Race: the History of an Idea

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I. Race from ancient times to the Enlightenment

A few things to remember as you begin to think about the history of the idea of race.
1. Everything has a history, including words and ideas. That means race did not always mean what it does to us today.
2. “Common Sense” is simply what you learned before you were five years old.
3. Race is the witchcraft and alchemy of our times. It is a zombie idea.

This is a history of the idea of race, not of prejudice or racism, or slavery, but the idea of race in Western Civilization and America. 3 parts: the idea of race down to the time of the French Revolution, race as a scientific concept (largely the 19th century), and race as an idea with consequences in the last hundred years. This concerns not only American history, but western civilization. Americans think of race in terms of skin color: Black and white and possibly red and yellow; the European history of the idea of race is much more connected with terms like Aryans, Celts, Slavs, Latins, and Jews.

One of the hardest things about teaching history is that we tend to assume that the world has always been substantially as we know it, that words have always had the same meaning we give to them, that peoples in earlier ages have had the same categories in which to think as we do. None of this is correct, of course. In other words, everything has a history. Recently J. Kameron Carter, a Black American theologian, has published a remarkable book entitled Race: a Theological Account. Part of his argument is that the concept of race developed in European civilization out of the separation of Christianity from Judaism. Christians very early found the need to separate themselves from Jews and by the fourth century, when Christianity became the favored religion of the Empire, that process had led to the vilification of the Jews as collectively responsible for Christ’s death. Then as Christianity spread through Europe over the next centuries, Christians identified Jews as Orientals, aliens among them. Then as Christian Europeans came to see themselves as white people, Jews were identified as not white. The racism of Western civilization is therefore rooted in a religious prejudice against the Jews. To follow this argument into the modern period would take us too far ahead now, but it introduces the important understanding that the meaning of white has also changed over time. Another remarkable book by Ian Haney-Lopez is called White By Law. It is about the legal definition of whiteness by the American courts from 1790 to the present. Such cases arose because of the Naturalization Act passed by the first Congress in 1790 that said that only “free white people” could be naturalized as American citizens. Well, what did white

(A copy is available for download. A copy is available online at https://www.dioala.org/racerelations/racerelations.html)
mean? Was a person who was ¼ Japanese and ¾ German white? Was a Persian or Arab white? Were dark skinned people from south Asia “white” because scientists classified them as “Caucasian”? There was a time in this country when Jews, Irish, Italians, Slavs and others were not considered “white” by Anglo-Saxons. One American historian, Matthew Jacobson, documented the successive enlargements of the meaning of “white” by inclusion of various southern and eastern European groups in his work *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* in 1986. Another recent book by a Black scholar, Nell Painter, is humorously entitled *A History of White People*. The meaning of the racial descriptor changes over time and is relative, not absolute in meaning. Even whiteness, in other words, has a history.

The word *race* appears to have entered western European languages in the 15th century through Spain, where Latin Christian civilization was mixed with Arabic Muslim civilization. The Semitic languages have words based on ras meaning origin or beginning; this appears to be the source of the word. It was first used in Spanish (*raza*) as a term to describe a lineage of cattle, bred for particular characteristics. So the basic meaning of the term as it entered European usage was a *lineage* or line of descent from a common origin. If you look at the OED, you will find that the word is used exclusively in this sense until the 17th century: a race of bees, a race of cattle, a race of kings. The first definition given is “a group of persons, animals, or plants connected by common descent or origin.” So if you have ever wondered why the same word *race* means a running contest and an ethnic group? It is because until about the 18th century the term was used to mean a set of ancestors, a line of people who lived in an earlier age, replaced by another “race” who succeeded them, rather like a relay race of generations. The fact that this derivation is now unknown to most people shows what happened to the idea of race in modern western civilization: it changed from referring to the genealogy of an individual’s ancestors to meaning a permanent biological type fixed in nature. It shifted its meaning from the line of one’s ancestors in the past to the idea of a predetermined future. In this change the idea of race underwent several important shifts. But first we need a little philosophical background.

