The Smart Culture
Hayman, Jr., Robert L.

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The natural order presupposes natural differences, as well as natural processes for differentiating. Accordingly, it embraces two sets of myths: first, that identity—race, gender, or disability—is biological (and thus inherent, immutable, and essential); and second, that discrimination—racism or other forms of prejudice—is innate (and thus instinctive, inevitable, and rooted in the individual). Together, they suggest that social hierarchies are biologically determined: hence, a natural order.

But these are merely myths. The salient aspects of group identity are products not of nature, but of politics: identity, that is to say, is politically constructed. "Race," for example, has very little biological integrity, but it may carry a great deal of ideological weight and social meaning. It depends entirely on the political culture: its history of "race" and its contemporary realities of "race."

Discrimination is the same. The response to the construction of identity—for example, the "racist" response to "race"—is hardly instinctive; it is instead the product of the same historical forces and cultural choices—the same politics—that shape the object of its contempt. Racism is simply a way to describe the culture's pathological ideology of "race," an ideology that simultaneously makes of "race" something it is not—something biological—and denies to "race" what it actually is—for better or worse, a meaningful social variable. Race and racism are thus barely distinct aspects of the same cultural forces: "race" is incomprehensible except as a product of racism; "racism" impossible without the construction of race.

The task confronting us is to reconstruct "race" without racism—and "gender" without sexism, and "disability" without handicaps. It is the task of reconstituting difference without hierarchy, of creating a community without a "natural" order.
I grew up in an integrated neighborhood. Some of the kids were Irish, some were Polish, some were Italian, and one kid was Greek. There was also a kid who was part Indian (the "American" kind), and a whole bunch of kids like me who were a lot of different things, sort of integrated all by themselves. There were, on the other hand, no black kids in my neighborhood, or Asian kids or Latino kids; it was only when I looked back, many years later, that their absence seemed conspicuous to me.

We had our own gang in that neighborhood, and we were pretty serious about protecting our turf. We let kids from outside the neighborhood—kids from "across the park," as we knew them—play with us, but generally at a price. In whiffle ball, the price was literal: we charged the kids a fee. This, I should note, was not our idea, but the brainstorm of one of the guys who ran the corner store, a guy to whom we routinely went for advice (though, for some kids, just as a way to distract him while they swiped stuff, which, I think, was an idea they had in turn picked up from the guy who ran the other corner store a few blocks away).

In most of the games we played, the price we exacted was slightly less literal, but only slightly. I was reminded of this not that long ago, when I was rummaging through a box of my old toys. Mostly the box was filled with G.I. Joes, more than a dozen of them. There was no surprise in this; we played war games with the G.I. Joes all the time in my neighborhood. But three things about this collection seemed to me rather odd.

First, there were a fair number of Barbie dolls mixed in with the G.I. Joes. That was strange enough, but this was even stranger: none of the Barbies had any clothes, and many of them were headless. There is no pleasant explanation for this phenomenon, and some accounts are a good deal more disturbing than others, and while I am certain that it was the G.I. Joes who were somehow responsible for the Barbies' condition, their precise behaviors—our behaviors—remain a deeply repressed mystery (I guess, in any event, this is something I will eventually have to discuss with my wife).

Second, the G.I. Joes came in a surprising variety. There was a German G.I. Joe, who had distinctly Aryan features; and a Japanese G.I. Joe, who had distinctly Asian features; and an Australian G.I. Joe,
who looked, to all accounts, just like an American G.I. Joe, except in shorts. There was also a "black" G.I. Joe, and he too was indistinguishable from the other American G.I. Joes, except that he was molded in a somewhat more deeply tinted plastic. Finally, there was a G.I. Joe with circles drawn around his eyes: this I instantly recognized as my favorite G.I. Joe; I had given him glasses to look more like me. I don't know if that is particularly strange or not; I tend to think that there are a lot of kids who did that, or otherwise wished that their G.I. Joes, or their Barbies, could somehow be made to look more like them.

But it is the third oddity that is most immediately relevant to the point of this story. Some of the G.I. Joes in this box I simply did not recognize at all. It dawned on me gradually that they were in fact not mine: I remembered playing G.I. Joe war games with the kids in my neighborhood, and remembered that we sometimes let kids from outside the neighborhood play, and we always set the terms of engagement, and not surprisingly, we always won the wars. Except we never killed the other kids' G.I. Joes, we merely took them as prisoners of war, and I realized, as I rummaged through the box, that we never gave them back. As I surveyed this bounty, I recall thinking that this was not a good thing, but that it could have been worse—and then I remembered that we once took one of the actual kids as a prisoner of war, and held him hostage in my friend Dicky's basement, and even made him late for dinner, which caused the kid's mom to call one of our moms, and her to call the other moms, and most of us to get some kind of licking, which ended that version of our war games (and any aspirations we may have had to be terrorists). At least, on the other hand, we gave him back.

But the lickings did not dampen our enthusiasm for maintaining the integrity of our gang (and this, alas, is the point of the story). Our territorial imperative gradually spilled over into the school, where, in the second grade, we established exclusive dominion over our own table in the cafeteria. The table we staked out was right by the milk cooler in the back of the room; this was prime turf for the kids like us who could not—or would not—buy their meals through the cafeteria line at the front of the room. Each day we'd march to the back, spend our five cents for a half-pint of chocolate milk, and plop right down at our conveniently located table, with our milk and our lunch—usually a bologna sandwich with potato chips, each wrapped
in wax paper, separated by our moms, but shortly to be combined by us, and all contained in a second-grader’s paper bag, and most definitely not in a first-grader’s lunch-box. It was our own little paradise, disturbed only briefly by the civil unrest of the spring of 1964, when runaway inflation boosted chocolate milk prices to seven cents for a half-pint, causing some kids to stage a sit-in directly in front of the milk counter, and the vice principal to call their parents, who had to leave work to come to the cafeteria to get them, which produced, I would warrant, more lickings, and an end to their civil disobedience (and any aspirations they may have had to be activists). At least the kids, on the other hand, were nonviolent.

And so too were we. We guarded our table jealously; our gang, and only our gang, was allowed to sit there, but we were altogether reasonable about the matter. Occasionally kids from outside the gang would be invited as guests, and sometimes kids from adjoining neighborhoods would, after a suitable probationary period, become honorary members of the gang, and get their own seats at the table. Strangers, however, were not otherwise allowed, and, remarkably enough, hardly any had the temerity to challenge our rule. When they did, we’d ask who their sponsor was, and if they didn’t have one, we’d tell them they needed one, and they would have no idea what the hell we were talking about, and would usually just walk away. Sometimes, some kid would seem intrigued by the idea, and so he’d get a sponsor from the gang—who also, truth be told, had no idea what the hell we were talking about—and the new kid would get a shot at joining the gang. It was all very peaceful and orderly, and I don’t remember there ever being any problems.

Except for one day, when a kid didn’t know any better, and he found out, as I did, what it really meant to be part of a gang.

I was coming out of the milk line that day and heading toward my seat, when I saw a kid that I didn’t recognize sitting at the end of our table. There was no one sitting next to him and no one across from him; he appeared to be on his own. I set down my lunch next to him and was getting ready to put him through the routine when I heard a voice from across the table.

"No, Bobby."

It was my friend Louis. I gave him a blank look.

"No, Bobby. You don’t want to sit there." Louis took a drink of chocolate milk. "He’s a Jew."
I continued to look blankly at Louis. Then I looked at the kid. I grabbed my lunch. And I moved.

Nobody else took that seat. Twice more, some kid from the gang started to sit there, and each time Louis explained the situation, and each time, they moved. The kid ate his lunch alone.

I don’t know who had gotten to my friend Louis. I don’t know who had taught him what he thought he knew, or who had taught *them*. I would have thought that his parents would have set him straight, even, I guess, if it took some kind of licking. I worry that they didn’t, and I worry about what Louis is teaching his kids, or his grandkids, about who to sit next to, and who not.

The thing is, I could have set him straight. I should have known better: I was raised better. But I didn’t say a word; I just moved.

Years later, my mother told me a story from her childhood. She was just a little girl, taking a walk with her dad in her neighborhood, when her mother’s brothers appeared up the block, walking in their direction. Her dad gripped her hand tightly as the uncles approached; she could not imagine why. They stopped just a yard away, spit at her father’s feet, and crossed to the other side. Her mother was a German Jew; she had married a man who was Italian and Irish. The family would never forgive them.

It’s doubly ironic: under certain traditions, I am told, if your mother is Jewish, then so too are you. And I had moved to avoid sitting next to a Jew.

The kid did not come back to our table the next day. In fact, I never saw him again. I don’t know if he found some other kids to have lunch with, or if there were more lunches that he had to eat alone. I’ll suspect the worst, but imagine the best. Maybe he got into a gang; I just wish it had been ours.

**Race, Racism, and Reconstruction**

In April 1864, Democratic Senator James A. McDougall of California announced the reasons for his opposition to the Thirteenth Amendment. American slaves, he explained,

can never commingle with us. It may not be within the reading of some learned Senators, and yet it belongs to demonstrated science, that
the African race and the Europeans are different, and I here now say it as a fact established by science that the eighth generation of the mixed race formed by the union of the African and European cannot continue their species. Quadroons have few children; with octoroos reproduction is impossible. It establishes as a law of nature that the African has no proper relation to the European, caucasian blood.

McDougall concluded his exposition on a conciliatory note: "I would have them kindly treated." McDougall was, in the end, one of six senators to vote against the amendment abolishing slavery; thirty-eight voted in its favor.

The differences—the natural differences—between the races provided the cornerstone for the opposition to every act of Reconstruction. House Democrat John L. Dawson of Pennsylvania opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1866; the bill's advocates, he explained, championed an untenable doctrine:

They hold that the white and black race are equal. This they maintain involves and demands social equality; that negroes should be received on an equality in white families, should be admitted to the same tables at hotels, should be permitted to occupy the same seats in railroad cars and the same pews in churches; that they should be allowed to hold offices, to sit on juries, to vote . . . Their children are to attend the same schools with white children, and to sit side by side with them. Following close upon this will, of course, be marriages between the races, when, according to these philanthropic theorists, the prejudices of caste will at length have been overcome, and the negro, with the privilege of free miscegenation accorded him, will be in the enjoyment of his true status.

"We have to remember, on the other hand," Dawson observed, "that negro equality does not exist in nature."

As Dawson's comments suggest, the specter of "miscegenation" often loomed behind the objections to racial equality. Senator Garrett Davis of Kentucky was one of many Democrats to complain that the civil rights bill would authorize miscegenation or "amalgamation"; in Kentucky, Davis noted, miscegenation was and should remain a penal offense. Lyman Trumbull, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, found some irony in the sixty-five-year-old Davis's protests:
He also brings up the question of marriage between whites and negroes. He is troubled about amalgamation, and becomes excited and vehement in talking about it. I should have supposed that at his time of life he would feel protected against it without any law to put him in the penitentiary if he should commit it.

Andrew Johnson vetoed Trumbull's civil rights bill; his message to Congress also raised the question of miscegenation, though, the president noted, "I do not say this bill repeals State laws on the subject of marriage between the two races." This too prompted a response from Trumbull, one that, characteristically, went quite to the heart of the matter: "Then for what purpose," Trumbull asked, "is [the subject] introduced into the message?"

Opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment was also rooted in the claimed desire to preserve the "natural" distinctions between the races. Andrew J. Rogers, Democratic congressman from New Jersey, insisted that

under this amendment a negro might be allowed to marry a white woman. I will not go for an amendment of the Constitution to give a power so dangerous, so likely to degrade the white men and women of this country, which would put it in the power of fanaticism in times of excitement and civil war to allow the people of any State to mingle and mix themselves by marriage with negroes so as to run the pure white blood of the Anglo-Saxon people of this country into the black blood of the negro or the copper blood of the Indian.

As Rogers explained, it was not merely the corruption of blood that concerned him. The natural order was threatened in other ways by the Fourteenth Amendment, for "Congress would have power to compel the State to provide for white children and black children to attend the same school, upon the principle that all people in the several states shall have equal protection in all the rights of life, liberty, and property."

Congressman John A. Nicholson of Delaware also opposed the Fourteenth Amendment. He too feared that it would obliterate the legal distinctions between the races, distinctions that were in turn rooted in nature:
Now, the negro race in this country constitutes such a class which is easily and well defined . . . the radical difference between them and the white race should be recognized by legislation . . . For the negro is not actuated by the same motives as the white man, nor is he deterred from crime except by punishments adapted to the brutal, sensual nature which characterizes him.

Interestingly, when the "black race" did evidence the same motives as the "white race," Nicholson did not approve:

The negro’s idea of freedom is to do nothing but bask in the sunshine. The negro woman now disdains to pick cotton, and her present ambition is to "send her daughter to boarding school, and keep a piano." And they are assisted very much in these mischievous notions by such legislation as the Freedmen’s Bureau and civil rights bill.

Indiana congressman William E. Niblack reminded his colleagues that the "black race" was not the only one beneath the white man in the natural order; proclamations of equality were futile for the "Chinese race" as well:

The Chinese are nothing but a pagan race. They are an enigma to me. . . . You cannot make good citizens of them; they do not learn the language of the country. . . . They buy and sell their women like cattle, and the trade is mostly for the purpose of prostitution. That is their character. You cannot make citizens of them.

Attitudes did not much change as Reconstruction progressed; "race" itself was, after all, immutable. In 1868 Garrett Davis observed for his Senate colleagues that the freedmen "are as fixed in their ignorance and barbarism as though they were fossils under the face of the earth." The following year, Senator George Vickers of Maryland cited the fixed inferiority of the "black man" as the basis for his opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment:

[T]here are five races of man. These are the red man, the yellow man, the white man, the black man, and the brown man. . . . And because here is a distinct race, an inferior race, and because this race has color, the race is disqualified. It is not altogether on account of the color of the skin. That is only one of the indications and marks by which you distinguish the race.
Vickers's subsequent exposition of the differences between the races was just one among many in the history of the Reconstruction debates. To support his opposition to black suffrage, Garrett Davis had engaged in one of the more exhaustive exercises in amateur physical anthropology. It prompted a response from Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. "If the black man votes for the men who are just and humane," Wilson offered, "I shall not upbraid him. I do not believe the negro is to be any party's slave if you put the ballot in his hands. I want to call the attention of my Democratic friends especially to that point."

This last comment prompted laughter among Wilson's Republican colleagues. The laughter grew at the Democrats' expense as Wilson continued his defense of black suffrage and offered, in the process, one of the first political critiques of "race." If suffrage is extended, Wilson predicted,

These negroes will then be just as sweet as anybody else. I do not think the Senator from Kentucky will be examining their pelvis or shins, or making speeches about the formation of their lips or the angle of their foreheads on the floor of the Senate. You will then see the Democracy, with the keen scent that always distinguishes that party, on the hunt after the votes of these black men; and if they treat them better than the Republicans do they will probably get their votes, and I hope they will.

