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Grand anthropological themes

COMMENTARY

Some years ago I was conversing with a geneticist who was interested in, and was mildly irked by, the emerging interest of anthropologists in genetics as an ethnographic subject. After all, he asked, was it not against the interests of science education to have students relativize—or, more significantly, to question the correctness of—what they are taught? I replied that it kind of depends on how one conceptualizes the overarching goal of science education, and that maybe it was valuable to have students look at the interests of power and ideology in framing science, to recognize and analyze dominant metaphors, and to distinguish the literary from the literal. Obvious examples of important metaphors, such as Charles Darwin’s “natural selection” and Erwin Schrödinger’s “genetic code,” came readily to mind. As I spoke, however, the geneticist grew wide-eyed and finally sputtered, “But it *really is* a code!”

What Stephan Palmié’s article (this issue) brings home to me is the appreciation that, however diverse our training and specializations may be, certain themes unify anthropologists intellectually. Kinship, a generation ago a musty and esoteric subspecialty, has reemerged with a vengeance. Once again we see how Americans naturalize kinship in defiance of genetics (McKinnon 2006), embrace new technologies that reinforce their ideas about it (such as genetic-ancestry services), and find grave threat in any negation of their ideas about kinship (embodied in ideas like cloning and gay marriage).

The areas of overlap between science, profit, and kinship are beginning to be explored by anthropologists and scholars in cognate fields (Goodman et al. 2003; Hitt 2005; Koenig et al. in press; Nash 2004). Biological anthropologist Sloan R. Williams (2005) recently used the Hemings–Jefferson “family” for an interrogation of bioethical practices in human genetics. Palmié uses it now as a window on the knowledge-production processes in modern genetics. He suggests that genetic services can often recover racial or cultural identities because they project those identities on the data in the first place, and so consumers understand them in the commonsensical fashion that technical scientific work is actually supposed to transcend, if not refute. Moreover,

AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 233–235, ISSN 0094-0496, online ISSN 1548-1425. © 2007 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/ae.2007.34.2.233.

the operative logic of the modern genetic consumer parallels that of E. E. Evans-Prichard's *Azande*, including the lapses of logic. (Another good contemporary example is the derivation of the Cohen Modal Haplotype from the gonads of Aaron, the high priest, on the basis of a literal reading of Exodus as history, in forums that would certainly not countenance a literal reading of Genesis.) I would add to Palmié's perceptive analysis only that genetic analyses now commonly group their samples by "continent of origin" or "continent of ancestry"—neologisms that reinscribe the "one drop of blood" rule on subjects yet avoid the term *race*.

If kinship was an anthropological theme that had begun to seem irrelevant a generation ago, race was a theme that only dredged up bad memories. Race has been the fundamental subject matter of biological anthropology for most of that field's existence as the tangible or "physical" side of anthropology. But by the 1970s, it had become clear that (1) most human differences were cultural; (2) what was not cultural was principally polymorphic—that is to say, found in diverse groups of people at different frequencies; (3) what was not cultural or polymorphic was principally clinal—that is to say, gradually variable over geography; and (4) what was left—the component of human diversity that was not cultural, polymorphic, or clinal—was very small.

A consensus consequently developed among anthropologists and geneticists that race as the previous generation had known it—as largely discrete, geographically distinct, gene pools—did not exist (Marks 1995). What this consensus did, however, was leave open the possibility of reifying race once again by subtly redefining it, now as that small residual of human diversity that remains once one has eliminated its major patterns.

Although this view might sound somewhat perversely unscientific (certainly the tail of race would be wagging the dog of human variation!), it is nevertheless noteworthy that its exponents have not only successfully managed to recruit the voice of science in their service (Risch et al. 2002; Sarich and Miele 2004) but also have managed to get the *New York Times* to acknowledge theirs as the voice of science (Banton 2005; Duster 2005; Leroi 2005; Social Science Research Council n.d.; Wade 2006). Alas, the voice of science does not actually have a very good track record in such matters, as that voice had also been successfully appropriated by the eugenicists in the 1920s (Kevles 1985) and (less successfully) by the segregationists in the 1960s (Jackson 2005). Once again, differentiating science, as a source of authoritative modern knowledge, from some sort of perversely anti-intellectual and anti-democratic doppelgänger proves remarkably difficult (Grant 1916; Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Putnam 1961; Rushton and Jensen 2005).

Kinship, race, and knowledge—all broadly unifying themes of anthropology—are bound up in this work. Big pharma gives us the political economics of reifying race

(Kahn 2004). The emergence of new para-racial categories (such as Hispanic and Middle Eastern) and the submerging of others (such as Irish and Jewish) attest to the cultural construction and political salience of the categories. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss had gotten it pretty much right, way back when, it seems—natural categories do replicate social forms. And blood, long a staple of physical anthropologists, has become rapidly transformed and commodified (as a source of exotic DNA, a raw material for biotechnology), and its collection is now examined in the context of the property rights of indigenous peoples and as part of the global ethics of a burgeoning biomedical trade in body parts.

In short, if ever there was a time for biological and cultural anthropologists to co-teach seminars, this is it!

[*race, genetics, genomics*]

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