

21A.100
Prof. Howe

Race and Anthropology

Huge topic – only going to cover a small portion of the discussion

Two notions about race:

Race has a biological meaning, but not a social meaning

*Race has a social meaning but not a biological meaning.

*The second notion is the one preferred by anthropologists.

American Anthropological Association has a statement on race that can be found here:

<http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>

- Their reasoning starts out with a genetic argument:
 - Gradual not abrupt changes
 - Traits vary independently
 - Race is essentially subjective
- It also focuses on the history of race:
 - Race gets it's meaning from slavery and colonialism
- Humans develop in culture and all humans have the ability to learn all cultural forms

Why does anthropology feel so compelled to respond to the notion of race?

In part because of where this concept came from.

- Linneaus – Systema Naturae
 - Believed that god created the the categories of race
 - Categories were fixed and unchanging
- Blumenbach 1795 Degeneration of Races
 - Organized a racial hierarchy
 - Created the term “Caucasian” because the skull form he found most beautiful came from Georgia, and thus it must have been most closely related to Adam and Eve.

Caucasian
American Malay
Asian African

Added “Malay” to form a tree

- The races “degrade” as they move further from Caucasian.
- Clear example of how cultural and ideological beliefs were injected into science
- These categories are arbitrary but still present

Race still has real social power: Race and American citizenship

- Country founded on the notion that only people “fit for self government” should be granted citizenship.
 - Immigration act of 1790 – all free white persons could become citizens
 - This allowed Catholics, Irish and Jews to obtain citizenship
 - Allowed massive immigration from Eastern and Central Europe
 - Granted Irish a status that they hadn’t enjoyed before
 - Asians could work here but not become citizens
 - Native Americans had, and still have, a separate system
- Not until the 14th amendment of 1868 did blacks become citizens
- “Nativist” movement focused on notions of race
 - Worried that America was becoming too diverse
 - Employed anthropology as racist ethnology
 - Concerned that the new immigrants were not racial fit for self government
- Race notions tested by Asian immigrants
 - Argued that their skin color was lighter than some Sicilian immigrants and therefore they were more closely related to the pure white racial stock.
- Creation of Eugenics
 - Trying to create optimal breeding for desired traits
 - (Picture of eugenics tree) Idea of creating a better racial stock
 - Lead to Immigration act of 1924 – excluded all but northern Europeans

Contemporaneous with these racist notions, some people were developing anti-racial ideas

- Franz Boas – founder of American Cultural Anthropology argued against the notions of race
 - Created the term “cultural relativism”
 - Found that people were not different because of their biology, but because of their culture
 - Used this idea to argue that there is no cultural hierarchy
 - But he was involved in arguing that Jews were part of the white race
- WEB DuBois – socialist and activist
 - Brown vs. Board of Education cited DuBois and Boaz as evidence that Blacks could succeed in education if given the chance.
- Civil rights movement mobilized anthropology to its cause
- Lead to 1965 Immigration Act – Ended race oriented quotas for immigration
 - Immigrants were accepted based on
 - Skill
 - Family reunification
 - Refugee status
 - Created notion of “model minority”
 - Increased Asian, African and Caribbean immigration

- Allowed MIT to get lots of talented students from around the world
- Before 1924, lots of anxiety over European differences
 - Now you lump them all together under the heading of “white”
 - Distributions are by census category
- These ideas are both new and reinventions of old categories
- We also see how racial categories can shift
 - South Asians used to be seen as “Asian”
 - Now, they are more often lumped together with “Arabs”
- Anthropology still has a lot of investigating to do in terms of race as a social construction and the power relations it produces
- Work is being done in:
 - Healthcare
 - Political resistance
 - Law enforcement
 - Residence patterns

Race in Anthropology Today

- Medical anthropology
- Boundary between biological and social
 - Collection of healthcare stats
 - Distribution of healthcare
- Social distinctions can become biological distinctions
 - Not genetic distinction

Political mobilization around race

- Forced drug companies to collect racial data
 - Make sure that medical studies included people of all races
- Fear that racial stats will be used for exclusionary purposes

Big question for Anthropology:

Now that we’ve argued that race is a social construction, how do you deal with racial inequality without acknowledging race as a valid form of classification?