On July 16, 1862, the House Select Committee on Emancipation issued its report. The committee had been charged with considering the practical obstacles to manumission; it concluded that the surest means for overcoming those obstacles was through the colonization of the emancipated slaves. The report explained,

Much of the objection to emancipation arises from the opposition of a large portion of our people to the intermixture of the races, and from the association of white and black labor. The committee would do nothing to favor such a policy; apart from the antipathy which nature has ordained, the presence of a race among us who cannot, and ought not to, be admitted to our social and political privileges, will be a perpetual source of injury and inequity to both. This is a question of color, and is unaffected by the relation of master and slave.

It is useless, now, to enter upon any philosophical inquiry whether nature has or has not made the negro inferior to the Caucasian. The
belief is indelibly fixed upon the public mind that such inequality does exist. There are irreconcilable differences between the two races which separate them, as with a wall of fire. There is no instance afforded us in history where liberated slaves, even of the same race, have lived in any considerable period in harmony with their former masters when denied equality with them in social and political privileges. But the Anglo-American never will give his consent that the negro, no matter how free, shall be elevated to such equality. It matters not how wealthy, how intelligent, or how morally meritorious the negro may become, so long as he remains among us the recollection of the former relation of master and slave will be perpetuated by the changeless color of the Ethiop’s skin, and that color will alike be perpetuated by the degrading tradition of his former bondage. Without this equality of political and social privileges, and without the hope of a home and government of their own, the emancipation of the slaves of the south will be but adding a new burden to their wretchedness. . . . To appreciate and understand this difficulty, it is only necessary for one to observe that, in proportion as the legal barriers established by slavery have been removed by emancipation, the prejudice of caste becomes stronger, and public opinion more intolerant to the negro race.

The report found many sympathetic ears. That same year, Democratic senator Joseph A. Wright of Indiana opposed emancipation in the District of Columbia for similar reasons: there would be no equality, because there could be no equality:

We tell you that the black population shall not mingle with the white population in our States. . . . We intend that our children shall be raised where their equals are, and not in a population partly white and partly black; that they shall see those around them who are on an equality, and we know that equality never can exist between the two races.

It was a bipartisan view. Republican Orville Browning of Illinois explained that the black race could never live as the equal of the white:

It is not legal and political equality and emancipation alone that can do much for the elevation of the character of these people. We may confer upon them all the legal and political rights we ourselves enjoy, they will still be in our midst a debased and degraded race, incapable of making progress, because they want that best element and best incentive to progress—social equality—which they never can have here. There are repugnances between the two races that forbid, and will forever forbid,
their admission to social equality; and without social equality they never
can attain to a full development of their mental and moral natures, or
lift themselves to any tolerable degree of respectable social status.

For Browning, the futility of the egalitarian project made it worth
reconsidering the wisdom of emancipation. "Mr. President," Browning
continued,

I may be mistaken in my view of this subject, but I do not believe that
the races can ever live together in harmony and with mutual advantage
to each other; and, hostile as every feeling and sentiment of my nature
is to a system of human bondage, I am by no means sure, while the
races do continue together, that it is not better for them both to
continue together in the relation of master and slave. . . . There are
many negroes whose intellectual and moral worth far transcends that
of the white men around them, and yet they do not take a position in
society that is accorded unhesitatingly to the white man who is in no
respect their equal. It is because, I apprehend, of the repugnance of the
races that the Almighty has implanted in our bosoms, and the strong
instinct which we cannot eradicate.

Senator Waitman T. Willey, Republican of West Virginia, concurred:

The negro, whatever we may say about the natural rights of that race,
must be in this country forever an inferior race. He can never be
socially equal, and, after all, that is the distinguishing characteristic of
equality. He is under the ban of social inferiority in this country.
Never can he rise to the dignity of a freeman or to the enjoyment of all
the rights of a freeman. The two races cannot live together and
prosper.

But not everyone was convinced. Senator John P. Hale of New
Hampshire insisted:

We are working out to-day some of the greatest problems that have ever
been wrought in the world, and this rebellion is not the greatest. It is
the ultimate result that is to grow out of the juxtaposition, in some
respects antagonistic, and in some respects social and friendly, of these
two races here together; and I tell you, sir, that here together they have
got to work out this destiny.
Hale's view ultimately prevailed. The slaves of the nation's capital were emancipated, and by 1863, with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, so too were the slaves of the Confederacy. Throughout 1862, Lincoln had suggested that emancipation must be tied to a scheme of compensation and colonization. But Lincoln's great proclamation was silent on the matter, and the colonization scheme gradually died. The two races, as Hale put it, would have to work out their problems "here together."

Some persisted in the belief that it was impossible. They would state their claims throughout the Reconstruction era and beyond: the races were, by nature, unequal, and so peace between them was, naturally, impossible. Racial oppression, in short, was as much a part of nature's plan as the color of a man's skin.

For some, the natural hostility of the races provided the best rationale for opposing black suffrage. In 1866 Democratic congressman Benjamin Boyer of Pennsylvania explained,

> It is argued that suffrage is necessary to the black man to enable him to protect himself against the oppression of the whites. . . . I am satisfied that in those localities where such prejudice is allowed to corrupt the streams of justice you would only add force and acrimony to its operation by establishing a political rivalship between the races. The true friends of the negro race should save them from the fate which would be sure to follow.

Green C. Smith of Kentucky opposed the civil rights bill on the same basis:

> By such attempts you but irritate and excite the two races, the one against the other. . . . the effort to bestow the right of suffrage upon negroes throughout the country is not calculated to promote their advancement or secure their best interests. In my own state, I have never met more than two or three of these people who ever asked to be endowed with the right of suffrage. I received the other day a letter from a negro who in 1862 was my property; and in that letter he urges me to resist this effort because of the prejudice prevailing in this country against his race. I go further, and reiterate the sentiment . . . that I am utterly and entirely opposed to this doctrine of negro suffrage. I believe that God almighty never intended the white people and the black, two distinct and antagonistic races, should be copartners in the
management of civil government. . . . It is useless for man to attempt to accomplish what nature has determined shall not exist.

Boyer's Pennsylvania colleague, Democrat John L. Dawson, concurred: "It is impossible that the two races should exist harmoniously in the same country, on the same footing of equality by the law." And so, Dawson explained,

We have, then, to insist upon it that this Government was made for the white race. It is our mission to maintain it. Negro suffrage and equality are incompatible with that mission. We must make our own laws and shape our own destiny. Negro suffrage will . . . result inevitably in amalgamation and deterioration of our race. The proud spirit of our people will revolt at such certain degradation, while American women, the models of beauty and superiority, will indignant-ly execrate the men who advise and dictate the policy.

The logic was echoed in the Senate. Garrett Davis explained his opposition to the civil rights bill as follows:

The passage of such a bill as this is designed to produce interference between, and disturbance of, the relations of the black laborer and his white employer, to get up feuds and quarrels and contentions between them by interested and sinister persons, to alienate the white employer from the black laborer, and consequently by such vexations, to induce the employer to resort to the white instead of the black laborer to cultivate his fields, and perform his other work. If the bill is passed, it will promote feud and enmity between the white employer and the black laborer.

Andrew Johnson took up the cause in his veto messages. The bill providing for black suffrage in the District of Columbia, he insisted, "would engender a feeling of opposition and hatred between the two races, which, becoming deep-rooted and ineradicable, would prevent them from living together in a state of mutual friendliness." So too the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which "intervenes between capital and labor," and threatens "to foment discord between the two races."

The override of both vetoes hardly ended the debate. In 1866 Republican senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania insisted that the proposed Fourteenth Amendment erred in conferring citizenship upon the inferior races. Citizenship, Cowan explained,
depends upon the inherent character of the men. Why, sir, there are
nations of people with whom theft is a virtue and falsehood a merit.
There are people to whom polygamy is as natural as monogamy is with
us. It is utterly impossible that these people can meet together and
enjoy the several rights and privileges which they suppose to be natural
in the same society; and it is necessary, a part of the nature of things,
that society shall be more or less exclusive. It is utterly and totally
impossible to mingle all the various families of men, from the lowest
form of the Hottentot up to the highest Caucasian, in the same society.

Three years later, Senator James A. Bayard of Delaware would make
the same argument in opposition to the Fifteenth Amendment: there
was no natural equality, and the attempt to force it could only
aggravate natural animosities. "[E]quality of political power," Bayard
concluded, "can only end in the conflict of races."

As always, there was another side. Congressman Glenni W.
Scofield of Pennsylvani a rejected the contention that black equality
necessarily came at the expense of the white race. There was no racial
competition, he suggested; it was not a zero-sum game: "The ignorant
white people have been made to believe that the elevation of the negro
is equivalent to their debasement. The reverse is true. The more we
improve this unfortunate race, the higher we raise our own."

As Scofield suggested, Republicans were of the view that the
hostility between the races was anything but natural; it was, on the
contrary, a political invention. "Attempted prejudice against the black
man," insisted Congressman George F. Miller of Pennsylvania, "is
gotten up by demagogue politicians." Fernando C. Beaman of
Michigan elaborated:

These expressions—"elevation of the negro," "negro equality," "negro
supremacy," "amalgamation," &c.—are mere catchwords employed to
excite the prejudices of the inconsiderate and the ignorant. They were
not in use in the early days of the Republic, when it was believed that
slavery was a temporary institution; on the contrary, negroes were then
allowed to vote. But they were brought into vogue at a later period by
slaveholders.

Senator Waitman Willey of West Virginia mocked the complaints of
the Democrats:
"Will you place the white man under the domination and government of the negro?" That is the cry. Why, sir; it is a senseless clamor. There is no propriety in it. It is an appeal to the passions of the unthinking multitude. It ought not to be addressed to an intelligent man. That is not the purpose of it. It is the clamor of the demagogue and nothing else.

If the problem of prejudice was in fact a political one, then so too necessarily was the solution. "One thing is certain," Senator William M. Stewart of Nevada observed, "that the negro must have the ballot or have no friends; and being poor and friendless, and surrounded as he is by his enemies, his fate is extermination. But give him the ballot, and he will have plenty of white friends, for the people of the United States love votes and office more than they hate negroes." Congressman James M. Ashley of Ohio agreed: "The prejudice of caste is strong, but the ballot will soon banish its baneful spirit."

Charles Sumner put the lie to the notion of the "white man's government." "By what title do you exclude a race?" he asked. "The Constitution gives no such title; you can only find it in yourselves." And there, too, were the roots of racial prejudice: "The fountain is pure; it is only out of yourselves that the waters of bitterness proceed."

In February 1871, Sumner's thesis received the support of Mississippi senator Hiram Rhoades Revels. "Let lawmakers cease to make the difference," insisted the nation's first black senator, "let school trustees and school boards cease to make the difference, and the people will soon forget it."

**Different Races**

What race are you? The question has been terribly important throughout America's history. Are you white? Are you black? Yellow, red, or brown? The answer has determined your legal status throughout much of that history, your social and probable economic status through nearly all of it.

That, in the grander scheme, is unusual. Because "what race are you?" has generally been, in the history of human civilization, not only a meaningless question but an incomprehensible one. Until quite recently, the notion of "race," as we understand it, simply did not
exist; the specific notion that individuals were of some biologically
determinable "race" is no more than two centuries old. The suggestion
that "race" should be inexorably tied to legal or social status is still
more novel: even in the United States, where "race" found, perhaps,
its fullest legal and social expression, it took fully two centuries to fix
the practical meaning of "race," and many of its ambiguities were never
completely resolved.

That is why the question "what race are you?" somewhat misses the
mark; the real question is "what ‘race’ are you considered to be, by the
culture in which you live?" In most cultures, at most times, the
answer would be, "I am considered to be of the ‘human race.’"

Similarly, the question "are you white?" needs to be translated as
"does your culture consider you ‘white’?" at which point it begs the
only questions that really matter: "What does it mean to be ‘white’?
Or ‘black’? Or ‘yellow,’ ‘red,’ or ‘brown’? in your culture?"

Because, in the abstract, there is no such thing as a "white" person
or a "black" person, or a "yellow," "red," or "brown" person; in the
abstract, there is no such thing as "race." All these terms derive their
meaning from the political culture that creates and perpetuates their
use; that culture determines—yesterday and today—what it means to
be "white," what it means to be of a "race."

"Race," in short, is a product of our political imagination. And it
is precisely because "race" is political that it has been, and continues to
be, so terribly important, not, again, in the abstract, but only in the
political culture that created it.

It was a "race"-ist culture that created the meaning of "race": that
seized upon random human attributes, generated categories from them,
ranked those categories on a hierarchical scale, and defended the whole
sorry enterprise as "science." It is a "race"-ist culture still that
embraces this outmoded conception of "race," as something biological,
inherent, innate, and immutable, and simultaneously refuses to
acknowledge the real meanings of "race"—the lived and living history
of "race," its social, economic, and political consequences.

It is "race"-ism, then, that compels the denial of its own paradox:
there is no such thing as "race," but "race" matters all the same. And
it is "race"-ism that denies this truth: there is nothing natural about
any of it.
The Concept of Race

That "race" and "racism" are natural creations seems to be a given, a statement of universal truth. The arguments on behalf of the natural order, in fact, rest on these twin biological presumptions. They presume, first, that differences—like "racial" differences—must be biological. Racial inferiority and superiority, then, are fixed in the biology of the racial group (and, of course, the individual within it): racial inferiority and superiority are thus inherent, innate, and immutable.

The arguments presume, second, that the processes of constructing hierarchies based on these differences—like the processes of "race"-ism—are somehow natural as well. Racial discrimination is thus due either to a natural repugnance—racial animosity—or to an innate sense of hierarchy; either way, the racial order is instinctive and inevitable.

Even arguments against the natural order sometimes accept its basic premises. Race is still presumed to be natural; racial differences, then, are at least to some extent biological; and racial inferiority and superiority therefore may be to some extent natural, though opponents of the order ardently hope that these rankings reflect more the influences of environment. Racial discrimination, meanwhile, is presumed to be an individual reaction—a psycho-pathological response either to biological difference or to social caste; it too, however, is ardently hoped to be chiefly the product of the environment, that is, conditioned.

What all of these views share is an emphasis on the biological individual. Race is a fact that defines the biological individual; reactions to "race" are the reactions of the biological individual. The operative concepts are thus fixed in the individual, who becomes both a natural cause and effect: "race" makes individuals and individuals make "racism." And if these are natural, if these are biological, if they are part of our individual constitution, then presumably, "race" and "racism" have always been with us.

But the history of humanity surprises. Racism, it evolves, is a recent phenomenon, and so too, for that matter, is the concept of race. As far back as 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois had canvased the history and concluded that "[t]he discovery of personal whiteness among the world’s peoples is a very modern thing." Subsequent scholarship has confirmed his assessment. As Bernard Crick puts it in the foreword
to Ivan Hannaford's recent study of "race," "racial conditioning is not part of the human condition."

