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The definitive version of this article is published in:

The definitive version of this article is available online at:
http://phg.sagepub.com/content/32/3/470 (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

The journal Progress in Human Geography is available at:
http://phg.safepub.com/ (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

doi: 10.1177/03091325080320030903

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Author’s response

The argument of Race and the crisis of humanism – amply summarized by Catherine Nash – is that the idea of ‘race’ emerged from the much longer-standing premise of human distinction from other life forms on earth. Substantially, the concern of this work is to understand race and racism as quite specific ideas about human difference and inequality, rather than merely as vehicles for expressing an impulse to superiority over denigrated other people. The language of race/racism has frequently invoked a conception of ‘the human’. For example, the attribution of a ‘subhuman’ or a ‘more or less human’ character to certain races is, as Peter Wade points out, well known. So is the fact that this conception of the human is often bound to an idea of civilization as a measure of the proximity (or otherwise) of certain peoples to ‘nature’. This is clear enough, for example, in the idea of savagery that was elaborated in social contract and stadial theory. The question, and it is one that has barely been raised, much less addressed, is how the entanglement of these terms – race/human/nature – is to be understood.

Race and the crisis of humanism is set somewhat against the claim of critical race theory that ‘race’ was a means for legitimating slavery or empire. According to this claim, the specificity or substance of the human (or the subhuman), or civilization (or savagery), are not really taken up. Rather, these terms are understood as the expressions of a superiority (or an inferiority) that, at least in principle, may just as easily have been expressed differently. The hypothesis of the book, and its wider, ongoing project, is to take these terms seriously and to explore the possibility that the relationship between race and ideas about the human vis-à-vis nature is not arbitrary, but central to what race and racism ‘are’ and became.

The theoretical impetus here is posthumanist, but not just in the sense of questioning or challenging a classical idea of human distinctiveness. There have been various attempts in geography, cultural studies and elsewhere to produce analyses that situate the human amid – and not apart from – other life-forms. My aim, however, is more provisional and historical. Critically interrogating our humanist heritage seems vital if posthumanism is to constitute a serious project. My concern, then, is to consider the ways in which humanism has informed, if not pervaded, how we see and organize ‘our’ world; and, here, not just our relationships to ‘things’, but also to other human beings.

Against this background, Race and the crisis of humanism seeks to explain the profound shift – summarized by both reviewers – that took place in understandings of race around the middle of the nineteenth century. Race ceased to be regarded as a superficial human variation and came to be seen as a permanent and significant difference.
The argument of the book is that, seen through the lens of a specific variant of posthumanism, this shift may be traced to the colonial encounter with Australia’s Aboriginal peoples, for it was in their apparent inability to overcome their ‘natural’ or ‘savage’ condition that, in contrast to Enlightenment views that savagery had been surpassable, it now appeared as an irredeemable state. The very idea of the human, as distinct from nature, was thus put into question. And the polygenist assertion that the different races were the product of multiple creations, and not just one, may be understood as a response to this crisis in Enlightenment and Christian thought: as an attempt to preserve this idea of the human by shattering its formerly assumed universality.

Catherine Nash’s reflections on the relevance of this thesis for recent developments in genetics are interesting in themselves, and raise many questions I am unable to take up here. I would, though, just make two brief points. First, any clear distinction between race as ‘tribe-nation-kin’ and race as ‘innate-immutable-biological’ was (as the book’s fifth chapter indicates) already problematized by the evolutionary theory of the late nineteenth century. Second, and not least here in view of James Watson’s recent comments about Africans’ intelligence (Watson, 2007), I cannot help wondering just how viable it is to maintain that, in the context of a kind of genetic ethnology, ‘race is now largely not framed by ideas of the relative worth of human groups’. But that is, as Nash also indicates, a complex matter.

Peter Wade’s reservations about the book’s thesis speak more directly to its central aims. For Wade, it seems, the book adds little to the existing race historiography; and, in accounting for the shift indicated earlier, he seems to prefer a recourse to slavery’s legitimation and the emergence of biology in the early nineteenth century.

There is no doubt that mid-nineteenth century debates around slavery were of central importance. But it is in showing how these debates drew upon supposed ‘evidence’ from the colonies (and from Australia in particular) that the book attempts to demonstrate how the argument for race as a fixed difference began with the ‘indigenous question’, and was made with reference to a largely ‘new’ idea of savagery as irredeemable. As the book documents, the generalization of an innatist conception of race to the ‘Negro’ indeed took place in the context of debates around slavery; but, the book argues, it did so with reference to ‘evidence’ from the colonies (and, again, from Australia in particular). This context, then, is not so much given short shrift in the book; rather the book’s focus is upon explaining the emergence of racial discourse, not its subsequent elaboration to other people and places. (Elsewhere I discuss this situated account of the rise of the idea of race as a theorization not back, but from, the periphery; Anderson, 2008).

More generally, though, Wade seems to downplay the radicality of this shift to innatist (or polygenist) thought. It is as if the idea of race did not really need any more explanation than, for example, the variety of contexts – including slavery and the demise of the Christian thesis of shared origins – that George Stocking (1968) and many other race historiographers have invoked. The insufficiency (but not, to be clear, the irrelevance) of these contexts is indicated well enough by the fact that Stocking invokes them only after explicitly stating that he cannot fully explain the shift to polygenism (1968: 36). Stocking’s privileged context is the increase in ‘data’ about
other peoples that followed the ‘great expansion of cultural contact’ during this period (1968: 39). But, again, the proliferation of evidence about the diversity of humankind still falls short of providing an explanation of how the idea of a unified humanity came to be shattered by innatism – to be clear, here, by the idea of multiply created species of people or, in ‘softer’ readings, a fixity of human differences.

The step beyond conventional accounts of the ‘biologization of race’ offered by *Race and the crisis of humanism* can be clarified here in so far as it offers what Stocking’s more general reference to diversity cannot: that is, an account of why the ‘data’ generated by increased ‘cultural contact’ put the idea of human unity into question. Despite the fact that they both refer to an idea of improvement or civilization, there is (as Stocking, for example, recognizes) a vast difference between the idea of savagery proposed in Enlightenment thought and that which came to prevail by the middle of the nineteenth century. It is far from clear, then, that innatism can be ‘explained’ as an elaboration – even if a biological elaboration – of older ideas; again, as if it amounted to nothing more than a recontextualization of these ideas under conditions of power differentiated contact.

Innatism was not just a ‘new’ thesis about human types; it was profoundly radical. And its explanation needs to go beyond vague invocations of human ‘diversity’, and Enlightenment hierarchy. The argument pursued by the book is that innatist accounts of people need to be recognized not only as presenting a false and pernicious continuum of human development. They were more specifically underpinned by an ontological assumption of human distinctiveness from ‘nature’. It is from this perspective that an explanation of the racist shattering of the human category can be provided, and in terms that exceed the familiar recourse to an overgeneralized imperial impulse and subjectivity. It is also from this perspective that we glimpse a potentially transformative understanding of humanist violence across multiple forms of life on earth, human and non-human.

References


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