

Some thoughts on Ashley Montagu

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A MOST PUBLIC FACE: PAPERS IN HONOR OF ASHLEY MONTAGU
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When I learned from Susan Sperling that Ashley Montagu had died, I said kaddish for him. Not out of any deep religious beliefs on my part, or deep religious beliefs on his part, but because I thought he would have liked it, given the ambiguities of his life. And Ashley Montagu was an extraordinarily ambiguous man.

Ambiguously Jewish – having led his adult life as a non-Jew
Ambiguously Gentile – having been born a Jew, a fact seized on with glee by his racist enemies.
Ambiguously upper-class English
Ambiguously American
Ambiguously a physical Anthropologist – rejected, if not blacklisted, by that professional community
Ambiguously a cultural anthropologist – not being a fieldworker
And Ambiguously gendered – what an odd name!

I wish I had met Montagu earlier in his career, and gotten a glimpse of the Montagu unknown to the panelists here, the one of whom Earnest Hooton wrote to Robert Yerkes in 1943:

I am afraid that this young man has the unfortunate effect of irritating nearly everyone with whom he comes in contact.

That was an extraordinary indictment shared between two major power brokers. Ultimately of course Montagu would become a brilliant evangelist for anthropology, irritating the rest of the world in productive ways, some more subtle than others.

In preparing these comments I picked up an old paperback of Montagu's from 1958, called "The Cultured Man" – deliberately using "culture" in the ambiguously non-anthropological sense. It consists of a series of quizzes to see how cultured you are, exercise in self-improvement.

Needless to say I scored about the level of a marmoset.

But if you turn to the anthropology quiz on page 76, you find questions like #13, Who wrote *The Mind of Primitive Man*? Or #18, What is meant by cultural relativism?

And then you get to question #28: Should anthropology be taught in our schools?

Ummmmm....yes?

And you turn to the answer on page 150: "Anthropology... should form the core of every curriculum."

Yeah, okay, nice and subversive.

Now there's a couple of things I'd like to raise briefly because they do relate to several of the presentations this morning.

One might be Montagu's most misunderstood position, perhaps his greatest failure. That is the substitution of the term "ethnic group" for the term "race". A recommendation of lexical authoritarianism, which I think goes back initially to Huxley and Haddon's 1936 book, *We Europeans*, a more influential work than is generally acknowledged.

Now, talking about ethnic groups would certainly have a salutary effect – again, not widely acknowledged – that "racial" issues transcend biology – they are issues of equality, rights, opportunities, and prejudices. The issues faced by the black "race" were also those faced by the Jewish, Irish, Italian, gay, Hispanic, and female non-races. So talking about "race" in that context was the obscuring factor, for it made biology look like a key variable in what was properly a social and political discourse. "Ethnicity" becomes a way of preserving group membership and identity, as well as all the obvious cultural markers of speech, dress, diet, and body language, while keeping the focus on the common thread of prejudice and opportunity.

"Race" was revealed to be merely a vehicle for naturalizing inequality; for laying social and political evils at the foot of Mother Nature.

To me it is fascinating to imagine that getting rid of the word race would do some good, by a guy who had written a book on *The Natural History of Swearing*. Banning the word doesn't get to the heart of the problem. The word isn't the problem, the concept is the problem.

There's a nice analogy to be made here as a counter-example. Many of Montagu's books have an archaic ring to their titles, using "man" as a generic term for the species, like *Anthropology as the Science of Man*, and *Man: His first Million Years*, something that has been eradicated in our lifetimes, and which marks the speaker now as either an old fart, or British.

It wasn't a result of the vocabulary police, but those of us educated with women as academic role models recognized how silly it sounds, like nails on a blackboard. That's what never happened with race.

Anyway, to wind up, I was reading a collection of Montagu's essays called *The Humanization of Man*. And it raised a number of interesting questions: In addition to the obvious ones, race and gender – things like privacy, love, civilization, human nature (a concept abandoned by anthropology, and claimed vacuously by sociobiology).

And the thought I had as I was reading the collection was, Gee I wish I had written that.

And then I remembered, Oh wait, I still can.

Of course, I mean that in the nice sense, building on Montagu's vision of anthropology as a humanistic, intellectual, useful field, and bringing it forward to a new generation and a new millennium.