The idea of race is a body-idea; that is, it has to do with the physical body. But it is also a group idea, transcending the body of individuals. One of the main questions of philosophy since the ancient Greeks invented it is how to relate the physical, or what we might call the natural, with the mental or psychic, how to connect what is with what we think. Individual humans die, and are therefore always interested in how they relate to the ongoing undying sequence of generations. This connection is what gives meaning and ultimate significance to the brief individual life. Race is one concept that allows people to connect our individual mortal body to something larger and lasting, but that something is conceptual, not physical. It is of course not the only such concept: in fact it emerged rather late historically. The first such concept was almost certainly the family. In ancient Greece and Rome, the *familia* was a household built on the idea that “blood” relationships and the line of descent from a common ancestor provided such meaning. The family name represented this conceptual unity of the generations. Even religion was seen as familial, with an altar in every home and the father of the family as its priest. This was then enlarged from the family to the state, the polis or *civitas*, which was imagined as
a sort of super-family sharing the same sacred ties to the gods. If you read the first great work of political philosophy, Aristotle’s *Politics*, you see this immediately. The polis is an accumulation of families designed to allow all the citizens to achieve the good life. It is obviously much more abstract than the natural family. The ancient Greeks and Romans did not have the idea of race as we think of it. They distinguished between Greeks and barbarians, and between citizens and slaves, but on the basis of the relationship people had to the polis and to participation in the political realm. The premises of race-thinking were absent in ancient thought. Slavery was common, but slaves were not racially or physically distinct from free people.

The second type of body concept emerged with Christianity, which drew all the individual bodies of believers into the mystical body of Christ. As found in St. Paul, this concept was intended to overcome the divisions among gentile families and between Greeks and Romans and Jews. The medieval Christian Church added to this St. Augustine’s idea that Christians were citizens of a City of God as well as a city of man, and that all who were baptized and partook of the Holy Communion were members of the Body of Christ.

Race, according to the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, is the third form in which the body-idea appears. And in Christian Europe, the transition from the body of Christ to race begins with the rise of the Jew as the Other. Jews were virtually the only non-Christian minority in Europe in the Middle Ages. The Muslims were an external enemy during the Crusades, but the Jews lived among the Christians and yet were not part of the body of Christ. It was during the Crusades that Christian soldiers began killing large numbers of Jews, as the enemy within appeared more dangerous than the enemy without. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council required Jews to wear distinctive dress and badges, marking them visibly as non-members of the political community, now defined in religious terms. After the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492, even converted Jews (*conversos*) were suspect, and a new consciousness of *limpieza de sangre*, purity of blood, that is Christian blood, began to enter western thought. At this time, however, it was still in competition with older ideas that the conversion of a Jew made that person a full member of the body of Christ and the Christian social order. So the persecution of Jews, which rose to considerable heights during the terrible 14th century of plague and crop failure, was not yet really on account of what we call race. As George Frederickson says in his book *Racism: a Short History*, “if conversion or assimilation is a real possibility, we have religious of cultural intolerance, but not racism.” In 1492, Spanish Jews who refused to convert were expelled. All this was persecution and bigotry, but not racism because not really race in our understanding of the term. But the idea of purity of the blood was soon applied to discriminate against the *conversos*, the converted Jews. The Holy Inquisition was established to ferret out these “New Christians” who were contaminated by their “impure” Jewish blood. With the discrimination against the converted on grounds that their bodies were permanently corrupted and their morality affected by the stain of Jewish blood, we are seeing the transition to the modern idea of race. And fateful this was all happening in Spain just as Spain was acquiring a vast empire in the New World.
The Reformation and the discovery and conquest of the Americas and their inhabitants required new adjustments. The medieval idea of human history as a single story of two cities, the city of God and the city of man, was given up. The discovery of ‘barbarous’ and ‘savage’ peoples was a challenge to the universalism of Christianity and institutions of European dominance, enslavement and peonage, had to be justified somehow. Still, this did not lead to a fully developed idea of race in the modern sense ‘since there was no proper anthropology, natural history, or biology to support it.” (Hannaford, p. 183)

