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The concept of race

Arun Saldanha

ABSTRACT: Over the last few decades there has been some confusion in geographical education and research about the category of race, a category that was once so central to all the social sciences. If race often appears in quotes, does that mean it is not real? If race is a social construction, why is there still racism in institutions, feelings and economic distribution? Can physical differences between human bodies be considered without boxing them into the old colonial categories? This article provides a critical account of some of the mechanisms whereby differentiation happens along racial lines. It does so by carefully avoiding the reduction of race to genetic lines, while also taking the biological dimension of race seriously. A framework for approaching race and racism is suggested that will hopefully help to clear the confusion.

Why race, still?

A feeling shared by most educators and policy makers is that race is no longer the big issue it was during European imperialism and eugenic science. In places as disparate as Dubai, Singapore, Brasília, Silicon Valley or Berlin, focusing explicitly on the term race makes people uneasy. Although socio-economic inequalities are readily admitted to exist, the fact they are visible across populations of physically varying bodies is either denied or seen as inconsequential. The reasoning is that if we would acknowledge phenotype (visible physical differences) as consequential for the reality of inequalities, we already open the door for justifying them through unequal inherited capacities for success. Here, I argue that it is not only possible to study the reality of phenotype but also necessary for anti-racist pedagogy to do so (Saldanha, 2007). For critical geographers racism still structures humanity as it has for centuries, and in avoiding tackling the issue head-on the inequalities of the world will only deepen. In fact, the conceptual confusion surrounding race is part of its persistence. But first, a brief overview of race's global inequalities will be helpful.

Geographers are singularly aware that in the last two or three generations the world has become more interconnected than ever before, this process is seldom understood in its racialising effects (exceptions include Anderson, 2007; Bonnett, 2000; Nayak, 2003). One obvious global process that has racialising implications is migration. Most European settlers in the Americas, Asia and Africa did their utmost to erect punishable spatial boundaries between white and native (Duncan, 2007). In post-colonial Europe itself, from the beginning of state-sponsored migration from formerly colonised countries, non-white immigrants have generally been at one remove from full citizenship. While there is reason for celebrating the cosmopolitanism and hybrid cultural forms migratory movements led to, geographers continue to show that institutional racism has the upper hand – on scales from the body to the region (Dwyer and Bressey, 2008). Immigrants' incomes, education levels and political participation still lag behind white mainstream society. Across Europe, despite (and to an extent even because of) the official and commercial celebrations of 'diversity', racist populism has returned with a vengeance. Nationalist and regionalist movements from Russia and Austria to Scotland and the Netherlands define the nation or region they wish to preserve in the face of globalisation as white, even if they usually do so implicitly.

Hence the European Union's (EU) exaggerated 'fortress' response to asylum seekers from Africa and Asia is ultimately based on defining Europe as

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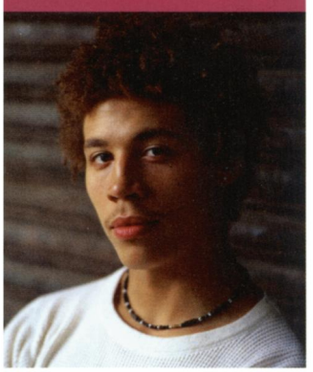



Prostestors display signs against the state of Arizona, USA, for their recent immigration bill against Mexicans who work as labourers in the housing trade. Photo: ElFlacodelNorte/ iStockphoto.

full, fragile – and white. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001 and the declaration of a nebulous and infinite 'war on terror', new obsessions with security and control have colluded across the West and elsewhere. Surveillance has become heavily infused with xenophobia, directed especially against Muslims. Research shows that racial profiling is a logical implication of surveillance technology (Gregory and Pred, 2006). The more subtle discrimination and exploitation of Eastern European immigrants in the EU has also to be called a form of racism insofar as it is facilitated by visible difference, just like anti-Semitism attempts to base itself on racial features. The trafficking of Third World and Eastern European girls to the red light districts of Western Europe is an extreme example of the racial division of labour that a racist society is based on. The racialisation of sex work, and circumstances approaching slavery, is further seen in the international sex tourism of Thailand and elsewhere. German, American or Chinese men have the purchasing power to buy sex from economic or political refugees originating from rural South East Asia. In short, the uneven distribution of access to transport and communications technologies is itself racialising, because it shows that certain bodies do the touring while other bodies do the work.

