

THE LANGUAGE OF RACE

I broached the subject of race one day in a class of college juniors and seniors by telling the story of Stephen Biko's confrontation with a South African judge. As recorded in Richard Attenborough's 1987 film *Cry Freedom*, the white judge asked the black African activist, "You people look brown to me. Why do you call yourselves black?" Answered Biko, "You people look pink to me. Why do you call yourselves white?"

After the laughter subsided, I explained that in the time of apartheid there were nine recognized racial categories in South Africa, and by law everyone was at birth placed in one of these pigeon holes. Since one's race determined where one could live and work, there were frequent applications to the government to change one's original designation. Indeed, in 1985, the state permitted 506 "coloreds" to become "white," but no "whites" became "black," and no "blacks" became "white."

I then told the class to forget what Biko had said about pink and to place a naked forearm, palm down, across a piece of white paper. "Now, scrutinize the color of your skin," I said passing around several sheets of black construction paper to remind them what black looked like. "Is your arm pink, white, black, or brown?" I inquired. The class of thirty, which had three African Americans and a young woman from Taiwan peppering the majority from the American Southeast, agreed that "brown" was the one word that best described their skin color. "Beige, tan, toast, snuff, sepia, chocolate, and buff," I unilaterally declared, were to be considered synonyms for "brown" in this exercise. No one objected. To be sure, some of the "browns" were darker than others, but no one was "black," and no one was even close to "white," but then it was late April in South Carolina. For 2005, it was a rare moment of agreement in a multicultural classroom.

At this point I unstabled one of my favorite classroom war horses. I said, "Imagine that all six billion of us are in a single file, in short-sleeved shirts, heads covered with paper bags, and arranged from the most nigrescent Nubian to the fairest Finn. Flying overhead in a helicopter, how confident do you think you would be saying where one 'race' began and another ended?" Judging from the show of hands, most of us agreed we would not be confident given the fact that the skin tones of the three African-Americans and the Asian student were identical to or lighter than some of the suntanned Caucasians seated beside them. Understandably, a few of the students, both light and dark, refused to raise a hand, for I was challenging something that lay very deep, and they weren't about to give it up after a ten-minute demonstration and lecture.

Suddenly a hand in the back row shot up, "Dr. E, why do some people call whites 'Caucasians'?" He had me. I knew the word had some connection to the mountain range in what is today Asian Georgia, but how it ever came to describe most Europeans and Americans, I confessed I did not know.

Back in the office, I found a superb essay on the net by the late Stephen Jay Gould that placed the blame squarely at the feet of Johann Blumenbach, a German social scientist who never traveled outside of Europe and rarely traveled within it. In the late eighteenth century in the generation following Linnaeus, Blumenbach was one of the finest taxonomic anthropologists in the world. In the collection of skulls gathered by field workers from the University of Göttingen, where Blumenbach taught, a handful of specimens collected near Mt. Caucasus years earlier and bleached white by the sun struck Blumenbach in his words as the "most beautiful" of all the skulls in the collection. Because of this

Christian European's subjective and surely biased appreciation of a few skulls and the fact that these bones originated closest to the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (think Eden), he made what Gould calls one of the most "fateful" decisions in the history of science: he ranked the races based on the "beauty," color, and "uniformity" of the skulls. Here for the first time, a recognized authority had given the imprimatur of science to racism. Blumenbach's thinking apparently went something like this: if the Caucasians are the most beautiful race, the Asian and African must be the least beautiful. Now he had an equilateral triangle. But Linnaeus had stipulated an American race, so Blumenbach situated the Native Americans between the Caucasians and the Asians. This, however, left the triangle unbalanced in an age when classical symmetry was a virtue. (If there's any doubt, see the work of Jacques Louis David and the compositions of Haydn, both contemporaries of Blumenbach.) Searching the Göttingen collection, Blumenbach found what he concluded were examples of the Malay race, and these he placed between the Caucasians and Africans to balance his triangle. Symmetry has always exerted a powerful force on the asymmetrical especially in the file-drawer minds of classifiers like Blumenbach.

Indeed forty years earlier, Linnaeus, while he did not rank the races he described in hierarchical fashion, he was not exactly objective either. He decided that if there are

four continents ("America, Europe, Asia, and Africa"),
 four humors ("choleric, sanguine, melancholic, and phlegmatic"),
 four body types or postures ("erect, brawny, rigid, and relaxed"),
 four governing principles ("custom, law, opinion, and caprice"),
 four body coverings ("fine red [painted] lines, cloth vestments, loose garments,
 and grease"),
 and four temperaments ("obstinate, gentle, severe, and crafty"),

there must be four primary races, each with its own distinctive color ("copper-colored, fair, sooty, and black"). [Each parenthetical listing above, incidentally, follows the order of the continents and their respective races.] In other words, if a gentleman has four jackets, four trousers, four shirts, and four pairs of shoes, it's hard to resist buying that fourth tie. In time, the whole world begins to look like a multiple of four! Invariably, however, someone like Galileo comes along and finds five of something the whole world thought there were only four of.