The Enlightenment was when natural history moved into new channels of classifying and ordering nature. The first natural historian to write on the races of mankind was François Bernier (1625-1688), a physician and traveler who went to Egypt and India and in 1684 wrote a work called The New Division of the Earth, attempting to classify humans according to race. For Bernier, Europeans were the first race, with North Africans, Arabs, Indians, and Americans second, and Lapps fourth. What we learn from this first effort is that hierarchy and valuation were part of the systematic classification of races from the start. The Swede Carl von Linné (1707-1778), Latinized as Linnaeus, gave names to species of plants and animals in his Systema Naturae (1735), and classified them by their morphology, that is their physical characteristics. He is important for including humans among the animals as part of the same order as the apes, rather than seeing them as separate from the animals. And he classified them the same way he did animals, that is by their physical differences. He described five “varieties” of humans: H. europaeus, H. asiaticus, H. afer, and H. americanus. Note that he did not refer to these as “races” but simply as varieties. He regarded species as real and fixed, separate divine creations, but varieties were changeable and not “real” in the sense that species were. Because he was interested mostly in a systematic classification of all species, he paid little further attention to the varieties. Linnaeus’ contemporary, the greatest French naturalist of the day, Georges Buffon (1707-1788), in his 44-volume Natural History, offered another schema of six varieties of mankind. For Buffon, the unity of the human species was the dominant idea, and he attributed the varieties of human physical types to differences of environment, especially climate, which he thought affected both color and character. Buffon says explicitly that race is not a constant, but persists as long as the milieu persists and changes as the milieu changes. In other words, he was an unabashed environmentalist. These men were not trying to argue that moral or intellectual qualities were determined by “race”, but they played a pivotal role in tying the idea of race to nature and giving scientific standing to the idea of race.

For these Enlightenment scientists like Buffon, it was an assumption that variation from an original type was a kind of degeneration. It is very important, therefore, that they assumed at the original human type was white. They believed that the first humans had lived in the area between the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, and that as they migrated to other parts of the world the environments they encountered darkened their skins. But this set of assumptions comfortably implied that because white (or Caucasian) was the first, white people were the best and the most beautiful and intelligent.

Because of the history of the 20th century, we tend to think of the Germans as responsible for the ideological construction of race; it is a surprise to most students of the subject that
it was largely a product of the French mind. In the resistance of the French nobility to the construction of the absolute monarchy in the 17th century, we find the beginnings of what will become the Nordic or Aryan myth. Count Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658-1722) opposed Louis XIV’s absolutism on the grounds that it violated the hereditary rights of the nobility, whose ancestors were the Franks. In this reading of French history, a Germanic ‘race’ of Franks had conquered a Celtic or Gallic ‘race’ of peasants. The French nobles were descendants of this ancient conquering Frankish race. Now their rights, won by conquest, were being taken from them by the absolutism of Louis XIV.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century deeply affected the development of the idea of race. Enlightenment thinkers like Baron Montesquieu grounded the differences of ‘race’ in nature and natural history. In his *Spirit of the Laws* of 1748, Montesquieu argued that “the physical world of matter explains the mind and institutions of men.” (Barzun, p. 52) Montesquieu stressed the importance of environmental factors like climate and diet as causes of the variations of human types in different parts of the earth. After the French Revolution, French historians and anthropologists played a major role in elaborating the idea of race as science (or pseudo-science).

The great scientific question about races in the 18th century was about origins; it was a debate between the polygenists and the monogenists, those who thought that the varieties of mankind were separate creations and those who thought all were descendants of one original; the latter position was of course that supported by the Scriptures and the Church, but those arguments no longer were determinative in natural history. For monogenists, the obvious question was how to account for such variation in human beings in the few thousand years of earth history as then understood. Polygenists had a clear answer to the problem of how racial differences arose in a few centuries: the races were descended from different original ancestors; they were in fact different species. The main problem with the polygenists’ position was that it contradicted the teachings of the Christian churches, which read the account in Genesis to say that all humans had descended from a single set of ancestors. Some polygenists tried to reconcile their theory with the Bible by positing that Adam and Eve were the ancestors of the Jews only or the whites only, and asking where Cain found his wife if there were no other people besides his family in the world, but the theological objection was difficult to overcome. Besides, if a species was defined as a group within which male and female could produce fertile offspring, the races could not be separate species.

II. Scientific Racism; the Nineteenth Century

The beginning of modern race theory was in the 17th and 18th century effort to create a science of humanity parallel to the mechanical Newtonian science of matter in motion. But what these early thinkers did not have was a scientific biology, sociology, anthropology, or psychology. Furthermore, their science of living things or natural history was descriptive and morphological, that is, it only touched the body. To create an adequate science of humanity, it was necessary to include what the Greeks called psyche, the mind or the soul. The race idea was a concept designed to “to explain the
psychophysical unity of man . . . and make consistent and coherent statements about the . . behavioral and psychological unity of particular groups of individuals.” But in the period of the French Revolution and early 19th century, the only way to attempt this was by positing some kind of “inner force.” This approach was a pre-scientific approach to biology we know as vitalism.

