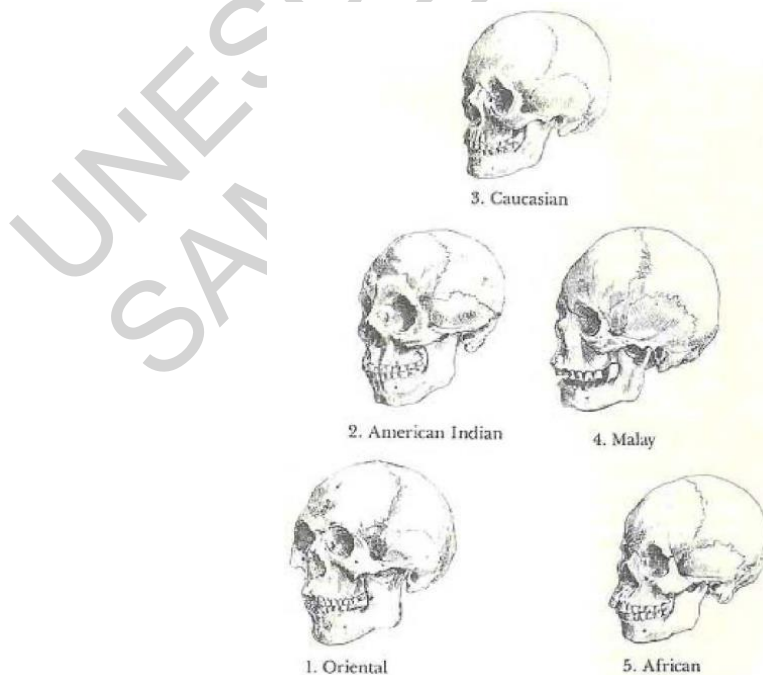


Figure 2. Blumenbach putting human races into a hierarchical system.

Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) was born in the north of France. After serving in the Army, he first began to study medicine but then became a botanist. In 1778, he published a book on the botany of France. Buffon was impressed by this book and engaged Lamarck as a tutor for his son. In 1781, Buffon had Lamarck appointed as royal botanist and collector for the Jardin du Roi, and they traveled together collecting plants for the garden in Germany, Holland, and Hungary (Hays 1964). After an interesting career, Lamarck published a series of books on invertebrate zoology and paleontology; he also published in the fields of physics, meteorology, and hydrogeology.

Lamarck is most remembered, and often most criticized, however, for his early theories of evolution, which are most clearly stated in his *Philosophie zoologique* (1809). Lamarck expounded the idea that organisms are not passively altered by the environment but that environmental changes cause changes in the needs of organisms that in turn cause changes in their behavior. This altered behavior leads to greater or lesser use of a given structure or organ. Thus use causes increase in size of the structure or organ, and disuse causes it to decrease in size or disappear over several generations. This was Lamarck's "First Law"—that use or disuse causes structures to enlarge or shrink. His "Second Law" was that all such changes were heritable. Lamarck believed in continuous, gradual change of all organisms as they become adapted to their environment (Clifford 2004). He believed that nature is "attempting" to produce in succession, in every species of animal, a form beginning with the least perfect or simplest to an end product of the most perfect and structurally complex. He posed a specific direction (perfection) to be reached in every lineage, a progressive development in nature.

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