The racial division of labour in the United States is well known. While some upward mobility of a portion of every wave of immigrant is apparent, illegal immigration from Latin America has become a central political issue even while the economies on both sides of the Mexican–US border depend on the import of cheap labour. The United States is of course a country almost entirely based on modern migration, but the way in which it was formed reveals some of the most far-reaching racism in history. The original inhabitants of America were either killed or forced to become semi-citizens and Africans were imported as slaves. Today, African Americans, although having recently helped elect a mixed-race President, continue to bear the burden of the plantation society. To any visitor to the United States, the exclusion of Native Americans and the racial segregation in cities, media and schools is blatant. Furthermore, this exclusion and segregation is to a large extent condoned by urban policies and conservative intellectuals. It is in the United States that the battle on racism remains most urgent, yet no other country is innocent of deeply entrenched racism.

The geographical entrenchment of institutional racism was apparent in the immediate and longer-term aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2004. The scenes of stranded people inexplicably left to their own accord by the

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Border fence between El Paso, USA and Juarez, Mexico. Photo: ElFlacodelNorte/ iStockphoto.

authorities, resembled scenes from sub-Saharan Africa or Bangladesh – except that the dark-skinned corpses and the desperate survivors in second-hand clothing lived in the richest country of the world. The lessons about systematic racism, the outrageously expensive war being fought in the Middle East, and the failure of the state that Hurricane Katrina provided for the rest of the world will not be so easily learnt in the United States itself, because the country is systematic about denying its racist system. An even deeper lesson from the consequences of Hurricane Katrina – that in modernity, what is disastrous about a natural disaster is always man-made injustice against the already disenfranchised – will take longer to sink in.

The biggest and slowest human-induced disaster is of course climate change. Global warming will cause storms like Katrina to occur more frequently; fluctuating levels will disturb canal and river systems everywhere; in other places there will be water shortage; and disease and chemical pollutants will be more difficult to contain. What all this means for segregated cities such as New Orleans and Los Angeles is that African Americans and Latinos will suffer disproportionately from ecological transformations. Activists and academics have gathered much evidence on what is called environmental racism, including the unjust and racialising effects of the construction of highways, the dumping of toxic waste, noise pollution and other dangerous or unhealthy environmental processes that are somehow never an issue for rich suburbs or downtown skyscrapers. Environmental injustice occurs at the global scale too. The immense amount of electronic waste (e.g. computers, mobile phones) from the rich are dumped and recycled in poorer countries like Pakistan and Ghana. All coastline or delta populations will become more vulnerable to rising sea levels, and most of these poorer and denser populations lie outside the West. Labelling these situations racialising effects is to leave the question open as to whether the industrialists, planners, real estate agents and consumers

Houses in New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Photo: ctoocheck/stock.xchng.



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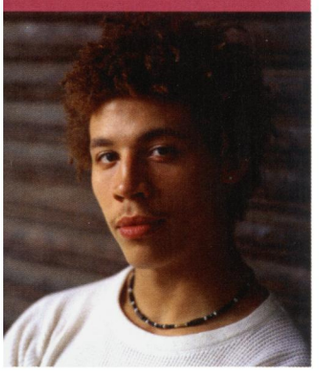

responsible for them are individually racist or not (see Holifield *et al*., 2010). Whether these people are racist or not, be they non-white or non-Western, what is beyond doubt is that the realities of their actions systematically harm non-white people more than they hurt white people.

The globalisation that migrants, tourists, computers, waste, multinational companies and governments bring about is therefore racist in its systematic effects. Instead of binding humanity into a 'global village' through instant communication and intercultural understanding, globalisation has disproportionally benefited European and Europe-descended populations. Even if many of the planetary troubles originated with European capitalism and patriarcy, revealing injustice is not simply blaming particular people. Corporate élites and huge middle classes have also emerged in the Middle East, China, India and elsewhere who promote the same consumer capitalism that encompasses developments like climate change and sex tourism. What is important is first to lay bare globalisation's unequal effects on populations of the world. Once these effects are known to be racist and sexist, we can say systems, not individuals, are responsible and need to be radically transformed. If it is true that particular individuals justify and protect these systems time and time again, they are well served by an ignorance of the effects of their policies. It is important to be extremely precise about the many ways that racism operates.

Race and biology

Why are the world's white people on the whole better off? The continuing Eurocentric way of thinking in educational and political institutions has for a long time postulated that human populations have adapted differently to the different climates they settled in to evolve differing capacities to think, work and appreciate art (Blaut, 1993). By the middle of the 19th century it could no longer be seriously argued, against overwhelming evidence of fertile mixed-race offspring, that there was more than one human species (Livingstone, 2008). Nevertheless the desire to demonstrate that there exist significant differences between human 'races' – not surprisingly, especially between sub-Saharan Africans and northern Europeans – continues to live on. For a critical geographer race is real, but that means 'races' are not.