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) was a professor at Göttingen and the author of *The Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775), and along with Buffon the founder of scientific anthropology. Blumenbach spent his life studying and collecting skeletons, especially skulls, and organizing them into types. On the basis of one skull that came from the Caucasus, which he thought looked like the skulls of contemporary Germans, he coined the term “Caucasian” to refer to whites. Blumenbach still used the term variety rather than race, even in 1775! He divided mankind into five great divisions: Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays. He was an uncompromising monogenist, but his answer to the problem of how the various races emerged was different from the environmentalism of Montesquieu in one crucial respect. Blumenbach thought that there was a mysterious internal purposive force (*nisus formativus*) in humans, a life force that guided the growth of the organism. So for him, the environment did not reshape the passive organism; the organism had its own movement propelling it to adapt to the changes around it. But like his predecessors, Blumenbach had no explanation for how racial differences had originated, because the science of the time had no explanation for how particular physical features were passed from parents to offspring. There was no science of inheritance – what we call genetics.

The classificatory schemes of Linnaeus provided these scientists with a clear idea of species. Species was fixed and real in nature, not just a name. But was race “real” in the sense that species was, or was it just a name we give to a certain set of human varieties? The great puzzle, then, for the great thinkers of the later 18th century such as Kant, Blumenbach, Georges Cuvier, and Pieter Camper, as they collected and arranged skulls and skeletons and considered how to classify them, was the gradation among them. There was a clear line separating species, but no line at all in the gradation of sizes and shapes among human races. There was great variety among them, but where were the boundaries between types? If there was none, was race a truly scientific concept at all?

The great Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), best known for his *Critique of Pure Reason* and his ethics of duty, also wrote about race. In the same year that Blumenbach published his *Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775) Kant published *On the Different Races of Men*, a counter to Blumenbach’s purely physical description of human varieties. Kant was not satisfied with a science that applied only to the physical phenomena; persons were psychophysical beings, not just bodies but minds as well. He wanted an integrated science of man linking mind and morality to the physical. In a word, he wanted a comprehensive science of race that included the inner consciousness of Self as well as the size and shape of the body. There were, he thought four temperaments of human (a theory derived from the ancient idea of the four humors of the body). Based on any man’s temperament, his will allowed him to make himself in some respects, to shape his character himself. Different races had different characters which they shared with other members of the same race but not with other races.

Kant connected the body-idea with the moral character. In other words he abandoned all transcendence for a complete immanence: the racial body and mind were
not molded by the environment but in interaction with each other. Then, facing the question of how to define race when the varieties seemed an endless gradation with no gaps, he said that there was only one trait that was always inherited, and that was skin color. He thought that there were four basic colors, each of which was predominant in one part of the world: white in Europe, copper-red in America, black in Africa, and olive-yellow in the East Indies. All the other intermediate colors were, he thought, produced by crosses among these basic four types. He believed that had originally been one original type, but he had no good explanation as to how the four basic colors came from the one original. The original skin tone, he assumed, was white. The others had diverged from the original as the internal impulse adapted to climate and environmental conditions. He saw these divergences as degenerations from the original and the greater the difference from the original white color, of course, the greater the degeneration.

Early 19th century German life science was deeply influenced by these Kantian ideas and especially by their further development by the philosopher Friedrich Schelling. In his biological thought, which he called Naturphilosophie, the philosophy of nature, Schelling exaggerated Kant’s idea of the internal life force so far as to say that matter was an expression of mind. This implied something very important for thinking about race. It meant that the racial Mind expressed itself in bodily form; that is, the distinctive features of the character and intelligence of each race was “bodied forth” as its physical form. One could therefore discover the distinctive character of each race by looking at the body form of individuals of that race.