In the next class, I summarized the origin of "Caucasian" and told the story of Blumenbach's unfortunate decision to rank the races. Even though most historians of science agree he was not a racist, I have my doubts just as I have reservations about the objectivity of Linnaeus. I then asked the class how many still used Blumenbach's word "Caucasian" to describe themselves, and no one raised a hand. Seeing this, I said, "Take a sheet of paper and imagine that your closest friend has asked you, 'What are the races of man?' Write down the words you would use to answer. I'm interested only in the terminology; don't give me any hierarchies, and don't include your name or race." The results interested me so much that I posed the question to my other two classes.

Out of eighty students aged nineteen to thirty, fifteen refused to take my bait and answered in elegant simplicity, "the human race." The great majority, however, forty-five to be precise, resorted to the familiar color terminology—twenty said, "white," twenty said, "black," two said, "yellow," two said, "red," and one said "brown." Clearly "black"

and “white” are firmly entrenched at least in American Southern usage, but the political correctness movement apparently has all but killed off “red” and “yellow” as racial designations. These two colors appear to be drawing their last breaths in “the Redskins” and “Yellow Peril,” but when they expire, few will mourn their passing. While “African-American” received four votes and “Negro” got one, “brown” only polled one vote. This strikes me as a mystery of perception, a curious blindness, when so many of us are a shade of that color as I thought I had so convincingly demonstrated just days before.

World geography has seldom been the forte of the American college student, and my classes were no exception. Many confused “race” with “continent” (the “African” and “European” races), or “country” (the “Mongoloid” and “Israeli” races), or “culture” (“Hispanic” and “Native-American” races), or “region” (the “Southern” and “New England” races), or “state” (the “Texan” and “Georgian” races). A few confused “race” and “religion” (the “Christian,” “Muslim,” and “Jewish” races); one answered dialectally (“white folks and black folks”); one Bob Jones University transfer, I suspect, responded “fundamentally” (“Semitic, Hamitic, and Japhetic” using the adjectival forms of Noah’s sons’ names), and one resorted to slang (“towel heads”). I’m pleased to report that no one used the term “nigger” proving once again that this remains one of the strongest taboo words in the language even when written work is unsigned. As proof that students did not feel compelled to take this exercise too seriously, one student answered, “The races of man—Darlington, Daytona, Talladega, and Bristol.”

Lest the reader think these students unsophisticated in the matter of race, permit me to tell of one more classroom experience. In William Fleming’s famed humanities text, *Arts and Ideas*, now in its tenth edition, there is a section on the rise of photography in the nineteenth century. The last of five early photographs is captioned, “John Lamprey, *Front View of a Malayan Male*, 1868-1869. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.” In the accompanying text, Fleming states, “Through photography, social scientists and the general public confirmed their belief in the inferiority of non-Western cultures.” When I first read this gloss of Lamprey’s photograph, I wondered how in one or more black and white images any cultural inferiority could be shown much less confirmed, so I asked some sixty plus juniors and seniors to respond to the sentence quoted above in a well-reasoned and well-supported paragraph of their own. I gave them a week to think about it.

I anticipated a series of observations about how the naked Malayan is dark-skinned, short (5’1”), uncircumcised, unkempt, and thus inferior to Western males. Although two men offered that the Malayan was inferior because his penis was “underdeveloped,” I was gladly mistaken about the majority. Here’s a paraphrased but representative sample of what most wrote:

“I fail to see any signs of Western superiority or Eastern inferiority in Lamprey’s photo. If a European were stripped naked, handed half of a curtain rod, and placed beside this Malayan male, he would doubtless appear vulnerable.”

“This poor man reminds me of a butterfly pinned in a shadow box for the delectation of voyeuristic Europeans. But since the butterfly is capable of flight and the viewer isn’t, who’s inferior to whom?”

“The author of our text should have explained that Lamprey’s image is an ugly objectification of a complex human being and may lead the viewer to an unjustified sense of dominance.”

“Lamprey’s photo neither enhances nor down-plays this man’s essential humanity; it

merely records the truth of his appearance on a given day.”