While the majority of scientists today fortunately emphasise genetic and behavioural interconnectivity of human populations, a combative minority perseveres in the conviction that regionally evolved sub-species are demonstrable. However careful to distinguish themselves from earlier racist science, these scientists clearly find it as frightening as 19th-century racists to accept the fact of constant gene flow among all humans and hominids. Today's racist scientists feel besieged by an allegedly politically correct majority and thoroughly enjoy kicking up dust, claiming it is data not ideology that drives them. They seem incapable of acknowledging that they reinforce the oldest and silliest of white male anxieties (e.g. Sarich and Miele, 2005). It is crucial for the public to discern this bogus science. Data do not appear by themselves. The refusal to examine where exactly one's own scientific interests and choices come from is purely ideological and is central to the persistence of racism. The reality of race depends to a large extent on the insistence of the reality of 'races'.

There are fortunately more nuanced ways of producing and interpreting biological data. Geographers have to posit forcefully that genetic, morphological and physiological variation is real and can only be studied as a highly volatile planet-wide system. Regardless of how much some may try, human variation will never allow for any strict and timeless classification. Borrowing from natural history, especially the famous system of Linnaeus, racist science seeks to determine a fixed number of 'races' within the human species. Taxonomy in biology cannot avoid a fairly strong version of what philosophy calls essentialism: each species, genus, etc., has an unchanging essence which can be found to varying degrees in individual organisms. Charles Darwin was aware that this taxonomic desire to place organisms into boxes only works if one forgets the many intermediate stages between species on the evolutionary 'tree'; the many hybrids; the fundamental sexual differences within a species; the role environments play in introducing variations, even during lifetimes; and the many cases where it is unclear whether a population is a variation, a separate species, or something else entirely. In other words, classification can exist only if we bracket all that is interesting about life in the first place (Mayr, 2007).

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A young man holds dismantled pieces of a computer at Agbogbloshie dump, Ghana, which has become a dumping ground for computers and electronic waste from all over the developed world. Hundreds of tons of e-waste end up here every month. It is broken apart, and those components that can be sold on, are salvaged. Photo: © Fernando Moleres/Panos Pictures.

Furthermore, physical variation between human bodies is inseparable from what cultural practices do to them. Barring a handful of hereditary diseases, health and well-being are determined by access during one's lifetime to medication, safe food and clean water, hence ultimately one's position in global capitalism. The extent to which disabilities or mental instabilities impinge on social interaction depends on cultural understandings and a country's healthcare policy. On the physiological level itself, therefore, human variation can only be explained by bringing economics and politics into the equation. Put more strongly, social injustice is ingrained biologically into human populations.

Bodies develop and experience very differently over their lifetime. Bodies are trained, surgically altered, enhanced with bypasses and spectacles, tattooed, clothed, decorated, painted, erotically disrobed and subjected to all sorts of media-fed pressures (for example, anorexia). In a basic sense humans eat, have sex and die just like all mammals (including the many weird combinations of sex, death and eating which are entirely useless for survival). In a more exacting sense, however, the variation in prohibitions, transgressions, kinship, ceremony are what really matters for our daily lives. This variation is called cultural because it is learned not inherited, but still it engages human physiology. When we look at bodily variation carefully it becomes not just practically but theoretically impossible to say where 'biology' ends and where 'culture' begins. Human culture does not escape human biology, but necessarily uses 'it' as raw material out of which unprecedented forms are continually invented.

Hence human biological variation is real, unclassifiable and intrinsically cultural. What does this mean for our understanding of race? I would argue that it makes race something more than an idea: race is a fleshy reality of mass and movement. Some of the bodily features listed above cohere into identities which are racial. For example, obesity rates may vary significantly between white, Afro-Caribbean and Asian populations, and certain ways of talking or singing are recognised and marketed as black or regional. The important point for anti-racist geography is neither to shy away from talking about physiological and ecological differences nor to become

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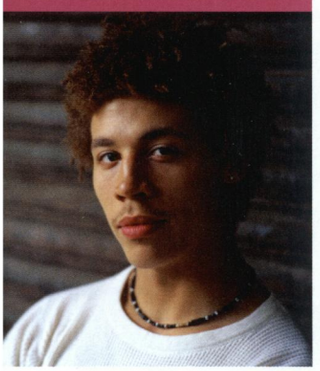

determinist about them. One instance of this is the many researchers and African American doctors (as well as, of course, pharmaceutical companies) who are keen for treatment to become racially sensitive. With a more complex and critical understanding of human biology it becomes possible to call such a field of pharmacogenetics not just ideological and commercially driven, but scientifically inadequate. A risk of heart disease, for example, is directly caused by lifestyle not by genes or skin hue. Race is an effect of health inequalities spread over differently coloured bodies, not a cause. Besides, there is no dependable way of telling genetically who would be the target group for these 'ethnic drugs'.

