



THE LOW END OF ANOTHER BELL CURVE

Race: The Reality of Human Differences, by Vincent Sarich and Frank Miele
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Reviewed by Jonathan Marks

ACADEMIC ANTHROPOLOGY was founded on two fundamental fallacies of the eighteenth century: first, the idea that the human species is naturally divisible into a small number of qualitatively distinct kinds, or “races”; and second, that human behavior is divisible into qualitatively distinct units, or “cultures.” The first withered under an intense critique in

the first half of the twentieth century, magnified by the excesses of Nazi anthropologists. The second has been suffering under a more recent critique, magnified by the excesses of apartheid anthropologists.

What is the problem? In each case, “race” and “culture” have shown themselves to be intractable as formal analytic categories. They vary or vanish according to the percep-

tions of the observer and consequently have meaning only as folk or commonsense categories. They can be subdivided endlessly, a single person may partake of multiple ones simultaneously, and they seem to be unbounded by time or space. As scholarly tools they consequently afford us little opportunity for a rigorous analysis of human diversity, although they seem real enough if you don't think too hard about them. After all, they do afford convenient, if not unimpeachable, ways of classifying groups of people, for diverse purposes ranging from mere tabulation to exclusion or extirpation.

Most contemporary anthropologists retain the idea of culture as a useful heuristic device, even while acknowledging its limitations. But race—an older and more and more pernicious fallacy, for it not only fails to capture the actual patterns of human biological variation but also misrepresents itself as a product of nature rather than as the arbitrary agglomeration of peoples into politically salient clusters that it really is—has been all but purged from contemporary anthropological science.

Periodically, however, whether out of malice, ignorance, or just academic iconoclasm, someone demands a justification for the disposal of race as a natural unit of people and calls for its reinstatement. The call is generally accompanied by a self-aggrandizing claim to objectivity and scientific truth, the gleeful support of bigots, and sometimes even by a historiographic twist that lays the disposal of the race concept at the feet of a conspiracy of Jews and communists. This encapsulates, for example, the sad case of the prominent anthropologist Carleton Coon in the 1960s.

Race: The Reality of Human Differences, by Vincent Sarich and

Frank Miele, is the latest such endeavor. Sarich enjoyed a distinguished academic career at Berkeley as a student of the genetic differences among mammalian species (and I coauthored papers with him in the *Journal of Human Evolution* and *Cladistics*); Miele is the editor of *Skeptic* magazine. They seem to have been inspired by their animus toward a recent PBS series called *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (on which I participated as consultant). In their eyes, it represented fairly accurately the contemporary thought on race in anthropology and its cognate fields—just a bunch of politically correct, knee-jerk liberal, unscientific hogwash—and dadgum it, they mean to set the record straight.

The very title of the book displays the confusion of the terrain. Who ever denied the reality of human differences? Anthropology is predicated on the reality of human differences; at issue is the pattern or structure of those differences, and race just doesn't seem to be it. Their own confusion lies in staking out a position as defenders of human differences, a relatively uncontroversial proposition, and misrepresenting evidence that humans are not all identical as evidence that humans actually come in just a small number of basic flavors.

This is a familiar site of controversy for Sarich, who found his Berkeley classes boycotted in 1991 for ostensibly racist lectures. But then Berkeley is admittedly kind of a nutty place—administrators there had me investigated a few years later on the charge of being disrespectful to the memory of the late, dear Princess of Wales—and so who's to say where the justified moral indignation ends and the crass sanctimony begins?

A principal target of theirs from the very outset is the anthropologist and public intellectual Ashley Mon-

tagu, who crusaded against racism and indeed against the very word "race," advocating instead the lexical substitute "ethnic group." Sarich and Miele attribute these stances to his marginality and Jewish origin but fail to acknowledge that Montagu derived them from the influential 1935 book *We Europeans* by biologist Julian Huxley and Cambridge anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon, neither of whom was Jewish nor particularly marginal.

Indeed, repeating the accurate charge (originally leveled by segregationists) that Ashley Montagu was an invented identity of one Israel Ehrenberg, Sarich and Miele might have done their readers a favor with the contextualizing observation that reinventing oneself was a not altogether unprecedented strategy of British self-advancement, as the cases of conductor Leopold Stokowski, journalist Henry Morton Stanley, and anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown readily attest. How changing your name and concealing your humble roots would somehow discredit your work is not a question these authors care to articulate explicitly.