It certainly was not a part of early human civilizations. Frank Snowden's study of the ancient Egyptians, Greek, and Romans concludes that,

the ancient world did not make color the focus of irrational sentiments or the basis for uncritical evaluation. The ancients did accept the institution of slavery as a fact of life; they made ethnocentric judgments of other societies; they had narcissistic canons of physical beauty; the Egyptians distinguished between themselves, "the people," and outsiders; and the Greeks called foreign cultures barbarian. Yet nothing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern times existed in the ancient world. This is the view of most scholars who have examined the evidence and who have come to conclusions such as these: the ancients did not fall into the error of biological racism; black skin color was not a sign of inferiority; Greeks and Romans did not establish color as an obstacle to integration in society; and ancient society was one that "for all its faults and failures never made color the basis for judging a man."

Jan Nederveen Pieterse's iconographic study of the period concurs in Snowden's judgment: "The oldest representations of black Africans, dating from 2500 B.C., show them well integrated into society and intermarrying. They demonstrate also that black beauty is appreciated." "Generally," Pieterse concludes, "the world of antiquity . . . was a mixed culture, and one in which difference in skin color did not play a significant role, or rather, in which black carried a positive meaning."1

Snowden's study concludes that this benign attitude extended at least to sixth-century Christians:

During the first six centuries of Christianity, blacks were summoned to salvation and were welcomed in the Christian brotherhood on the same terms as other converts. Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian was a landmark in the evangelization of the world. Origen and his exegetical disciples made it clear that all men, regardless of the color of their skin, were called to the faith, and in their interpretations they employed a deeply spiritualized black-white imagery. . . . In sum, in the early church blacks found equality in both theory and practice.
And in Western Christendom, the attitude seems to have endured well beyond. Western European Christians enslaved the pagan Slavs in the Middle Ages, and later conquered the territories of Islamic peoples, capturing the black African slaves of Muslim masters. But there is no evidence, throughout this process, of a distinctively racial animus. On the contrary, Christian Ethiopianism and the cult of the King of the Moors represent parts of a hazy awareness of black Christians south of Islamic North Africa—peoples, it was hoped, who would join the holy crusade against Islam. It was thus largely a positive image of black Africa that predominate the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, one typified by Rogier van der Weyden's 1460 rendition of the *Adoration of the Magi*, which includes, significantly, a black "wise man."

Pieterse's study suggests that the Western conception of black Africa gradually changed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Positive images persisted: in Christian Ethiopianism; in respectful diplomatic relations; in the paintings of Rubens, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck; and in the literature of the era. As late as 1688, Olfert Dapper's study of Africa was filled with praise and admiration for African courts and cities. But the period of European expansion and conquest also brought new images of Africans: condescending, denigrating images of a beastly and savage people. Africans, of course, had not suddenly devolved: it was the Western attitude that was "progressing."

After the Enlightenment, the attitude became more ideological. Ivan Hannaford's study suggests that the period from 1684 to 1815 marks the first significant stage in the evolution of the modern concept of "race": the empiricist preoccupation with classification; the emerging concept of a "natural law"; and the concurrent rise of the idea of a *volk* or culture combined to make possible the idea of discrete "races" of people. Throughout the eighteenth century, the idea of "race" remained tentative, ambiguous, and highly idiosyncratic: Montesquieu, for example, used the term to identify the stages in the development of a nation's law. But the modernist emphasis on progress gradually secured this vital point of agreement: there were "races," and some were more advanced than others. Increasingly, non-European worlds became the counterpoints to modernization; "race" became a part of the demarcation. And ultimately, "race" achieved the highest status in post-Enlightenment ideology: it became "science."
The science of race developed in Western Europe roughly between 1790 and 1840. Physical anthropologists purported to identify naturally discrete classes of people; biologists then debated their origins and natural compatibilities; cultural anthropologists matched the peoples to distinct civilizations. Of course, these were not merely "racial differences" that were being discovered; the science of race, rather, was defining "superior" and "inferior" "races." At its climax, in 1840, anatomist Robert Knox declared, "That race is everything, is simply a fact, the most remarkable, the most comprehensive which philosophy has ever announced. Race is everything: literature, science, art— in a word, civilization depends upon it."

Just fifteen years later, in France, Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau would fully explicate the superiority and purity of the "Aryan" race. Within a few generations, some of Gobineau's German adherents would pursue his thesis to its "logical" conclusion.2

The victories of nineteenth-century abolitionism were a temporary obstacle to the science of "race"; twentieth-century nationalism, on the other hand, was a major boon. In the United States, the physical anthropology of "race" was largely dormant during Reconstruction and its immediate aftermath, but revived by the early twentieth century. Xenophobia, eugenics, and America's peculiar racism were part of the backdrop for Ales Hrdlicka's 1921 lecture at American University, which included this unequivocal assertion: "There is no question that there are today already retarded peoples, retarded races, and that there are advanced and more advanced races, and that the differences between them tend rather to increase than to decrease." Harvard's Ernest Hooton was among the more prominent scholars to carry this intellectual legacy into the 1930s. By the time they were done, taxonomists would have divided us into as many as 37 different races, some, of course, more "advanced" than others.

But the horrors of the European Holocaust made the idea of "advanced races" unpalatable, and the emerging science of genetics made it untenable. English biologist Julian Huxley and American zoologist Herbert Jennings were among those who opposed the eugenics movement; they focused on a new genetic approach to race that sought, in Hannaford's words, "to distinguish the rational boundaries of science from the lunatic." In 1936, as the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour was taking effect, Huxley and A. C. Haddon published We Europeans. Their text used
In the Nature of Things: Myths of Race and Racism

In genetics to demonstrate the fallacies of hereditarianism, and to debunk the concept of a biological race. "The term race," they concluded, "as applied to human groups, should be dropped from the vocabulary of science."3

An Interlogue on the Construction of Identity

I know people who are mentally retarded. They have been tested for it, and are now called that. I also know people who seem emotionally retarded, but nobody has tested them for it or called them that. I know people who seem socially retarded, and economically, and politically, and so on, and they've never been tested either, or called the name.

I also know people who seem mentally retarded at some times, and about some things. I'm one of them. I cannot, for example, write down a set of numbers without transposing a few; I almost never get a phone number right. But I am not called mentally retarded.

I used to think that the difference here was that mental retardation was something that you had, like a disease or an infirmity, and that the tests for mental retardation were somehow medical ones. I assumed that the reason nobody considered me mentally retarded was that, quite simply, I did not have that disorder. The other kinds of retardation—emotional, social, and so on—were just things that you said about someone, subjective judgments about their behavior, not diagnoses of real conditions.

Then I learned that, at least with "mental retardation," there was no difference between what you are and what people say about you: you are what you are called.

I knew some parents whose baby was taken from them by the state; the reason was that they were mentally retarded. They had not done anything wrong; they were just mentally retarded, which meant, everyone assumed, that they could not care for their baby.

But in fact, they could care for their baby. When, after months of delay, they were finally given tests of "home skills" and "parenting aptitudes," they did all right. They knew most of the things they needed to know; what they didn't know, they showed they could learn. It became clear to nearly everyone that they would try hard,
because they cared so very much. They loved their baby boy; their tears, not the tests, proved that.

It all caused some of us to wonder whether the parents had been misdiagnosed. We asked how everyone knew that the parents were mentally retarded, and were surprised to learn that there had been just two tests: a psychologist's evaluation of their "adaptive behavior" and a standardized test of intelligence, an "IQ" test. Based on these, and these alone, the officers of the state had determined that the parents were, in the words of the petition against them, "suffering from mental retardation."

They were basically right. That's all there is to mental retardation—it's basically how you do on an IQ test. Do lousy enough, and you get called the name; whatever you might have been the day before the test, the day after, you are mentally retarded.

Mental retardation, like emotional, and social, and all the other forms of retardation, is not something you have, it's just something you are called. It's not a disease or a disorder, it's just a name. But unlike those other names, it's one that matters—because we have chosen to make it matter. We do, in fact, make people "suffer from" mental retardation.

The prevailing scientific construct of mental retardation for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in fact a medical model, a construct that placed the locus of mental disability within the biological constitution of the disabled individual. The role of science, under such a conception, was to cure or eliminate mental retardation, and the concomitant role of the state was to limit the social costs of the disability. It is this medical model that still characterizes our common misconception of mental retardation as a disease or disorder.

A more critical conception of mental retardation shifts the locus of disability from the biological makeup of the individual to the society that limits her opportunities. This social—or "cultural" or "political"—construction of mental retardation recognizes that individuals may appear to possess certain mental limitations for a wide variety of reasons, not many of which are "natural," but it is society that uses those limitations to disable her. The role of science, under this conception, is to understand the interplay between the individual's perceived limitations and the societal responses they evoke, and the
proper role of the state is to limit or eliminate the disabling societal restrictions that confront the disabled person.

As this new understanding makes clear, mental retardation is highly contextual. In the decision whether any given individual is mentally retarded—indeed, when the general parameters are set for the class—the perspective and motivations of the inquisitor are critical. Individuals may move in and out of the class of mental retardation, depending on both practical contingencies (e.g., the availability of resources to meet perceived needs) and prevailing philosophies. Indeed, one of the more remarkable social achievements of twentieth-century America came in 1973, when vast numbers of people with mental retardation were instantaneously "cured" of their disability by a change in the definition of the class.

Today, the most widely accepted standard defines mental retardation as "significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period." Mental retardation is thus essentially a norm-referenced statistical creation; it reflects neither a diagnosis of an inherent condition nor an absolute judgment about "intelligence." It merely reflects the opinions, first, the labeled individual demonstrates lesser aptitudes and abilities than the norm on some standardized measure of those particular aptitudes and abilities, and second, that there is something to be gained by application of the label.

In an absolute sense, then, there is no such thing as a mentally retarded person: only culture—in setting the norms, in creating the measures, and in applying the labels—can make someone mentally retarded. The decision to label someone "mentally retarded" thus represents a series of social choices, choices laden with political values and shaped by historical contingencies. Some of these choices inhere in the conception and measurement of intelligence (the focus of chapters 5 and 6 of this book); others inhere in the very decision to separately label those people who fail to convince us of their intelligence. The label we assign them could be designed to help: to bring educational opportunities, vocational opportunities, and life choices that should come automatically to all people, but do not. But in a society that values attributes that, by definition, mentally retarded persons will not exhibit—a society that values rationality, independence, and maximized economic utility more than it values compassion, communality, and equality—the mentally retarded label tends
ultimately to diminish the person who receives it. To be mentally retarded is to be inferior.

The label, sadly, makes that inferiority increasingly "real." Through the complex interactions between the society and the labeled person, the "mentally retarded" person appears "retarded" and, increasingly, tailors her behavior to accommodate the expectations of her social environment. The opportunities afforded her in that environment become increasingly limited, and so too her achievements, and on and on it goes, in a relentless, self-perpetuating cycle. And it all started with an IQ test.

Mental retardation, in the end, is not so much a product of creation, as it is a product of human re-creation. People are created as just plain people; we make them "mentally retarded" just because they need to be labeled that way for one political reason or another.

And it is politics, and politics alone, that causes people to "suffer from" mental retardation.

The same applies to other forms of "disability." The World Health Organization makes this plain with its operative definitions: it defines "impairment" as "an abnormality or loss of any physiological or anatomical structure or function"; "disability" as "the consequences of an impairment"; and "handicap" as "the social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability." Impairments, then, may be products of creation, but they are not "disabilities" until we experience them as such, and even then, it is a socio-political decision to "handicap" people due to their impairments.4

I am color-blind. It is an impairment. It is not a disability, except on the mornings that I am forced to dress myself. Even then, however, it is not a handicap, except to the extent that I need to appeal to a fashion-conscious crowd (which is, thankfully, never). It would be a handicap, however, if I was a clothes salesman, or a house painter, or an interior decorator, and so on—at least it would be if my customers lived in a color-coordinated society and were bent on upholding its conventions. But it is ultimately the cultural context that is important: only it can handicap me because of who I am.

Gender is also constructed. Of course, people are created as biological males and females, but that has very little significance except in a cultural context. There is, to illustrate, an ongoing and highly visible
debate about gender differences in the human brain: are the differences really important, and are the differences really, well, real?

The first question has assumed a certain ability to identify and quantify the differences, and has led commentators to insist that gender similarities outweigh the differences, or vice versa. But such assertions are meaningful only in a very narrow sense, as statements of some kind of physiometric fact. Even then, they assume, first, a closed set of agreed-upon criteria, that, for example, there are 120 brain characteristics; second, an agreed method of assigning weight to each variable, that, for example, each variable is of equal physiological significance; third, agreement on what constitutes "sameness" and "difference" for each variable, that, for example, variables are essentially the same if they are within a range of variation of, say, ± 20 percent; and fourth, agreement as to the findings for all measured variables, that, for example, the evidence conclusively establishes that there is sameness on one hundred of the characteristics, and difference on the remaining twenty.

This is a tall order—probably both conceptually and empirically impossible. Even if we satisfied every condition, I think we haven't come close to answering the question whether the differences are really important. Because the simple fact is that the brains could be identical in 119 of 120 characteristics, but that 120th characteristic might just control the functions that are most critically important to the most culturally significant traits. If that is the case, if, for example, the only difference is in the discrete part of the brain that controls, say, "the ability to empathize with other human beings," and if empathy was absolutely the most culturally significant trait, then the differences, slight as they are in number, would be really quite significant. Conversely, if the differences affected functions that had little or no cultural significance—to make a point, let's say that same "ability to empathize with other human beings"—then their number would not much matter: they were unimportant, because we had chosen to make them unimportant.

That is why I think the discussion of the second question—whether the differences are "real"—is often circular. The standard responses to the question are either "yes, of course, they are real, and we can measure them objectively," or "no, they are not real, they are merely: (a) measurement artifacts; or (b) reflections of cultural forces." But these answers all assume that there is a real gendered individual who
lives outside culture, and that the differences are "real" only if they are located in this independent individual, and not "real" if they are located in the culture.

But the individual lives in culture, and the differences are measured by and through culture: there is thus nothing "real" outside culture, and nothing un-"real" about culture's creations. Even the biological differences may be shaped by culture; after all, the human brain itself has evolved in and through culture.

And culture, of course, shapes more than physiology: it shapes the behaviors of the individual, and the perceptions of other individuals, and it is in their intersections, their cultural interactions, that "gender" really comes to be. Part of the process involves a valuation of "gendered" traits, and it is here that the social fact of gender becomes necessarily a political one. In the end, it is not biology, but politics that is, as Martha Minow so wonderfully put it, "making all the difference."

We, as a culture, have determined which differences count, and how they count, and in this important way, we, as a culture, have made gender. Gender differences, whatever their "origins," have no "real" significance until we seize upon their real-world manifestations, attribute to them some significance, and reorder our culture in ways that either exaggerate or diminish the significance of the attribution and treat it as something good or something bad.

I had a friend who was a truck driver, and we got to talking one day—for reasons that have long since escaped me—about the relative absence of women from his profession. The ostensible reason, we concluded, was that women were generally too small: their legs were too short to reach the pedals. We briefly debated the truth of this observation, and stumbled on a more important discovery: the cabs did not have to be designed such that shorter people could not function in them. We reveled briefly in our revolutionary insight before my friend observed, half-jokingly, that women were still unlikely to enter the profession, because, after all, they would not want to use the truck stops. We were left, I think, with an interesting project: trying to imagine a "feminized" truck stop.