If there was to be a science of mind, intelligence, character, and morality, it could no longer be treated as part of theology, but had to be found in the physical body. The variations or “races” of human beings, that is, their physical forms, had to explain all the psychic and mental characteristics of different types of persons. So there was a way to establish a “science” of race. Of course scientists still had no way to explain the origins of races or how traits were passed from parents to children. They had no explanation for the random variability of traits. The next phase of the history of race would be centrally concerned with providing a scientific basis for the body-idea called race. But before the 20th century began, both of these stumbling blocks would be removed: the first by the theory of natural selection we call Darwinian evolution and the second by the theory of particulate inheritance we call Mendelian genetics.

History and anthropology played important roles in developing the idea of race after the time of the French Revolution. History was reimagined as the story of nations and peoples rather than of ruling dynasties. Moreover, historians were particularly impressed with a pattern they thought they saw of nomadic peoples conquering settled agricultural ones. As Eric Voegelin put it, the idea of race came to the fore along with a new history focused on the migrations of peoples and the rise and fall of empires. The nomads were the conquerors, the dominant and creative ones; the settled agricultural people were the conquered. The more creative and dynamic nomads were the Germans in Europe and the Aryans in India; the passive agricultural peoples were subjected to these stronger and more martial peoples. The dynasties or ‘races’ of kings morphed into peoples or Völker in the minds of thinkers starting with Johann Gottfried Herder who spoke of each nationality as a distinct organism with its own internal driving force or Volksgeist. In the German nationalistic reaction against Napoleonic occupation, historians like Barthold Niebuhr turned history into the story of distinctive Völker or peoples. In his
Niebuhr abandoned the older tradition of understanding Rome as the story of the growth of a republic in favor of seeing the dynamic as the conflict between patricians and plebeians, which he depicted as two races. French historians followed suit, looking at the roots of their own people along the lines suggested earlier by Bougainville, as a conquest of a Celtic race by a Frankish race. Augustin Thierry, François Guizot, Jules Michelet and other early 19th century French historians recast the understanding of French history as a story of two races. The English in this same era came to see their history as the conquest of the Saxons by the energetic Normans, and came to understand English language and law in racial terms as the fusion of these two “races.” By the mid-19th century it would seem self-evident to most educated Europeans that race and racial differences accounted for the “national character” of various nationalities in Europe. In the absence of any scientific psychology, this idea of a racially-determined “national character” served to explain Europeans to themselves.

In the 1830s and 1840s, biology emerged out of the earlier natural history and became a true science. A science of mankind had to be quantitative and objective, which meant it had to be based on measurement. This is what accounts for some things which we all today regard as bizarre pseudo-sciences like Francis Gall’s phrenology. It seemed reasonable in the early 19th century that the bumps on the skull would reflect the size and shape of the lobes of the brain, and that these then could be measured and used to determine a person’s character and intelligence and morals. Equally it seemed reasonable that by measuring all the physical features of humans one could develop scientific types that would demonstrate significant differences in behavior, intelligence, and morality. And so the body-idea of race became the scientific idea of race.

In the 19th century, anthropology would develop into a science obsessed with measurement of anatomical features, and especially of size and ratios of skulls; the cephalic index or ratio of the length to the width of the skull, developed by Anders Retzius in 1840, was thought to be one of the defining differences between Aryan and Latin and Celtic ‘races.’ Anthropology gave way to anthropometry, the measuring of skull size and shape. The distinguished French anthropologist Paul Broca and many others tried to arrange races in a hierarchy by brain size. They were able to show that on average the crania of men were larger than those of women, whites larger than Blacks. And so on. When you valued long-headed skulls over round-headed ones, Nordic or Aryan males came out on top of the heap. An American anthropologist named Samuel Morton collected hundreds of skulls from mummies and burials from Egypt to South America and measured their cranial capacities, publishing his results in 1849. He found, as you might expect, that white people’s brains were largest and Black people’s were smallest. Morton’s collection was still at Harvard and the recent scholar Stephen Jay Gould decided to replicate his work. Gould discovered that, consciously or unconsciously, Morton had fudged his numbers, made elementary errors in sampling and statistics, every error resulting in overstating the size of white crania while understating the others. But when Morton’s results were published they were received enthusiastically by the slaveholding South. The Charleston Medical Journal wrote in its review of Morton’s findings in 1851: “We of the South should consider him as our benefactor, for aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race.” Objective measurement had confirmed white superiority. Actually, as Gould shows, if
you correct for all Morton’s errors in sampling and statistics, there is no statistically significant difference in the size of the crania of the different races.