A biological perspective on the human species has to be resolutely multidimensional and include culture, history and economic globalisation. Biologists are themselves gradually understanding that nothing about life's complexity can be reduced to the quasi-metaphysical notion of 'natural selection', with 'selfish genes' directing material processes from their little hideouts, unperturbed by what goes on at smaller and larger levels of physical organisation. Intra-species phenotypic variations are obviously a key topic for biology and there are ways to take them seriously that undermine racist science.

Getting real about race

By focusing on the concept of race, and assuming that the reality of racism followed from it, the answer to the question 'what is race?' has in recent geography tended towards philosophical idealism: race is an idea. More precisely, like other phenomena from science to the state and menstruation, race is metaphorically called a 'social construction' (Jackson and Penrose, 1993). What is race then constructed from? Social interactions, presumably, but what is social interaction? The production of meanings, we might say, but who produces and circulates these meanings? People, probably. But are those people not bodies with certain shapes, colours, desires, illnesses? Isn't it precisely those material features that are swept up in the social constructions of race, sex, health? How can they be simultaneously the material and the objective of the constructing? Unpacking the term 'social construction' leads to complicated and age-old philosophical discussions about the nature of reality and the language to describe it. Why was it so important anyway to assert the constructedness of everything?

For feminist and anti-racist geographers, social construction was from the start a politically salient decision. If social reality is shown to be far from 'natural', constructed specifically by those who benefit from calling it natural, then it can be changed. For a just society, race and sex are the quintessential constructions that should be exposed as fallacious. If you would suppose there really exists some indisputable bedrock of material differences on which race and sex are founded, you already succumb to accepting some states of affairs as inevitable. The strong social-constructionist political view is to deny the relevance of any knowledge of physical bodies for politics, since it is based on the (scientific) supposition that bodies can be known. However, we do not have to suppose that bodies are fully transparent to knowledge. Bodies beckon knowledge onwards forever into their ever-receding depths, requiring from knowledge constant invention. Instead of hitting a bedrock (this is race), science and politics are ongoing explorations through the body rather like the science-fiction movie *Fantastic Voyage*.

Hence race is not constructed merely from ideas or meanings and not even only by people, but it is constructed by and in material reality itself. There are realities of trade, migration, conquest and slavery, and then racist ideas of inevitable superiority and inferiority emerge to make sense of and maintain those realities. From Marx onwards, philosophical realism has been committed to change by understanding ideas to be secondary in relation to the material circumstances in which they participate. This is not to say that a realist cannot study a reality – say, the genocide of the Jews or the Vietnamese minority and Cambodian dissidents under the Khmer Rouge – that is at least partially triggered by ideas. Nevertheless ideas have to negotiate their way through an immense thicket of heterogeneous processes in order to take effect. Indeed, as we see from Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans and anthropogenic climate change, there are racist realities that are triggered not by clearly identifiable ideas at all, but by forces of so-called 'nature'. Human-biophysical systems of unequal distributions of power are what matter first. Race is mostly constituted of racialising effects of processes that far exceed people and meanings.

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Race is always more...

Getting real about race means understanding race perhaps above all as irreducible. Race is always more than mental conceptions, genotype, phenotype or socio-economic inequality, although some racial phenomena may be better explained through one particular component. There are no essential 'races', no differently evolved human sub-species as racist typologists still try to argue – even if genetic, physical and cultural variation in the species and beyond can and should be studied using non-essentialist and non-reductionist methods. Anti-racism becomes more precise and vigorous as we address the biological components of race and racism. Not only can racist scientists be defeated on their own turf, but the wide, sub- and supra-human scope of institutional racism is revealed. Darwin himself provides complex conceptions of human life that are in some ways more radically open to the future than is available in the humanities (see Amin, 2010). Instead of the conventional religious or liberal-humanist positions that humans are fundamentally equal because they are so in the eyes of God, the law or the market, anti-racism should be derived here as an ever-changing geopolitical situation which does not allow for such a priori principles. Dismantling racism is still necessary in popular media discourse and the lingering Eurocentrism of our discipline, but sadly also in many other areas, such as the environment and housing. In fact, without changing the mechanisms behind racialising effects – chiefly capitalism and patriarchy – it is utopian to think racism will disappear. Racism is not simply prejudice. If only it were!

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