But it is not easy to imagine a truck stop—it is not easy to imagine a world—designed equally by and for women.
Disability and gender are pretty much the same. We are created with some meaningless variations; over time, we re-create these variations as meaningful. The differences that constitute disability and gender are therefore not natural: they are cultural, social, and ultimately political. We make disability and gender. The same is true of race. Only more so.

The Construction of Race

The notion that "race" is at least partly the product of social forces is almost as old as the concept itself. Early expressions of the notion tended to focus on the role of society in shaping the "racial" being. Benjamin Franklin's 1755 essay on population observed that "almost every slave" is "by nature a thief"; the evolution in his thinking is apparent in his 1769 revision of the text, which contended that "almost every slave" is "from the nature of slavery a thief." Similarly, abolitionists—and later the postbellum egalitarians—stressed the role of slavery and discrimination in suppressing the abilities of black Americans: if the black race was inferior, the argument went, it was because it had been made that way.

One aspect of the bias that inhered in the "natural order" was exposed by the romantic racialism and Ethiopianism of the mid- to late nineteenth century. Edward Blyden, for example, insisted that the soulful Africans were spiritually superior to their soulless European counterparts, the latter preoccupied with material progress. In exalting the attributes of black Africans and Americans, Blyden and others essentially inverted the racial hierarchy. But they left substantially undisturbed the prevailing conception of "race": it remained something natural.

The turn of the century brought a more radical critique, this time of the concept of "race" itself. The science had never been all that definitive. Johann Friedreic h Blumenbach is often considered the founder of physical anthropology; his 1795 text introduced the term "caucasian" and substantially accelerated the process of scientizing "race." But Blumenbach asserted the unity of mankind; insisted that the racial categories he created were overlapping; observed that the defining characteristics were substantially mutable; maintained that individual Africans "differ from other Africans as much as Europeans
differ from Europeans, or even more so"; and denied that physical differences could be interpreted as inferiority or superiority.

A century of racial "science" tended to obscure Blumenbach's initial insights, but "race," in the end, was too weak a concept to do what science demanded. In 1904 Oswald Garrison Villard summarized for American readers the work of German ethnologists; "race," he concluded, "is merely a pseudo-scientific or political catchword." The great bulk of racial science was, in Villard's words, "ethnological claptrap"; it was "humbug pure and simple."6

Perhaps no one did more to expose American readers to the deficiencies of "race" than anthropologist Franz Boas. In Anthropology and Modern Life, Boas began his critique by noting that "There is little clarity in regard to the term 'race.'" That was, as Boas explained, because "race" was widely misunderstood.

The process of categorizing, Boas noted, was a normal cognitive phenomenon; but it was important to remember that the categories, or "types," were only products of the human mind. "The 'type' is formed quite subjectively on the basis of our everyday experience," he wrote. And it did not always comport with the reality: "We are easily misled by general impressions," he cautioned, and "[w]e must also remember that the 'type' is more or less an abstraction."

This was true of the "types" that were called "races"; that "race" had a certain subjective resonance did not mean that it was a biological truth: "The vague impression of 'types,' abstracted from our everyday experience, does not prove that these are biologically distinct races, and the inferences that various populations are composed of individuals belonging to various races is subjectively intelligible, objectively unproved."

In fact, most biological qualities could not be assigned to discrete racial types: "The multitude of genealogical lines, the diversity of individual and family types contained in each race is so great that no race can be considered as a unit." "[F]rom a purely biological point of view," Boas concluded, "the concept of race unity breaks down."

"Race" resonated, Boas contended, precisely because we had been socially conditioned to think, and act, in terms of "race": "The formation of the racial groups in our midst must be understood on a social basis. In a community comprising two distinct types which are socially clearly separated, the social grouping is reinforced by the outer appearance of the individuals and each is at once and automatically
assigned to his own group." It was a process facilitated by America's historical experience: the pretenses of "race" had helped produce socially distinct classes, and those social distinctions were easily attributed to "race." The process was not universal: "In other communities . . . where the social and racial groupings do not coincide, the result is different." But it was the American experience, and it made "race" a social reality, "not only in everyday relations but also in legislation."

Boas's critique was carrying the day even before the outbreak of the Second World War. In the 1920s, Robert E. Park led the Chicago school of sociology in articulating a distinctively social understanding of race. In 1936, political scientist Ralph J. Bunche observed in *A World View of Race* that "Race is the great American shibboleth." The following year, Jacques Barzun published *Race: A Study in Superstition*: "Race theories shift their ground, alter their jargon, and mix their claims," Barzun wrote, "but they cannot obliterate the initial vice of desiring to explain much by little." A year after that, the English translation of Magnus Hirschfeld's *Racism* offered American readers an extensive critique of Nazi race theory; Hirschfeld's work also popularized the term that comprised its title.

The postwar generation completed the critique. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu was at the forefront; in 1959 he wrote that

> For two centuries anthropologists have been directing attention towards the task of establishing criteria by whose means races of man may be defined. All have taken for granted the one thing which required to be proven, namely that the concept of race corresponded with a reality which could actually be measured and verified and descriptively set out so that it could be seen to be a fact.

Montagu was among those who thought the "race" project had compromised the scientific method: "The process of averaging the characters of a given group, knocking the individuals together, giving them a good stirring, and then serving the resulting omelet as a 'race' is essentially the anthropological process of race making. It may be good cooking, but it is not science, since it serves to confuse rather than clarify."8

More recent work has tended to confirm the critique. The concept of "race" has, in truth, little integrity as a biological phenomenon. In
most communities, any attempt to identify discrete "races" will be instantly confounded by the obvious conflation of the "racial" gene pools. In the United States, the ancestry of the current "black" population is generally estimated to be between 20 and 30 percent "white"; between 75 and 90 percent of the "black" population has some "white" ancestry. Meanwhile, the ancestry of the current "white" population is estimated to be between 1 and 5 percent "black."

But even these numbers assume the existence of demarcations of "white" and "black" that have—or at some point had—some biological integrity. But in truth, whatever else may be said for "race," it does not, as a biological matter, seem to amount to much.

R. C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin have examined the case for or against a genetically significant "race." There are, they report, about 150 different genetically coded proteins that have been identified and examined; 75 percent of these are monomorphic, that is, they are identical in all individuals. Just 25 percent, then, are polymorphic, that is, they vary among individuals. Fully 85 percent of the variation among these polymorphic genes occurs between individuals within local populations, groupings typically identified as "tribes" or "nations," leading the authors to conclude that "[t]he remarkable feature of human evolution and history has been the very small degree of divergence between geographical populations as compared with the genetic variation among individuals." Only 8 percent of the genetic variation is between the "tribes" or "nationalities" that collectively constitute the conventionally described "races." The smallest proportion of variation—just 7 percent (of, remember, the polymorphic genes, which are in turn just 25 percent of the overall pool)—is between groups that have conventionally been considered "races." Significantly, no polymorphic gene perfectly discriminates among the traditionally classified racial groups.

The pragmatic case for racial classifications is not much stronger. Stephen Jay Gould follows nearly a century’s worth of anthropological tradition when he suggests that racial classifications have no discernable scientific value. As a general proposition, he notes, subspecies "are categories of convenience only and need never be designated." Typically, subspecies "represent a taxonomist's personal decision about the best way to report geographic variations." With modern quantitative methods permitting the numerical description of geographical variation, Gould observes, "we need no longer to construct names to
describe differences that are, by definition, fleeting and changeable. Therefore, the practice of naming subspecies has largely fallen into disfavor, and few taxonomists use the category any more."

Nor are the categories justified for the human species: "[w]e are not well enough divided into distinct geographic groups, and the naming of human subspecies makes little sense." Gould identifies, in fact, three distinct problems with the notion of human subspecies: the discordance of characteristics within subspecies (e.g., variation in skin color, blood group, and so on); the fluidity and gradations of the designations; and the persistent evidence of convergence—the independent evolution of similar characters—among the designated groups (e.g., of skin color among indigenous tropical peoples). "Human variation exists," Gould concludes; "the formal designation of races is passé."

This evidence does not prove, of course, that "race" is insignificant. What it does prove is that "race" is a weak biological phenomenon and does not much matter in nature—hardly a surprise, at this stage in human evolution. It remains possible, of course, that the very slight proportion of human variation that seems attributable to "race" is nonetheless significant, and equally possible that otherwise obsolete racial classifications are still necessary to preserve distinctions that quantitative methods cannot fully express. But it is important here to note that the significance of "race" and the necessity for "race" are not then mandated by nature. If "racial" differences matter, it is because they are made to matter—not by nature, but by human beings.9

So it is perhaps appropriate that among the sciences, only psychology seems not to have completely broken the peculiar hold of "race." But even here, it may just be a matter of time. In a recent essay in American Psychologist, psychologists Albert H. Yee, Haldor H. Fairchild, Frederic Weizmann, and Gail E. Wyatt called on their colleagues to follow the lead of other disciplines and to re-assess the utility of the "race" construct. They noted that there was "much to question in the definitions and applications of race by several of its exponents and their allies." It was psychologists, they observed, who were arguing for the "natural" intellectual differences between "races," but the "natural" sciences were not cooperating. Surveying the evidence, they concluded that "[n]ot only do the pertinent scholarly groups and experts . . . indicate no consensual support for the genetic deficit hypothesis, their comments are highly critical toward the spurious use of and tolerance for the term race in psychology."10
A Political History of Race in America: Part 1

The meaning of "race" has not been constant throughout American history: its "scientific" meaning has evolved—or devolved—and so too has its social meaning. Moreover, "race" has meant different things for different groups. That, above all, is the real story of "race": the various ways it has included and excluded people from the mainstream of American life.

One way to tell this story—by no means the only or "right" way—is as the story of the "white race" in America. It is, of course, far too long a story to tell in just a few pages. But perhaps even an absurdly truncated edition of the story may suffice to capture some sense of the history of "whiteness," some of the ways whiteness has been created and re-created over the span of four American centuries.

"White," of course, has been the norm through virtually all of this period: even the conventional way of describing the earlier history as "pre-Columbian" serves to emphasize the point. But the "white"-"nonwhite" dichotomy that characterizes modern American race-ism has not always been with us. This is largely because "white" only gradually emerged as the distinctive feature of America's chosen people: "white"-ness has been, at various times, far less important than nationality or the ownership of property. "White"-ness, in fact, has been of little assistance to those who, at different junctures, were not propertied, were not English, were not Protestant, were not from Northern Europe, or were not both willing and able to assimilate into the cultural mainstream.

Not all "white" people were equal in the colonial era. In the early 1700s, roughly half the English and Scottish immigrants to the American colonies came in some form of indentured servitude. Being a freeholder was no guarantee of equality either. The so-called Scotch-Irish were hardly welcomed among the English colonists; Cotton Mather lamented that they were one of "the formidable attempts of Satan and his Sons to Unsettle us." For the most part, the group retreated to the backcountry to weather the storm of English hostility.

Gradually, the colonial bondsmen became exclusively non-European and, eventually, almost exclusively African. By the antebellum era, then, there were no white slaves. But the nineteenth century saw a new form of economic oppression, and it was felt principally by northern white labor. In the South, the "low, menial" work was done
by slaves; in the North, the comparable work of an increasingly industrial economy was done principally by workers of European descent. Like their enslaved counterparts, and unlike the fabled yeoman of both southern and Yankee lore, these workers were generally divorced from the land and from the ownership of productive property. For many of them, "free labor" was often experienced and denounced as "wage slavery."

In 1850 the number of wage earners exceeded the number of slaves for the first time; a decade later, on the eve of war, wage earners finally outnumbered the self-employed. Gradually, the prevailing ethos changed: wage labor—once degraded as unfit for free men, occasionally degraded as unfit for "white" men—became respectable, first as a means to acquiring productive property, later as a virtue in its own right, the counterpoint to slavery. In the end, Eric Foner notes, the positive free labor ideology was defined in part by boundaries of exclusion: it was the right and province of those who were not, in Lincoln's words, of a "dependent nature"—men, not women; and "white" men, not Indian servants, Mexican American peons, Chinese coolies, or black slaves.11

But the racial demarcations and, specifically, the black-white dichotomy were still far from absolute. At one end of the political spectrum, the degradation suffered by some Europeans throughout the nineteenth century had all the hallmarks of the emerging "race"-ism. Nativism flourished in the Know-Nothing movement, which briefly dominated mid-century politics, and in the Progressive movement, which ascended at the end of the century. The Irish continued to suffer some of the worst of it. In England, the 1840s brought both massive Irish immigration due to famine and mounting resistance to British domination; the English, in response, gradually recast the "wilde Irish" in biological terms. By the mid-nineteenth century, Victorian depictions of the Irish were starkly simian. The prejudice found receptive audiences across the Atlantic, where comparisons between black and Irish Americans were common. Harper's Weekly, "A Journal of Civilization," took to lampooning both groups simultaneously, and with equal hostility.

At the other end of the spectrum, a biracial politics also intermittently flourished: in, for example, the midcentury cooperation between some abolitionists and labor advocates, and in the populist movements of the end of the century. In 1892, Thomas E. Watson of the People's Party campaigned for an end to the racial divide:
The white tenant lives adjoining the colored tenant. Their houses are almost equally destitute of comforts. Their living is confined to bare necessities. They are equally burdened with heavy taxes. They pay the same high rent for gullied and impoverished land. . . .

Now the People's Party says to these two men, "You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both."

"[L]et all this be fully realized," Watson concluded, "and the race question in the South will have settled itself through the evolution of a political movement in which both blacks and whites recognize their surest way out of wretchedness into comfort and independence."

Sadly, Watson's personal history provides something of a study in microcosm of this and too many other populist movements: Watson was elected to Congress in 1890, was defeated in 1892, and defeated again as the party's vice presidential candidate in 1896. He concluded his political life as a racial segregationist.12

By the end of the century "new immigrants" to America, principally from Italy, Russia, Poland, and Greece, for the first time outnumbered the "old immigrants" from Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. The former confronted a resurgent nativism supported by the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, "social control" elements of political progressivism, as well as by a pseudoscientific racism. Immigrants accounted for 20 percent of American workers as the new century dawned, but 60 percent of the workers in heavy industry. Conditions there were often appalling: the nation's industrial accident rate was among the highest in the world. Employers' hiring practices, meanwhile, played on traditional ethnic divisions to help stem union growth. As a consequence, wages barely justified the risks: in 1900 an American steel-worker worked twelve-hour days, six days a week, for the sum of $450 a year; a garment worker labored the same hours for $260 a year. That same year, Andrew Carnegie enjoyed a tax-free profit of $23 million. In 1900 the wealthiest Americans—less than 2 percent of the American population—owned 60 percent of the country's wealth; the poorest Americans—65 percent of the population—owned just 5 percent.
The steady influx of immigrant labor and the massive black migration during the World War I labor shortage significantly changed the composition of both the work-force and the urban neighborhood. Race and ethnicity evolved into the principal bases for social stratification. There was some economic mobility for lower class whites, but their social standing was increasingly fixed by their ancestry. 