They casually and repeatedly dismiss Montagu's famous book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* as having gone through "innumerable" editions. I doubt that they could really have had that much trouble counting to six, but it does bespeak a certain cavalier attitude toward the relevant literature that pales next to the high scholarly caliber of Montagu's own work.

The discussion of the influence of Franz Boas in chapter 3 explicitly relies almost exclusively on the work of conservative historian Carl Degler, although that reference doesn't actually make it into the chapter's notes. And the history of

anthropology they consequently present is quite problematic. Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict are singled out as a bisexual and a lesbian, although the sexuality of no other scholars is mentioned. (One might wonder what relevance the lechery of James Watson or the promiscuity of Calvin Bridges might have for understanding the history or principles of genetics.)

Boas's sway over the field of anthropology is remarkably overstated as well. While the maturation of anthropology as an academic discipline can justifiably be attributed to him, and though he did make the cover of *Time* magazine in 1936, Boas in fact struggled mightily against an older establishment. If he was indeed the lord of the discipline, it is hard to explain his censure by the American Anthropological Association in 1919 or the reluctance of that association to pass a motion condemning the Nazis as long as Boas was perceived to be behind it. So this potted history of anthropology, with its pointed ad hominem remarks (how relevant once again is Boas's Jewish ancestry if he inherited his liberal scientific agenda from his mentor, Rudolf Virchow, as the authors note?) is just not very insightful and is indeed a little bit disturbing.

The middle chapters comprise Sarich's recollections of his laboratory research, discrediting the Miocene ape *Ramapithecus* as a human ancestor and working with some of the developers of the study of mitochondrial DNA. Of course, mitochondrial DNA is a minuscule part of the story of human diversity, and while Sarich's insights into it are a welcome read, they offer little to advance the book's ostensibly central thesis—that races are more real than anthropologists acknowledge.

Chapter 7 tells us that a disproportionate number of outstanding

long-distance runners come from a Kenyan tribe called the Kalenjin, repeating uncritically the arguments of a bizarre book by a sometime television producer named Jon Entine. What this fact has to do with the distribution of innate qualities in our species—or with race!—is entirely obscure. Biological information is often useful in a discussion of biology, but none is presented here, and certainly overrepresentation in a successful elite field is hardly an argument in and of itself for genetic superiority. One would hardly wish to extrapolate to the existence of Italian mobster genes, or Irish policeman genes. Further, if the Kalenjin afford an argument about the reality of race—returning once again to the book's title—then race itself reduces to any group of people with their own name, which is neither biologically rigorous nor scientifically useful.

From the contents of chapter 8 we can perceive whence the Berkeley students' moral indignation to Sarich's teaching may have arisen. Relying on the work of Canadian psychologist J. Philippe Rushton, the authors argue that the average IQ of indigenous Africans is about 70 (yes, you read that right)—that is, indicative of slight mental retardation. This forms part of Rushton's general theory that Africans evolved to be dumb and promiscuous; Asians, to be smart and undersexualized; and whites, to be a happy medium—a theory that has been extensively criticized professionally and is taken seriously by no competent scholar.

The fact that some psychologists could find such a strange empirical result about native Africans—any one of whom is likely to speak more languages fluently than Rushton, Sarich, and Miele combined—should suggest two alternatives. Either

something is wrong with Africans, or else something is wrong with the scientists and their facile interpretations of the tests. That these authors fail even to entertain the latter possibility serves to demonstrate just how highly selective their self-professed skepticism really is.

But of course there are many decades of empirical and theoretical work on human biological diversity that have led to the modern scientific consensus that Sarich and Miele are contesting. This raises the odder question: Exactly what science do the authors think they are speaking for? After all, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists passed a statement in 1996 that says, in part:

The only living species in the human family, *Homo sapiens*, has become a highly diversified global array of populations. The geographic pattern of genetic variation within this array is complex, and presents no major discontinuity. Humanity cannot be classified into discrete geographic categories with absolute boundaries. Furthermore, the complexities of human history make it difficult to determine the position of certain groups in classifications. Multiplying subcategories cannot correct the inadequacies of these classifications.

Further, it explicitly repudiates “the idea of discrete races made up chiefly of typical representatives.” This would seem to say that the basic premise of Sarich and Miele's book—that races are, in some basic commonsensical way, real—is not only politically incorrect but biologically and anthropologically inaccurate as well.

The final judgment, then, must be that this book is scientifically idiosyncratic and politically reactionary. I'm sure the authors themselves already know that. ●