“Since Victorian-era Westerners were covered in clothing from head to toe, Lamprey’s photograph may indeed have said to many that this man is subhuman. Fleming should have said that the model was paid to pose naked and was under the impression that the work was scientific.”

“In all likelihood, this Malayan male was stripped, propped, posed, and photographed in a way to capture what European audiences, shaped by incipient notions of Social Darwinism, would have considered his ‘simple barbarism.’ Lamprey should be ashamed of himself.”

Given the fact that the “experts” have at various times identified as many as sixty-three “races” and distinguished them based on a comparison of finger-whorl patterns, hair shapes in cross section, tooth shapes, and ear-wax compositions, it is not surprising that there is massive confusion when it comes to race. My position has long been, if all of us are 99.9999% genetically alike and have been for 3.93 of the 4.0 million years we’ve shared the planet, why bother to make racial distinctions, especially after the 5,000 years of racial strife we have a record of that got us nowhere?

To illustrate the futility of a hollow classification system, recall that in the seventh and eighth centuries, England was torn over the relative superiority of the Frisians, Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, all of whom incidentally spoke a dialect of Low German and could therefore understand each other. This internal conflict ended about the time the Normans invaded, and the country was torn all over again. As soon as speakers of Old English and those of Norman French began speaking the hybrid we call Middle English, the strife died down. Today few Englishmen know if their ancestors were Norman or Jute; however, they do know if they are Christian or Muslim, and herein lies the rub for the twenty-first century. The sooner we follow the lead of the American College of Physicians, which in 1995 voted to delete race labels in patient case studies, the better off we’ll be.

The contributions of Blumenbach continued to haunt me, so I asked some German-American friends how they would answer the same question I posed to my classes. Three said “black, white, and yellow.” A fourth, however, answered, “Asian, African, and Germanic.” Though this came from a *Gymnasium*-educated woman who had lived in the States for thirty years, it’s clear that racial and national pride dies hard. When I checked the *Brockhaus Encyclopedia* to see what terms German authorities recommend, I found, “European, Mongoloid, Indian, and Negroid.” In the *Bertelsmann Lexicon*, another standard German reference work, I found, “Mongoloid, European, and Negroid.” In the land that gave the world “Caucasian,” the word appears to have been replaced by “European.” But given the multicultural nature of the twenty-five-state European Union, it’s hard to say how the Irish, Estonians, Portuguese, and Greeks at the EU’s four “corners” share any classification other than political and “human.” And one has to wonder what became of the Lapponoids, the Fenne-Nordics, the Alpines, and the Osteuropids last described by Ernst Haeckel in 1879.

Besides “Caucasian,” “Aryan” is another race word that even more speakers of English associate with the Germans especially the Nazis even though in English the word preceded that gang of thugs by about a century. In *Mein Kampf* (1933), Hitler wildly and irresponsibly uses “Aryan” as an antonym for “Jew.” In English, “Aryan” (not “Arian”) was first used as an adjective meaning “noble” in 1839 and as a noun meaning “gentile” in 1851.

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, writers like Madison Grant in 1916 and J. S. Huxley in 1939 were publicly discouraging the use of “Aryan” in English as a “term of racial significance.” But Friedrich Schlegel and Max Muller in Germany, taking a heavy-handed cue from the anti-Semitic Frenchman Comte de Gobineau, had already waved their linguistic wands over the Sanskrit “*arya*” and declared that the German word “*ehre*” (“honor”) was a cognate. And if the languages were related, the people must be related, or so Nazi scholars later emphatically opined, even though we now know that the Aryan people lived in northern India, not northern Europe. As the *American Heritage Dictionary* now succinctly states, “Aryan” is “no longer in technical use.”



In North America over the last four hundred years, the unevenly punctuated evolution of “darky,” “dinge,” “nigra,” “negro,” “Negro,” “colored people,” “nigger,” “black,” “people of color,” and “African American” has been slow and painful. Each of these terms (and of course there are more), may be understood to represent a point on a graph. Connect the points to make two lines, one drawn by whites the other by blacks, and you’ll see two very different contours. Nevertheless, the progress of both lines is upward, and I for one interpret this trend as a sign of hope, which has led me to write the following verses:

Between black and white
are countless shades of gray.
Where the lines should be drawn
is hard to say.

From Nubian
to alabaster Swede
are six billion dark,
red mouths to feed.

Their colors range
from pepper to malt—
however they’re shaken,
their tears are salt.

Human skin shines
in a rainbow of hues,
but passed through a prism,
they’re all shades of blue.

Black, white, or umber,
all of us share
the color we bleed,
the conversion to air.