Post-war xenophobia and a eugenic fixation with the measured intelligence of racial and ethnic groups both reflected and exacerbated an almost hysterical reaction to the demographic changes in America. Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* helped revive the fascination with "race" as a determinant of social fate, but Grant's racial divisions—including "Nordics," "Alpines," "Mediterraneans," and "Jews"—confirmed that this was not just a question of black and white.

As immigrants clustered into ethnic ghettos, nativists warned of the "balkanization" of the country. Henry Pratt Fairchild entitled his 1926 anti-immigrant tome *The Melting Pot Mistake.* "Why should we take the pains," Fairchild asked, "deliberately to reach out after the friendship of those to whom we are not attracted?" The inability of immigrants to satisfactorily assimilate threatened the "American nationality"; "there has already developed in the United States a distinct Polish-American society, which is," Fairchild insisted, "neither truly Polish nor truly American."

Eugenicists correlated ethnicity with intelligence, ignoring the obvious cultural explanations for their measured disparities. The Dillingham Commission on Immigration correlated ethnicity with high crime, disease, and other social indices; they were remarkably oblivious to the effects of economic status. It all culminated in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924; "America," declared President Calvin Coolidge, "must be kept American."

The "melting pot" was a failure in some eyes, and unfair in some others; among the latter, Horace Kallen's "orchestra of mankind" provided an attractive alternative metaphor. But in truth, assimilation was the only viable option for American immigrants. And it exacted a cost. According to Roger Sanjek, "In fact, the masses of European immigrants over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had paid the price of linguistic extinction and cultural loss for the privilege of white racial status. The outcome of Anglo-conformity for non-British European immigrants has been an opportunity to share 'race' with whites with whom we do not share 'class.'"
As Sanjek suggests, assimilation was not readily available to all. Throughout the period of twentieth-century assimilation, "black" Americans were the increasingly conspicuous counterpoint, "white" America’s dichotomous referent. Thus the New Deal could indeed be that, but principally for white Americans. Among the old traditions it continued was that of racial discrimination: the Fair Housing Administration, to cite one example, simply converted segregative practices into public policy.

And so while "Irish-American" and "Italian-American" and "Polish-American" were gradually transformed into honorifics, "African-American" remained something of an oxymoron. Federal law and policy continued to play their role. Before the Second World War, restrictive covenants typically forbade home sales to Jews and Catholics as well as to black Americans. But as Karen Brodkin Sacks notes, the war "led to a more inclusive version of whiteness." Part of the change was undoubtedly ideological, the inevitable effects of a war against Aryan supremacy. But part of it was simply economics; for "Euro-ethnics," Sacks notes, "economic prosperity played a very powerful role in the whitening process." After the war, restrictive covenants were limited almost exclusively to black Americans and neither the F.H.A. nor the Veterans' Administration would guarantee loans in "redlined" neighborhoods. As a consequence, black Americans could not obtain either homes or home financing in neighborhoods now open to Americans of ethnic European descent. "Such programs," writes Sacks, "reinforced white/nonwhite racial distinctions even as intrawhite racialization was falling out of fashion."14

It has taken, in sum, fully four centuries for "white" folks to define their own "whiteness," and for all we know, the process is still far from complete. Only time and politics will tell.

And that is only part of the story of "race" in America; it barely addresses the story of minority races, including the story of the "black race."

A Political History of Race in America: Part 2

The history of the minority experience has been richly told in other texts, and cannot be done justice in a few pages here. But for reasons that may soon be clear, the story—at least part of it—demands retelling.
This section will principally examine the story—that is, the construction—of the "black race." This is in part because, historically, the assertion of a natural racial order has generally meant the superiority of the white race to the black, and in part because contemporary expressions of that attitude also highlight the alleged intellectual inferiority of the black race. The history made for and by the other non-white "races" is certainly distinct from the black experience, and yet it is also—almost by definition—similar. But that, alas, is for another book.15

Origins

The American experience with "race" reflects all the ambiguities and evolutions that characterize the term. To begin with, as M. Annette Jaimes notes, "prior to the European conquest, there is no evidence that indigenous peoples of the Americas had in their societies any concept of ‘race’ to make differentiations within the human species." The American vision of "race" thus appears to be the distinctively European vision.

Precisely what vision they brought and how they manifested it has been the subject of considerable historical debate. Here, briefly, is what historians have had to say on the roots of American "race" and its relationship to American racism.

The consensus among historians through the early twentieth century—and perhaps still in the popular mind today—is that Africans arrived in the Americas fully enslaved and fully debased because of their "race." By midcentury, however, the historical consensus had collapsed, and two quite opposed views had emerged. On the one hand, there were those who continued to believe that racism and slavery defined the African from the outset: Wesley Frank Craven's *Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (1949) and Carl Degler's *Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice* (1959) were among the leading expositions of this view. On the other hand, there were those who saw evidence that the Africans’ status was not at all fixed in the early years: W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) that "the income-bearing value of race-prejudice was the cause and not the result of theories of race inferiority"; Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) similarly contended that "slavery was not born of racism; rather racism was the consequence of slavery"; while Oscar
Handlin and Mary Handlin maintained, in an influential 1950 article in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, that African servitude was initially like European servitude, and only later evolved into racial slavery.

Winthrop D. Jordan’s *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968) launched a new generation of the debate. Jordan’s central thesis was that the colonists carried an unconscious English prejudice toward "black Africa," but he maintained ambiguously that "slavery and 'prejudice' may have been equally cause and effect." Edmund S. Morgan’s study of colonial Virginia concluded that slavery there "had no necessary connection with race"; he suggested that race prejudice was cultivated as slavery evolved. George M. Fredrickson detected an inchoate prejudice toward outsiders among the early colonists, but maintained that it was not until the late seventeenth century that race formed the basis of a distinct prejudice, and that racism was not made explicit until the antebellum era. Alden T. Vaughn’s examination of the early Virginia censuses uncovered suggestions—in the relative anonymity accorded black Virginians—that "race" mattered quite early. Warren M. Billings, on the other hand, discerned religious bases for the differentiation, noting the early reluctance to enslave Christians, regardless of their color. *Slaves without Masters*, Ira Berlin’s 1974 study of free blacks, suggested an uneven evolution of racial law and ideology through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Judge A. Leon Higginbotham’s 1978 study of colonial slave law, *In the Matter of Color*, suggested much the same about the earlier slave and race codes. T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes’s *Myne Owne Ground* (1980) revealed evidence of a genuinely multiracial society in the years before Bacon’s Rebellion, and concluded that "not until the end of the seventeenth century was there an inexorable hardening of racial lines." Peter Kolchin’s comparative study of American slavery and Russian serfdom, *Unfree Labor* (1987), maintained that "fluid class alliances" dominated seventeenth-century America, and that in the early decades of the colonies, the "rigid dichotomy of later years between black and white, slave and servant, did not yet exist."

Finally, Barbara Jeanne Fields’s essay, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States," in a 1990 issue of the *New Left Review*, contended that Americans possessed no coherent racial ideology until the revolutionary era. Vaughn, her colleague at Columbia, contends that Fields misreads the evidence, that in fact racial ideology, if not racial
rhetoric, preceded independence by over a century. Vaughn maintains that

white Virginians made permanent bondsmen of imported Africans and their descendants because it was economically advantageous to the slaveowners; because Africans were usually powerless to prevent enslavement or to discourage additional importations; and because the planters, and probably most of their white neighbors, believed that Africans were an inherently inferior branch of humankind, suited by their God-given characteristics and the circumstances of their arrival in America to be slaves forever.

In the end, the last half century of historical scholarship seems to have generated more substantial agreement than these debates might suggest. The study of American race and racism and their relationship to American slavery has yielded something of a consensus on the following six vital points.16

First, the early bondsmen were not only Africans, but included Europeans and Native Americans as well. In 1641 Massachusetts became the first colony to authorize slavery by legislative enactment: their statute embraced European, African, and Indian bondsmen. For many decades, Virginia maintained a fairly complex hierarchy of servitude, including tenants, servants, apprentices, and "slaves," but these tended to blur in practice and were not, in any event, rigidly divided along racial lines: Virginia, like the other colonies, impressed people of each "race." Early attitudes toward African bondsmen, meanwhile, were not always—and perhaps not generally—markedly distinct from attitudes toward European servants or, for that matter, toward the poor of every "race."17

Second, Africans did not become the bondsmen of choice until late in the seventeenth century, and the development seems substantially unrelated to "racial" ideology. The black population in the colonies rose sharply in the 1680s, and the locus of the slave supply shifted from the Caribbean to Africa at the same time. Dissatisfaction with both Indian and European bondsmen undoubtedly played some role, and it is probably no coincidence that the shift to African labor occurred at about the same time as Bacon's Rebellion. Still, as late as 1708, a South Carolina census revealed that of 5,500 slaves, 1,400 (or more than one-fourth) were Indians. Within a generation, however,
Britain would secure complete dominion over the slave trade, ensuring a regular supply of comparatively cheap African labor.¹⁸

Third, the legal status of Africans and African Americans was ambiguous until the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and perhaps beyond. This was due in part to the hazy distinctions between most forms of servitude, and due in part to the fact that many black colonists were, to one degree or another, "free." In Virginia, to take one example, there were many black freemen in 1650, perhaps more than 25 percent of the black population in some counties. In colonial New York, to take another example, the "half-freedom" status, under which indentured colonists remained "free" if they paid annual dues or performed designated labor, makes such calculations meaningless.¹⁹

Fourth, the racial laws and rhetoric were not constant throughout the colonies or, after independence, throughout the states. The North-South distinction is well known, though in truth only Rhode Island did not unequivocally sanction slavery by legislation or judicial decree. Still there were significant regional differences. The Dutch in New York treated their slaves more mildly than did most other colonists, and the "half-freedom" status endured there until the mid-seventeenth century, when the English took control of the colony. Colonial Pennsylvania, meanwhile, did not sanction some of slavery's more brutalizing aspects: there was, notably, no special justification for killing slaves, and they were not formally considered property. And, of course, the most significant regional differences emerged after the Revolution, when the northern states proceeded to abolish the institution.

There were also significant regional differences within the South. In the upper South, Republican ideology and the surplus of slaves produced hostility to the slave trade and ambivalence toward the domestic institution. Until the immediate antebellum era, slavery was generally viewed as a necessary evil. As late as 1823, Congressman Charles F. Mercer of Virginia would denounce the slave trade as "the scourge of Africa, the disgrace and affliction of both Europe and America." Swallow Barn, John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 account of the fictitious slave owner Frank Meriwether, captures much of the ambivalence of its region and its day:
All organized slavery is inevitably but a temporary phase of human condition. Interest, necessity and instinct, all work to give progression to the relations of mankind, and finally to elevate each tribe or race to its maximum of refinement and power. We have no reason to suppose that the negro will be an exception to this law.

The fictional Meriwether notes that the slave is presently "parasitical in his nature" and "dependent" upon his white master. Still, he concedes, "[t]his helplessness may be the due and natural impression which two centuries of slavery have stamped upon the tribe." "What the negro is finally capable of, in the way of civilization, I am not philosopher enough to determine."

Much less ambivalence tempered racial thinking in the lower South. Part of it may have been due to the timing: the first slave did not appear in South Carolina until 1670, and slaves were not present there in large numbers until rice became a profitable staple at the very end of the century. Slave owners in the Deep South, as a consequence, may have been spared the distraction created by slavery's—and "race's"—most ambiguous period. Part of it may have been demographics: South Carolina was the only colony where blacks outnumbered whites, a circumstance likely to have at least some impression on the white master's mindset. Finally, part of it may have been economics: the cotton and rice plantations of the lower South created an incessant demand for black labor, inducing a vigorous defense of both slavery and the slave trade. The South Carolina and Georgia delegations to the Constitutional Convention, for example, defended the slave trade with an intensity that easily matched the fervor that other delegates—including Virginia's—marshaled against it.20

Fifth, there was apparently a considerable evolution of racial thinking. The details remain controverted, but it probably does not strain the historical consensus to suggest that "race" in America evolved in four stages.

1. Color-Consciousness: 1619-c. 1662. The early European colonists were undoubtedly aware of the color of the African's skin, and it assumed at some level a certain importance as a defining characteristic. "Negro" emerged as a term used by the Spanish and Portuguese to describe West Africans in nonpejorative ways, and "black" served the same purpose for English-speaking colonists. There is some evidence
that at least some English colonists viewed the Africans uneasily, and perhaps with prejudice. But the fluidity of the servile and free classes, the integration of free blacks into the social and political communities, and the as-yet impoverished conception of "race" all suggest that whatever "race"-ism may have characterized the early colonies was vague, incomplete, and far from universal.21

2. The Formalization of Race: c. 1662-c. 1776. The restrictions of servitude hardened in the late seventeenth century, culminating in the adoption of the first major slave codes in 1680-82. Servitude became both perpetual and inheritable, typically transferred from the mother. Race emerged in this time period as a determinant of legal status: the law gradually embraced the presumption that the "negro" was a slave and the "white" person was free. This, perhaps, was no more than a reflection of economic convenience—an apparently heritable marker certainly facilitated the notion of a hereditary slavery—and of the evolving demographic reality. It may have also reflected a very conscious effort to divide the rebel class: Edmund Morgan observes, for example, that the Virginia Assembly of the late seventeenth century "deliberately did what it could to foster the contempt of whites for blacks and Indians." Interestingly, there was no concerted effort to define either "negro" or "white" in this time frame: only the Virginia legislature made the effort, as it struggled to give meaning to the term "mulatto."

At the same time, restrictions on "free" blacks surface in this period; Georgia, for example, placed statutory limitations on the occupations open to "negroes." But as Ira Berlin notes, "Though the direction of white thought was clear, the pattern of colonial black law revealed the ambiguous, incomplete nature of their thinking." The "black codes" were laced with inconsistencies: while they often treated free blacks roughly, they left large areas of legal equality, suggesting, as Berlin notes, "a flexibility in white attitudes which would later disappear."22

3. The Explication of Race: c. 1776-c. 1835. There were three ways to resolve the contradiction between the ideology of the revolutionary generation and the fact of chattel slavery. One way was to cure it through the abolition of slavery; this indeed was the response of those states where slavery was not an economic imperative. A second way was to demur: concede the philosophical inconsistency, but tolerate the contradiction on practical grounds; this was the initial response, at least, in the upper South, where slavery was assumed to be but a
passing phase. A third way was to modify the ideology to incorporate what was by then a racial slavery, to carve out, in effect, a racial exception to the rules of liberty and equality. This, of course, would be the response wherever slavery needed more than an embarrassed defense—and that would be, eventually, throughout the American South.

"Race," in this sense, was born with the new nation. The Columbia colleagues Fields and Vaughn appear to find common ground on this score. The former has written: "American racial ideology is as original an invention of the Founders as is the United States itself. Those holding liberty to be inalienable and holding African-Americans as slaves were bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth." The latter notes that: "Not until the era of the American Revolution did a substantial body of literature emerge in defense of slavery and in derogation of the Negro 'race'—i.e., a racist literature . . . it marked a new stage in the ideology's development, as did, in the antebellum era, the emergence of 'scientific' explanations of 'racial' differences."

As Vaughn suggests, this early ideology of "race" was not rooted in science. At times, during this period, defenders of slavery do assert that the racial condition is "natural," in keeping with either "natural law" or the design of the creator. George McDuffie, governor of South Carolina in 1835, maintained, for example, that "[t]he African Negro is destined by Providence to occupy this condition of servile dependence." John Calhoun would make his reputation as slavery's great defender on similarly styled assertions. But this was not yet biological.

Just as often, moreover, the defense of slavery, or other discriminations against black Americans, would continue to find refuge in purely pragmatic rationales. When North Carolina and Tennessee disenfranchised free blacks in 1834-35, it was without any "race"-ist justification at all; free blacks were simply too great a political threat. A review of the Congressional Record over three randomly selected years from this period, 1821-24, also illustrates the point. Slavery is frequently the topic of discussion, but entirely missing are the gratuitous denigrations of the "African race" that would soon characterize the discourse. The incapacities of the "race" arise only in the context of debates on the tariff; the slave South, it is argued, cannot compete with northern manufacturers, due principally to the disabilities of slave labor. And
even this racial disability is not "natural"; it is simply that "[t]he circumstance of its degradation unfit it for the manufacturing arts."  

4. The Scientization of Race: c. 1835-? The nascent "science" of "race" found a receptive audience in the antebellum South, where a besieged practice was in desperate need of some ideological foundations. "Science," of course, furnished the very best kind of post-Enlightenment foundations: "truths" that were not merely "self-evident," but "proved." Samuel Morton's *Crania Americana*, an 1839 exercise in racial craniometry, helped launch a tradition that would persist through emancipation, two Reconstructions, and beyond. Throughout, whenever "race" has been really needed, some "science" has been at hand to provide it.

*Sixth*, the final point of historical consensus: the commitments to the divisions of "race" were never universal. Edmund Morgan notes the persistence in colonial Virginia of black-white, slave-servant alliances—personal, social, and occasionally, in the form of rebellions, political. Peter Kolchin concurs, noting that these early rebellions were class-based, not racial. Even after the fluid continuum of servitude evolved into the slave-freeman dichotomy, the presence of free blacks frustrated division along purely racial lines. As Ira Berlin notes, "[u]nder the pressure of common conditions, poor blacks and whites became one." In urban areas, an "easy intimacy" joined free blacks and whites; interracial fraternization extended to all aspects of working-class life and even into the upper classes. "Against these ties," Berlin writes, "Southern leaders arrayed an ideology and a social system which asserted the supremacy of all whites over all blacks." Only with great persistence, much ingenuity, and the control of the legal apparatus was the white master class able to confine egalitarian relations to the margins of society and ensure that their reign—what they misleadingly called "white supremacy"—would remain secure.

Slavery: 1619-1863

It is important to know where the idea of a "black race" came from, but that is, of course, just a small part of the story. It is at least as important to know what was done with the idea, what history was made for—and within constraints, by—the "black race" in America.
The account offered here is pathetically short of comprehensive. It intentionally omits the more well-known features of "black" history, and inevitably—and sometimes unintentionally—omits significant portions of the less well-known features. It is, in sum, a decidedly partial account, but one that is, hopefully, instructive all the same.

The account begins with slavery, and with some statistics that may defy comprehension. The best estimates today are that nearly twelve million African slaves were shipped across the ocean during the Atlantic slave trade; roughly ten million survived the journey. The larger figure likely represents just half of those who were impressed in Africa: another twelve million died during their capture or transport to slave ships. Of those who made the voyage, roughly two-thirds were male; throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the overwhelming majority were adults. During the nineteenth century, however, the demographics somewhat changed: in the end, over 41 percent of the newly impressed slaves were children under the age of fifteen.

The first African servants—again, they may have been "slaves," but both the record and terminology are ambiguous—arrived in Virginia in 1619. Georgia, chartered in 1732, was the last American colony, and the last to receive slaves. By a law of 1735, Georgia prohibited the importation and use of slaves; its de facto governor, James Oglethorpe, declared slavery "against the Gospel, as well as the fundamental law of England." But the prohibition was likely designed merely to further the objectives of the colony as a haven for poor whites and a military buffer for southern colonies. The law was largely ignored, and in any event it was repealed in 1750.

According to the 1790 census, there were seven hundred thousand slaves, of a total national population of roughly four million; by 1830, despite the end of the slave trade, the number of slaves had escalated to two million; by 1860 it was nearly four million. In the immediate antebellum era, roughly one-fourth of all southern whites owned slaves; in the Deep South—Mississippi and South Carolina—fully half the whites were slaveholders.26

Leon Litwack reports that the "education acquired by each slave was remarkably uniform, consisting largely of lessons in survival and accommodation—the uses of humility, the virtues of ignorance, the arts of evasion, the subtleties of verbal intonation, the techniques by which feelings and emotions were marked, and the occasions that demanded
the flattering of white egos and the placating of white fears." Most slaves were illiterate, but almost all neighborhoods had some literate slaves, unknown to their masters.

The widespread assumption among slaveholders was of the slave’s "contentment, docility, or indifference," an assumption not much challenged by the abolitionist imagery of the black supplicant. The assumptions generated what Peter Parish has identified as one of slavery’s internal paradoxes: black acquiescence was demanded by white slaveholders, but then offered as a sign of black inferiority. Compounding the paradox, slave resistance was equally a sign of inferiority, confirming the impossibility of civilizing the "race."

And there was much resistance. Its more subtle forms included work slowdowns and stoppages; less subtle was the "theft" of consumable goods and the destruction of personal property, often through arson. More obvious still were outright rebellions. This last both provoked a genuine fear among the master class and provided a compelling rationale for "white" unity; accordingly, the fear of insurrection—and later of abolition—was deliberately propagated throughout the white population. Of somewhat less concern was an equally radical form of resistance: there is no way to ascertain the exact number, but it is clear that from the beginning, substantial numbers of slaves committed suicide.

Runaways presented their own peculiar problems for slaveholders, some of which were patently ideological. Henry Bibb was a Kentucky slave who escaped from his master, one Albert G. Sibley, sometime in the 1830s. In 1852 Bibb wrote the slaveholder, "It has now been about sixteen years since we saw each other face to face, and at which time you doubtless considered me inferior to yourself." But Bibb was now prepared to challenge the notion of racial inferiority and the standard argument that slavery was best for the race. "I have often heard you say that a slave . . . was better off than a 'free negro,'" Bibb wrote, but "in answer to this proslavery logic," Bibb suggested that "the slave who can take care of himself and master can certainly take care of himself alone." Bibb was living proof of his claim, and, like all "free blacks," an obvious challenge to the idea of the natural order.27

The number of free blacks had increased manifold after independence. Revolutionary ideology and Christian evangelicalism each played a role, and so too did the bondsmen’s own efforts, as they manumitted themselves informally by escaping, as well as formally by
spending their modest savings to purchase the freedom of their loved ones. By 1810 there were over one hundred thousand free blacks in the South, accounting for 5 percent of the free population and nearly 9 percent of all blacks. But slaves turned free at decreasing rates in each succeeding decade. By 1840, with most states requiring judicial or legislative permission to manumit slaves, the number of free blacks was increasing at a slower rate than the number of whites or slaves. By 1860 free blacks accounted for just 3 percent of the free southern population and 3 percent of all blacks.

Free blacks and some sympathetic whites were moved to establish integrated schools in the post-Revolution era, but by the turn of the century, a change in white attitudes forced most of the schools to close or segregate. Next to the church, the school became and remained the most important institution in the African American community; in fact, nearly every African church had a Sunday school, and most supported day schools. Over time, the black commitment to education only hardened white opposition to the potentially subversive enterprise; "whites," Berlin records, "moved quickly to stamp out many of the most promising black schools." Berlin recalls the story of one Christopher McPherson, a free black "of considerable talent and modest wealth," who in 1811 opened a night school in Richmond for free blacks and slaves whose masters would consent. After a flurry of educational success, Richmond officials moved to declare the school a nuisance, jailed McPherson, and shipped him off to the Williamsburg Lunatic Asylum.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the oppression of free blacks became more systematic and more extreme. Black workers were channeled by law and trade practices into marginal, stigmatized occupations, and even there they met racial discrimination and increasing competition from white wage laborers and slaves. Many made a comfortable living, but most were pushed into abject poverty. The distinction between slave and freeman became increasingly hazy, as "free" blacks were forced into debt peonage, cajoled into oppressive sharecropping schemes, impressed into servitude for failures to pay fines, taxes, fees, or even private debts, or simply kidnapped and sold into bondage. Free blacks—once, in Berlin's words, "slaves without masters"—found themselves increasingly the slaves of the state.

The North was no haven. Civil rights there were the exception, not the rule: only three states permitted black suffrage on terms equal
with whites, and only one state, Massachusetts, permitted black jurors. The discrimination not accomplished by law was achieved through custom and official encouragement or indifference: segregation was the norm in public conveyances, accommodations, and schools, and exclusion the convention in many occupations. The Jim Crow South of the late nineteenth century in fact had a working model in the antebellum North.

For free blacks in the South, meanwhile, the worst came in the antebellum era. The forces that in the same era had tempered slavery's more brutal aspects were of little benefit to free blacks. The slave's welfare was of real economic interest to the slaveholder; the free black was an economic threat. The black slave merely exemplified the natural order; the free black contradicted it. "The danger," Berlin writes, "was not only that slaves would learn this from the freemen's example, but that whites would." "Southerners," Berlin continues, "willing to defend to the death a society based on Negro slavery had no desire to live alongside blacks who were free." So they sought briefly to resolve the contradiction by enslaving the free black population. Between 1858 and 1860, nearly every southern legislature entertained measures providing for the forcible removal or enslavement of all free blacks. Interestingly, the proposals encountered significant opposition from many southerners—some on theoretical grounds, others for practical or personal reasons. The impending defeat of the Georgia proposal prompted a Savannah paper to issue this ironic plea: "Every day we hear our slaves pronounced the happiest people in the world. Why then this lamentation over putting the free negro in his only proper . . . condition?" The measures were gradually withdrawn; civil war, in any event, was at hand.28

Reconstruction: 1863-1877

The Cincinnati Enquirer offered its own lament in 1863, in response to the Emancipation Proclamation: "Slavery is dead, the negro is not, there is the misfortune."

As the paper explained, the misfortune was for all. For the slaveholders, Leon Litwack writes, "war and emancipation played upon and exacerbated white fears and fantasies that were as old as slavery itself." White slave owners, distressed by the wartime behavior of
slaves, decried the "numerous instances of ingratitude evinced in the African character"; "those we esteemed the most have been the first to desert us." The occasional report of violence by the slaves, or "former slaves"—the distinction was not often clear—aroused paranoid fears of mass insurrection and retribution; generally, slaveholders blamed the Yankees for stimulating "the foulest demoniac passions of the negro, hitherto so peaceful and happy." Even the many instances of slave fidelity, as slaves defended both the lives and property of their masters from Yankee harm, confused the white mind. Slaveholders puzzled over the "contradictory" behavior of their (former) bondsmen; "I am beginning," a Virginia woman sighed, "to lose confidence in the whole race." Only occasionally did the slaveholders perceive what might have been obvious to all; James Alcorn, a Mississippi planter, responded to the flight of his slave Hadley by recording in his journal, "I feel that had I been in his place I should have gone, so good bye Hadley, you have heretofore been faithful, that you should espouse your liberty but shows your sense." Most slaveholders reacted to such circumstances with outrage and contempt. Their attitudes toward the "freed slaves" were perhaps best summarized by the query of one southern woman: "If they don't belong to me," she puzzled, "whose are they?"

Emancipation elicited much ambivalence from the slaves, for whom, frankly, the proclamation often mattered little. In the absence of Union occupation, slavery remained very much a practical fact; those slaves who dared to assert their manumission experienced much oppression and retaliation for their "betrayals." Not until after Appomattox, when federal officials and soldiers were available to enforce emancipation, could the freedmen confidently celebrate in jubilees. Even then, it was not clear that it was time to celebrate. Toby Jones, a South Carolina slave, worked for years after emancipation under his master's command before fleeing to Texas with his bride-to-be. "I don't know as I 'spected nothing from freedom," Jones recalled, "but they turned us out like a bunch of stray dogs, no homes, no clothing, no nothing, not 'nough food to last us one meal."

Often, it was worse than that. Assisted by the "Black Codes," the southern master class was able to maintain a system of virtual slavery, this time unrestrained by economic concern for the welfare of the labor force. Violence against the freedmen was as much the rule as the exception. The precise numbers "beaten, flogged, mutilated, and
murdered in the first years of emancipation will never be known," Litwack reports. "Nor could any accurate body count or statistical breakdown reveal the barbaric savagery and depravity that characterized the assaults made on freedmen in the name of restraining their savagery and depravity." A mass assault on the black population of Memphis in 1866 cost the lives of forty-six black citizens and two white. The Memphis newspaper editorialized, "The negroes now know, to their sorrow, that it is best not to arouse the fury of the white man."

The Reconstruction state legislatures and federal government provided some measure of relief, and briefly suggested a move to a genuinely multi-racial community. Under Republican control, the Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina legislatures repealed their antimiscegenation laws. The South Carolina legislature, the only one composed of a black majority, made that state the first in the nation to offer a free public education to all its citizens. Other Reconstruction legislatures moved to equalize their schemes of taxation and improve the bargaining power of agrarian labor. At the federal level, three constitutional amendments and a series of enforcement acts were designed to pursue legal, political, and—in the Civil Rights Act of 1875—what Democrats universally denounced as "social" equality.29

The most progressive Republicans of the Reconstruction era were indeed "Radicals" in one limited but vital sense: they sought to erase the color line. They did not broadly pursue the radical egalitarian goal of "social equality," nor did they pursue the radical democratic goal of universal suffrage. Many of them, after all, quite likely believed that people were not, as individuals, all that equal; "social" and "political" equality were, in this sense, unattainable. Many did not believe, on the other hand, that the "races" were necessarily unequal. What they sought was the elimination of artificial "racial" constraints on individual merit; from this "equality under law," a real justice, a natural justice, would then follow. But they miscalculated: the roots of "race" were deeper than they perceived, and their own time was much shorter.

For Reconstruction was not to last. By the time the federal garrison was withdrawn in 1877, most southern legislatures were already controlled by Bourbon Democrats. The old order would be shortly "redeemed"; the color line was secure.
In 1877 the Republicans traded the freedmen's security for the White House; southern Democrats were thrilled by the deal. Democratic control of the new southern legislatures was not, however, a given, thus the Bourbons actively courted the black vote during the early years of Redemption. Once they had secured power, they quickly moved to disenfranchise the black population. In the 1890s a biracial populism emerged throughout the South, but the ruling Democrats, with the assistance of Northern Republicans, stemmed the tide of rebellion. Frustrated by political failure and economic depression, the white Populists—with no little encouragement from their former adversaries—turned, in John Egerton's words, with "reactionary fury" against their black compatriots. Thus, in the span of a generation, Republicans, Democrats, and Populists had each in succession courted, exploited, and then abandoned black southerners.

The limited gains of Reconstruction were systematically undone. The case of Berea College offers a study in microcosm. The school's formal mission was "to break down the caste of race," and in the 1880s it was thoroughly integrated. Its president, Edward H. Fairchild, reported of the school's black students that there was "no essential difference, other things being equal, between their standing and that of the white students." But Fairchild died in 1889, and his successor was determined to increase Berea's white enrollment, even if it meant occasionally catering to white racial prejudice. The result was an increasingly white, and increasingly segregated, school. In spite of this change, or perhaps because of it, the Kentucky legislature determined in 1904 to formally segregate all of its private institutions of learning; Berea was its obvious target. Ridiculing the Berea mission statement, one Kentucky legislator declared, "If there is one thing clear about the designs of Providence it is that the 'caste of race' shall be preserved." The bill became law, and the college challenged it all the way to the Supreme Court.

In 1908 the Court sustained the law; the college, Justice David Brewer wrote, "had no natural right to teach at all," and hence was subject to whatever conditions the state should impose. Kentuckian John Marshall Harlan dissented:
If pupils, of whatever race... choose, with the consent of their parents, or voluntarily, to sit together in a private institution of learning while receiving instruction which is not in its nature harmful or dangerous to the public, no government, whether Federal or state, can legally forbid their coming together, or being together temporarily, for such an innocent purpose.

Harlan decried the "mischievous, not to say cruel, character of the statute in question." "Have we become," he asked, "so inoculated with prejudice of race that an American government, professedly based on the principles of freedom, and charged with the protection of all citizens alike, can make distinctions between such citizens in the matter of their voluntary meeting for innocent purposes, simply because of their respective races?" It was intended to be a rhetorical question, but the obvious answer was not the one Harlan had hoped for.

Black Americans continued their struggle for equality. "Historians," George M. Fredrickson writes, "have only recently begun to uncover the record of black assertiveness after Reconstruction that made state action necessary to guarantee white prerogatives." But the boycotts and protests brought only more oppression, some of it through the law, some of it outside the law, much of it in forms that defied the distinction. Jim Crow was all-pervasive, the white commitment to it passionate, and in the absence of federal intervention, it was quite secure.

In the face of such relentless hostility, some black Americans resigned themselves to "separate," but determined to achieve at least some form of "equal." The New England-style classical education offered by the black missionary colleges throughout the South seemed futile to some, in light of the practical and legal obstacles confronting black Americans. Samuel C. Armstrong at Hampton had pioneered the idea of an industrial education for black Americans, and it was soon championed by his protégé, Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee. In an 1895 speech at the Cotton States Exposition of Industry and Arts in Atlanta, Washington assured the white members of his audience that, just as in the past, "in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you." "In all things that are purely social," he offered, "we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to human progress."
Washington became, by white acclamation, the "voice of his people." Behind the scenes, his reform efforts often went considerably beyond the very moderate public positions he staked out for his white audiences. Still, those positions mattered, and the line between moderation and accommodation seemed to some critics a very fine one, and that between accommodation and surrender a finer one still. The most significant response to Washington came in 1905. The Niagara Movement Address demanded "political rights" and "civil rights" for black Americans, protested the "denial of equal opportunities . . . in economic life," and advocated reforms in both educational policy and labor practices. W. E. B. Du Bois emerged as the movement's leader and the more radical counterpoint to Washington. Du Bois denounced accommodation, insisted that the black race was capable of its own greatness, and promoted the notion of a black intellectual vanguard (he adopted Henry L. Morehouse's term, the "talented tenth") to help lead the way.

Each approach had its pitfalls. Du Bois's own form of romantic racialism was easily perverted by white supremacists, who saw in his work a glorification of racial attributes rather than a celebration of cultural achievements. Even Du Bois himself was, in those early years, unable to completely escape the biological determinism of his day: Du Bois's vanguard was composed of a very natural elite. We must acknowledge, he insisted in a 1900 speech, "the fact of human inequality and differences of capacity"; "there are men born to rule, born to think, born to contrive, born to persuade." Only later in his career would Du Bois emphasize that "comparatively few have, under our present economic and social organization, had a chance to show their capabilities."

But the hazards of accommodation were much greater. "Separate" was never "equal," but served only, as Fredrickson writes, to "mystify the process of racial domination and permit the illusion of justice and fairness." That illusion was a thin one. In 1909 the southern states spent an average of 2.5 times as much on the per capita education of white children as they did on black children; in 1915, after six more years of accommodation, they were spending 3.5 times as much. In 1932 North Carolina, widely reputed to be among the most progressive southern states in matters of education, maintained white schools with a per capita value five times as great as that of the black schools. As late as 1946, the state was spending three times as much for the
education of its white children as it spent on the education of its black children.

The "black" schools compensated in other ways. Vanessa Siddle Walker's study of North Carolina's Caswell County Training School notes that educators there "forged a system of schooling that emphasized the importance of teacher/student relationships, valued activities as a key means of developing the students' many talents, and believed in the children's ability to learn and their own ability to teach." The community donated resources, and "caring adults gave individual concern, [and] personal time." Throughout the segregation era, Caswell County and the other black schools would lag well behind the white schools in material resources; but there was here, Walker notes, no "poverty of spirit." 

Reconstruction Reborn: 1941-1948

As George Fredrickson suggests, A. Philip Randolph's 1941 March on Washington Movement was in many respects the first significant national political movement of black Americans. Randolph made a conscious decision to exclude whites from the movement, in part due to his fear of white communist control (Randolph had disassociated himself from that movement in 1940), but also to ensure black solidarity. Black control, Randolph insisted, "helps break down the slave psychology and inferiority complex in Negroes which comes with Negroes relying on white people for direction and support."

The movement achieved little in the way of material success, but it brought prominence to Randolph and to a new generation of civil rights advocacy and advocates. In 1944 the University of North Carolina Press published *What the Negro Wants*, a collection of essays by a cross-section of these advocates: it featured contributions from, among others, Randolph, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Langston Hughes. Representative was the essay by the still vital Du Bois; what the "negro" wants, Du Bois advised, was nothing less than "full economic, political, and social equality."

That these were still a great distance away was made plain by another work published that year, Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*. The Swedish social scientist, working with a research team of over one hundred scholars (including Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin
Frazier, Guy Johnson, and, as a consultant, Du Bois), painstakingly documented the details of American racial discrimination. Myrdal described a "vicious circle" of racism, in which perceived inferiority justified discrimination, which in turn perpetuated the inferiority (both "real" and perceived, to whatever extent these differ). Significantly, Myrdal noted that the justifications for racial caste—that blacks like to be separate, that segregation avoids friction, that separation is natural—were now clearly disingenuous; racial oppression was rarely defended for what it was, a way to preserve white interests. Myrdal exposed the shallowness of the centuries-old cry "no social equality": "the term," he noted, "is kept vague and elusive, and the theory loose and ambiguous." "The very lack of precision," he concluded, "allows the notion of 'social equality' to rationalize the rather illogical and wavering system of color caste in America."

Not everyone perceived the same problems: according to a 1946 survey, two-thirds of all white Americans believed that blacks were "treated fairly" in American society.

In 1947 John Hope Franklin published his remarkable social history, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. Like Du Bois's history of Reconstruction, or Carter Woodson's history "from the ground up," Franklin determinedly demonstrated the accomplishments of a people who were denied the opportunity "to make significant achievements in the usual sense of the word." Echoing Du Bois and confirming Myrdal, Franklin vividly described the separate and unequal "two worlds of race." "In a nation dedicated to the idea of the essential equality of mankind," Franklin concluded, the continued existence of a segregated black community constituted "one of the remarkable social anomalies of the twentieth century."

In June of that same year, the president of the United States addressed the annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. To a crowd of ten thousand, Harry Truman promised protection not only from government, but by the government. In October the President's Committee on Civil Rights explicitly called for an end to segregation, denouncing separate but equal as "one of the outstanding myths of American history." In December the President's Commission on Higher Education issued its report, "Higher Education for American Democracy." Segregation, the report concluded, "contravenes the equalitarian spirit of the American heritage." Just
three of the twenty-seven members dissented: the efforts to ensure equality, they insisted, must "be made within the established patterns of social relations, which require separate educational institutions for whites and Negroes." In 1948, as Congress was contemplating a peacetime draft, A. Philip Randolph testified before that body against the continuance of racial segregation in the military. Randolph did not need to wait for a congressional response; Truman ordered the desegregation of the military shortly before the presidential election.

Truman's overtures were too much for many southern Democrats. The Dixiecrats bolted the party and formed their own. The keynote address at the States' Rights Party convention denounced Truman's initiatives, which threatened "to reduce us to the state of a mongrel, inferior race." The party nominated South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond to be its flagbearer. Throughout his campaign, Thurmond defended racial segregation as a matter of principle: it was merely a question of "state's rights." Everyone knew, of course, that it was much more than that. Some things, it seemed, would never change.

Truman barely eeked out his upset victory over his Republican opponent, Thomas Dewey. But in the South, Truman defeated both Dewey and Thurmond by margins in excess of two to one. And it was not merely the "black" vote that provided the margin: barely 10 percent of the voting-age black southerners were permitted to cast ballots in the 1948 presidential election. Not everything had changed, but some things clearly had, and there was more to come.33

Contemporary Meanings

There are many signs of continued change. The percentage of white Americans between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine who had completed at least twelve years of education increased from 40 percent in 1940 to 65 percent in 1965 to 86 percent in 1987; the percentage of black Americans in the same category increased from only 12 percent in 1940 to 50 percent in 1965 to 83 percent in 1987, nearly at parity with whites.

Within the schools, the achievement gap between black and white Americans, as measured by standardized tests of achievement, has narrowed substantially: the math gap was reduced 25 to 40 percent during the seventies and eighties alone, the science gap 15 to 25
percent, and the reading gap by half. Regional analyses suggest that the achievement gap has seen particularly significant reduction in the Southeast, due in part, no doubt, to desegregation. As Martin Carnoy observes, these advances are all the more impressive since they occurred: first, when the percentage of black Americans graduating from high school was increasing; and second, during a time when the demands on public education—due to increasing poverty, and reduced parental and public support—have reached near-crisis proportions.34

Some of the signs are, on the surface, ambiguous. In 1967, 34.5 percent of white Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four were in institutions of higher education, as compared to just 23.3 percent of black Americans; by 1977, however, near parity had been achieved: 32.3 percent of those white Americans were in college, and so too were 31.3 percent of black Americans. By 1991, however, the gap had ballooned: fully 41.0 percent of those white young adults were in college, but just 28.2 percent of the black young adults. Despite the increase in the number of black high school graduates during the eighties, that decade also saw a decline in the absolute number of black recipients of bachelor’s degrees. By 1994, then, about 23 percent of all eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old high school graduates were American Indian, Latino, or African American, but students from those groups constituted just 16 percent of all students at four-year colleges, and just 12 percent of all students at colleges that were not historically black or Latino.35

Some signs are distressingly familiar. The black-white economic gap closed substantially during the mid century, but the gap stabilized in the mid-seventies and has now again widened. Today, one in seven white Americans lives in poverty, but so too does one in three black Americans. The poverty rate among white children is a distressing 13 percent; among black children it is an unconscionable 46 percent. America’s white citizens average roughly twice the income of its black citizens; its black citizens are unemployed at over twice the rate. The median net worth of white Americans is more than ten times that of black Americans. Black Americans account for 12 percent of the population, but just 10 percent of the labor force; they constitute 31 percent of all nursing aides but just 1.5 percent of all dentists; 30 percent of all domestic servants but just 2.6 percent of all lawyers; 28 percent of all postal clerks but just 1.5 percent of all pilots; 21 percent of all janitors but just 2.1 percent of all architects.36
Part of the gap may be due to an emerging college barrier. The percentage of black high school graduates from families with annual incomes under $10,000 rose from 27 percent in 1968-73 to 35 percent in 1980-85; for white graduates it remained constant at 9-10 percent. Black graduates unable to attend college but able to find work are almost invariably consigned to positions where wages are declining: wages, on the whole, have fallen more than 15 percent for black Americans since the early 1970s.37

Part of the gap may be due to continuing disparities in the delivery of education. Substantial funding disparities between "poor" and "wealthy" districts have been documented by the courts, by the United States Congress, and, in a narrative that conveys the tragedy behind the numbers, Jonathan Kozol's Savage Inequalities. Not surprisingly, the "poor" districts are disproportionately populated by racial minorities. Economists David Card and Alan Krueger have demonstrated the connection between education and income: spending per pupil translates into future earnings for the student. Meanwhile, total spending on public education increased 70 percent—5.4 percent annually—from 1960 to 1970, but during the next two decades, growth fell by half, to 35 percent, or roughly 3 percent annually. It is a compound irony: the schools that need the most get the least, when they need it most.

Part of the gap may be due to a resurgence in conventional racial discrimination. Carnoy estimates that wage discrimination was roughly halved in the quarter century 1959-84, but is now on the rise again. The expanded wage differential remains even after non-racial variables—economic sector, region, education and work experience, marital status, and hours and weeks of labor—are controlled for. A 1991 study by the Urban Institute also suggests that old-fashioned racial bias is very much alive: among carefully controlled and matched job applicants, white applicants were three times more likely to advance through the screening stages of the hiring process, and three times more likely to be offered jobs.

Part of the gap may be due to governmental "downsizing." The reduction in governmental services and payrolls reduces not merely a source of public benefits, which are disproportionately needed by black Americans, but also reduces a significant source of wages. As Carnoy notes, a higher percentage of black Americans are employed in the public sector than are whites, and black Americans encounter less
discrimination—and thus higher pay—in government jobs than they do in the private sector.

Part of the gap is deeply structural: a racialized division of education and labor perpetually limits advancement. Sharon M. Collins's examination of black executives in Chicago is illustrative. She describes a circular relationship between occupational aptitudes and experience—"human capital"—and the structure of management positions: "A race-based system of job allocation creates a deficit in on-the-job training and experience, and this structurally imposed deficit, in turn, leads to human capital deficits that create barriers to black advancement." 38

There are other disturbing signs. A recent study of excess mortality rates notes that "[d]eath rates for those between the ages of 5 and 65 were worse in Harlem than in Bangladesh." The root causes of this mortality rate, the study concluded, were "vicious poverty and inadequate access to the basic health care that is the right of all Americans." Harlem's population is 96 percent black. The situation in Harlem is not an isolated phenomenon: researchers found "strikingly higher rates of death and disease in Philadelphia's poorer communities," communities that, coincidentally, had the highest concentrations of nonwhite residents. Nationally, mortality among black women between the ages of fifteen and sixty is 79 percent higher than among white women. American white men have a 16 percent probability of dying between the ages of fifteen and sixty; American black men have a 30.3 percent probability, a level in excess of the mortality rates among men in some of the poorest developing nations in the world. The infant mortality rate is twice as high for black Americans as for whites.

Racial ghettos are yet another sign that some things have yet to change. Approximately one-third of all poor black Americans live in substandard housing, roughly 2.5 times the proportion of poor white Americans living in such conditions. A recent analysis of the 1990 census concludes that "the majority of the nation's 30 million black people are as segregated now as they were at the height of the civil rights movement in the '60s."

George Fredrickson's comparative study of the "Black Liberation" movements in South Africa and the United States concludes this way:
Despite the problems that remain, black South Africans have thrown off the shackles of white domination and have achieved genuine self-determination, while African-Americans remain at the mercy of a white majority that remains racist—not in the old-fashioned sense of openly advocating the legal subordination of blacks, but in the new sense of denying the palpable fact that blacks as a group suffer from real disadvantages in American society and will continue to do so unless radical action is taken.39

One vital part of this radical action might be to accept Fredrickson’s premise: to acknowledge the continuing truth of racial advantage and disadvantage, and to abandon the pretense that it is inevitable, acceptable, or natural. Merely to do so is to comprehend—and overcome—the "new" racism.

"Racism" in America

Recognizing the political nature of "race" suggests this ultimate conclusion: in America, "race" and "racism" are one and the same. "Race" is the history constructed by racism; "racism" is simply a convenient name to give the process of construction.

The story of race in America, then, is substantially a story of racism. But not racism, it must be emphasized, in the conventional sense, as overt racial animus and bigotry. There has been, of course, plenty of that. But the politics of race goes beyond overt acts of hatred and personal psychopathology. The process of race-making—"race"-ism—transcends the individual, even as it partly constitutes him.

Racism is the distorted way we perceive race and the distorted perceptions of us as racial beings. It is the systematic and systematized failure to recognize the realities of "race," in ourselves as well as others. Racism thus embraces not only the continued tendency to make of race what it is not, something biological, immutable, and inferior; racism embraces as well the refusal to recognize what race is, a powerfully significant social and political reality. These have predominated at different times, but they are flip sides of the same coin. The rhetoric of natural racial inferiority has yielded to a rhetoric of "color blindness" and "race-neutrality," but these separate assertions
are equally deluded, equally unrealistic, and equally harmful. Both explicitly deny what "race" is, and inevitably deceive us into believing that "race" is something that it is not. Both are equally race-ist.

Our conventional understanding of racism, like our understanding of race, has tended to obscure these points. At first, we believed that racism, like race, was natural: it was something instinctive, something normal, something inevitable. Later we saw that racism was not natural at all: it was learned, it was pathological, and it could be changed. But even this later conception was preoccupied with the individual, with curing his psychopathology. But psychology is no more adequate to fully comprehend racism than was the biology that preceded it. Racism, after all, is not something that is in some of us; racism, rather, is something that partly defines all of us. We are all, as Du Bois put it, "entombed" in race.40

Racism rewards some of us with advantages; it burdens some of us with disadvantages. And racism makes it hard to see them both.

Rejecting the Naturalistic Conception

Louisiana's "separate but equal" law, the Supreme Court told us in Plessy v. Ferguson, was no more than the codification of our innate racial animosity. To insist on integration—or "social equality"—was to defy nature: "If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals. Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts, or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences." Nothing in the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equality could change this biological truth. Only Justice Harlan saw what now seems obvious: the compulsory segregation of the races did not simply recognize the natural racial order, it created an artificial one. Racism was not natural, it was generated—by laws such as this.

Thomas Pearce Bailey was among the first prominent southerners to concur. In 1914 the former Memphis superintendent of schools, and then dean of the Education Department at the University of Mississippi, published Race Orthodoxy in the Old South. "The real problem is not the negro," Bailey wrote, "but the white man's attitude toward the negro."41
In the Nature of Things: Myths of Race and Racism

And this was not natural either. Franz Boas made this clear: in undermining the concept of "race," Boas also exposed the myth of racism. "The differences of cultural outlook and of bodily appearance," Boas observed, "have given rise to antagonisms that are rationalized as due to instinctive racial antipathies." But without "race" there could be no such "racism": "The basis of race consciousness and race antipathies is the dogmatic belief in the existence of well-defined races all the members of which possess the same fundamental bodily and mental characters."

Moreover, Boas observed that "race antipathy among different groups of mankind takes distinctive forms and expresses itself with varying intensity"; "we may doubt," he thus concluded, "whether we are dealing with instinctive phenomena."

What, then, was the explanation for "racism"? For Boas, it was to be found in the coincidence—carefully perpetuated—of two factors: visible difference and attendant social consequences. As Boas explained, "The first view of an entirely foreign type is likely to impress us with consciousness of contrast, that may well take the form of antipathy." But this did not necessarily persist: "Constant familiarity with strange types modifies our standards to such an extent that the consciousness of contrast becomes very slight."

The great difficulty arose only when the apparent differences coincided with social differences. "When social divisions follow racial lines, as they do among ourselves, the degree of difference between racial forms is an important element in establishing racial groups and in accentuating racial conflicts." "As long as the social groups are racial groups," Boas concluded, "we shall also encounter the desire for racial purity."

If racism was the product of the coincidence of differences in appearance and social status, then disrupting that coincidence—through, for example, the social integration of the different "races"—would seem to end racism. As Boas wrote,

It follows that the 'instinctive' race antipathy can be broken down, if we succeed in creating among young children social groups that are not divided according to the principles of race and which have principles of cohesion that weld the group into a whole. Under the pressure of present popular feeling it will not be easy to establish such groups. Nevertheless, cultural coöperation cannot be reached without it.⁴²
Boas's work was in fact part of an evolving tradition. The abolitionists had argued that prejudice was the result of status or condition, and so too had many of the advocates of congressional Reconstruction. In 1884 T. Thomas Fortune's *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Capital in the South* urged both a biracial labor coalition and an independent black economic effort, in the belief that the economic elevation of black Americans would end racial prejudice. Booker Washington was essentially following the same logic in urging an independent black capitalism: when blacks can demonstrate a prosperity comparable to whites, he reasoned, they will be treated by whites as equals.

But racism was more than simply prejudice against status or condition, more than just another manifestation of contempt for the poor. Racism, after all, added another feature, "race," and that feature, over time, had acquired extraordinary significance, if only as an unconscious proxy for class. William I. Thomas of the University of Chicago wrote in 1904 that "race" prejudice itself was prompted "primarily by the physical aspect of an unfamiliar people," and, as such, it was not a terribly significant phenomenon. "When not complicated by caste-feeling," Thomas wrote, "race prejudice is after all very impermanent, of no more stability, perhaps, than fashion." The difficulty, as Boas saw, was that race prejudice was now complicated by "caste-feeling"; what he might have seen, in fact, was that "race" was now incomprehensible without caste.

The stubborn persistence of racial prejudice through the first half of the twentieth century presented a superficial challenge to those who had insisted that prejudice would disintegrate with the elevation of black America's status or condition. Of course, the short answer was that black America's status had not changed all that much; even today, it takes more than just "color blindness" not to see the reality of racial caste. But the deeper answer was that it was becoming almost impossible to achieve Boas's project of disengaging "race" and "caste": the coincidence of "race" and "caste" was now being reproduced by American society without much conscious effort. Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* made the point: "We consider the social differentiation between Negroes and Whites as based on tradition." And tradition, like nature before it, seemed both normal and inevitable. It was difficult, as a consequence, to see tradition's bias, to see the color of tradition. But some could see it, even then: "The Negro problem,"
Myrdal concluded, echoing Thomas Pearce Bailey, "is primarily a white man's problem."43

Rejecting the Individualistic Conception

Even today the persistence of racism remains something of a mystery. If racism is neither innate nor inevitable, why—after emancipation, Reconstruction, and yet a second Reconstruction—does the color line persist?

The initial response is that, in some sense, it might not: the color line that divides white and black America today is in some ways demonstrably less distinct and rigid than the one that has historically prevailed. A recent survey of the evidence on racial attitudes concludes that, at least in what they say, "white Americans are gradually becoming less prejudiced and more egalitarian." Over the past four decades, negative stereotypes of black Americans have consistently faded, while pro-integration sentiments have consistently risen. By 1980 over 90 percent of white northerners and 75 percent of white southerners supported school integration; by 1982 the support for integration was at 90 percent for the entire national sample. A slightly earlier survey, done in 1978, indicated that roughly three-quarters of the general white population had no objection to their child being in a school where half the children were black; over 40 percent had no objection if a majority of the children were black. In a 1988 survey, more whites reported that they would prefer to live in a neighborhood racially mixed "half and half" than in a neighborhood with "mostly whites."

But there are reasons to be cautious. The surveys consistently reveal that a significant minority in the white population—roughly 20 percent—continues to exhibit traditional racial prejudice, either embracing the old, invidious stereotypes or declaring an overt hostility. Moreover, there are undeniable indications of ambivalence in the surveys, indications that racial prejudice persists among white Americans, but in more subtle forms, what some have called a "new" racism.44

Today, of course, it is easy to invoke race without being explicit: such is the undeniable cultural power of the construction. Strom Thurmond avoided references to "race" in his presidential campaign of
1948, but the meaning of "states' rights" and "tradition" were clear enough. Richard Nixon could be more subtle in his "Southern Strategy" twenty years later: "busing" and "crime" did the trick for him. Ronald Reagan evoked the specter of a "welfare queen" and George Bush flashed the actual image of one Willie Horton and neither had to mention race to get their message across. The text of Jesse Helms's "white hands" ad—which showed merely a pair of white hands crumbling a job rejection letter—was "race-neutral": "quota bills" are bad because they punish the folks who deserve the jobs. Racial competition was merely the subtext, racial hierarchy the context, and lingering just below the surface was the imperfect image of the undeserving black—unqualified, incompetent, inferior. No one has to use the "r" word: it's just about being fair to the individual.

But it is important to recognize in all events that racism, old or new, is not fairly attributable merely to individual pathology. The cognitive processes that provide the foundation for individual racial prejudice—the ability to differentiate—is, as Boas noted, both normal and quite benign. But while the individual may have an innate ability to differentiate based on "race," it is principally the work of cultural influences that makes "race" salient in particularized contexts. Thus "race," itself a social construction, evokes principally the attitudes and attributes developed for "race" by social processes. These may be, as Boas suggested, not so much based on "race" itself, but rather the attitudes and attributes that are otherwise associated with social "class" or "caste"; but since, as Boas knew, we made "race" as a social caste, the distinction is unknowable and practically insignificant.

Social processes are vital in an additional way: it is social norms that make specific differentiating behaviors either more or less acceptable. The norm, for example, that permits a preference for persons who are subjectively similar need not be accompanied by a comparable norm for disliking persons who are "different"; indeed, research indicates that biased positive attitudes (by, for example, whites in favor of whites) are not invariably accompanied by equally biased negative attitudes (by, for example, whites against blacks). Specific negative responses to differentiating characteristics seem to find expression where they appear to enjoy social sanction. "Racism" is perpetuated, in this sense, by its own long-standing tradition.

Consistent with these understandings, evidence suggests that racism can be "unlearned" through the meaningful engagement of countervail-
The epistemological premises for racist behavior, for example, can be refuted, as Boas predicted, through interracial learning: when it is clear that the real meanings of "race" are social and not biological, the negative racial schema is substantially undone. Significantly, such a result cannot be obtained merely through the insistence on "color blindness." Rather, the insistence that "race" has no contemporary meaning resolves the impossible dissonance between the reality of racial caste and society's egalitarian ideals only through denial. "Race," after all, does not lose its salience through mere proclamation; one unfortunate consequence of such inauthentic attempts to resolve the dissonance may actually be the entrenchment of racist beliefs. "So today more than ever," write Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies."

The proclamation of competing moral truths can also counter racist attitudes, but, at this normative level, they must directly challenge the norms on which racism is constructed. Research suggests that appeals to the ethic of individualism do not meet the moral challenge; on the contrary, this ethic seems positively correlated with negative racial attitudes and behavior, including a failure of interracial empathy and a tendency to discount the effects of racial discrimination. The reinforcement of the individualist ethos may actually exacerbate negative race-related tendencies. As Michael L. Blakey writes, "Individualism contributes to ahistorical and social context-free explanations of inequality, to overly narrow definitions of racial discrimination (as merely racial epithets or other openly racist personal acts), to victim blame, and to the denial of institutional racism and racially linked class barriers."

The set of norms that does appear to provide an effective counter to racist tendencies is that which includes principles of fairness and equality. But these norms are comparatively abstract and complex and, perhaps as a consequence, apparently fragile. Modern racism, in fact, does not so much confront these norms as elude them. The effectiveness of egalitarian norms thus apparently depends on their presentation in clear and unambiguous terms; when the divorce between the norm and the racist behavior is made clear, the modern subject, who may not recognize the behavior as racist, can and does reject the behavior in favor of the egalitarian norm.45
It is worth reiterating, however, that the norm and its applications must be unambiguous. The most significant feature of American racism has always been its ability to assimilate some conception of the egalitarian framework while avoiding the implications of the mandate for specific contexts. In an earlier day, this evasion typically took the form of the hideous fiction of "natural" inferiority. Today, it is more likely to take the form of the equally hideous fiction of the "color-blind" society. The assumptions, in either case, are essentially the same: "we"—the government, society, the white race, me and mine—are not responsible for the inequality. We are "neutral"; the inequality must be "natural."

Inherent here is the final deficiency of the individualistic model of "racism": it assumes that all racist behavior is the result of deliberate, conscious, willful hostility. But these behaviors are merely the tip of the iceberg. Much contemporary "racism" can barely be captured by the concept, so much of it is sub- or unconscious, structural or institutional, that it hardly seems "racist" at all. But in its pretenses to neutrality, in its blindness—willful or otherwise—to its biases, it is racist indeed.

So what is race? "The truth is," Anthony Appiah has written, "that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask 'race' to do for us." But if there can be no "race," there nonetheless are, as Appiah notes, "civilizations where we now speak of races." It is in that context that "race" demands definition, or rather, definitions: definitions that reflect insight into the forces that construct "race" without blindly perpetuating the need for it. "Race," after all, is, in Edward Said's words, "the product of human work." It is made; it can be re-made.

We do not talk enough about the way that we—as Americans—have made "race." If we ignore the story of its origins, the color line between us becomes an evolutionary truth, rooted in some undiscoverable primal moment, shaped perhaps by unalterable tribal instincts. Forged this way by the mysterious forces of creation, the story of racism becomes at once too profound and too elusive to tell. The story, in some important ways, also becomes irrelevant, and the sense of relief is compounded by the realization that the otherwise painful
history is not one of "our" making: it just happened, it's nobody's fault, and it's nobody's responsibility.

But there is a story to tell, and it contains some embarrassing truths for those who today deny its relevance. And if the story is painful to hear, it is nonetheless an ultimately empowering one, for it suggests that the racism that pervades America's soul is no less an artifact than the laws that formalize it; and that the promises of Reconstruction—challenged as they have been by nullification and interposition, by obstinacy and avoidance, and now by the resanctification of "private" decision making and economics—remain today both viable and fully realizable. As Frederick Douglass said of slavery over a century ago, "[W]hat man can make, man can unmake"; "race"-ism, the history suggests, is for us now to unmake.46

We might begin by rejecting its myths: that "race" is natural; that the processes of responding to race "differences" are natural. And this myth as well: that the resultant hierarchy reflects not merely "natural" differences, but "neutral" valuations of human worth. That is the myth of merit.