Quantification and measurement gave first anthropologists and then other scientists the idea that race was a real thing like species. What was dragged in the side door was the assumption that races with different physical characteristics, especially different sizes and shapes of skulls, had different abilities, different moralities and intelligences. This premise carried important values with it. Scientists, like other people, are likely to see their own type as the superior one and the types farthest from their group as less attractive, less intelligent, and less moral. And so in the course of the 19th century for many biologists and anthropologists, race became fundamental. Everything about mankind could be explained scientifically by racial classification and was validated as neutral and objective because it was based on measurement. The values and beliefs of the experimenter could be validated as well, which was of course very comforting. As British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli famously said, “Race is everything.” He called it “the key to history.”

Racial thinking was also promoted by the creation of the national state. After the French Revolution, the ideology of nationalism grew in appeal. Nationalism was based on the idea that every people, every Volk, with its unique racial temperament and language, deserved a state. Race thinking and nationalism linked the idea of race to land; members of a given race had ties to a certain land. Making the territorial state correspond with the nation, understood as a racial unit, would take the wars of two centuries, and create immense suffering, but it grew out of a notion that each race or nationality needed a state of its own. In western Europe, existing states like France, the Netherlands, Spain, and England were largely built on national lines, with important exceptions like Ireland and the Basques. In central Europe, the creation of national states required the merging of many small states to create a German and an Italian state, and this was accomplished by 1871. In eastern Europe, nationalism required the splitting up of the great dynastic states, the Russian Empire, the Austrian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire, and the creation of smaller national states. This process of fragmentation and the problem of national minorities within the mixed populations of the east would continue to cause wars and genocides to the end of the twentieth century. A special burden fell on the Jews of Europe in this growth of a racially grounded idea of the state. Nowhere a majority, Europe’s Jews had no national state. They had no ties to any land. For this they were condemned as rootless, as having no natural loyalty to the state, and therefore as potential traitors. Anti-Semitism based on racial-national thinking became so strong in Europe by the late 19th century that it called forth in response a Jewish nationalism. The idea of Zionism, created in the 1890s by Theodor Herzl, was a Jewish nationalism, an argument that the Jews too were a people and needed a state of their own. Herzl developed Zionism after having covered the trial of Alfred Dreyfus for treason, a verdict based on the assumption that a Jewish army officer could not really be a patriotic Frenchman. Jews needed a homeland. They needed roots. And to the Zionists, that land obviously had to be Palestine.

Back to the point that the French are more responsible for our modern idea of race than the Germans: the most influential work in setting the idea of race into its mold was the work of Arthur de Gobineau, Essay on the Inequality of the Races (1853-55). Gobineau believed he had an aristocratic background and despised the bourgeoisie and the centralized government of Napoleon III. He was a pessimist. He bought into the
old two-France argument; the nobles were descendants of a Germanic Frankish stock that had conquered a Celtic stock. But now, he feared, the great race was being compromised by interbreeding and that meant decline. He was a man obsessed with the idea of degeneration and decay through miscegenation. He rejected all importance of the environment, all ideas of human perfectibility; everything was to be explained by race.

“The basic organization and character of all civilizations,” he wrote, “are equal to the traits and spirit of the dominant race.” As Marx saw every stage of history as determined by the ruling class, Gobineau saw all history as determined by the dominant race. But he also believed in the inevitable miscegenation of the superior race with the inferior, and this racial degeneration would lead inevitably to the decline of civilization. Later in life, Gobineau became close friends with the German composer Richard Wagner, one of whose Bayreuth disciples translated his work into German. Later German racist thinking, including that of the Nazis, was very dependent upon this French aristocrat.

Gobineau wrote his Essay in the mid-1850s, the last pre-Darwinian moment. Within five years, the static understanding of fixed species in natural history gave way to an evolutionary perspective with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). Darwinism changed the terms of the scientific study of race, essentially ending the debate between monogenists and polygenists. Species were not fixed but evolved by natural selection. What then of races? Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism brought together the individualistic ethos of competitive marketplace capitalism and racial determinism, subsuming all change under the heading of “survival of the fittest.” The basic metaphor was now one of struggle for survival. Anthropologists and advocates for capitalism and imperialism now saw science as confirming that the lower races needed permanent guidance and control. Or if they could improve, it would be over eons of time. For the imaginable future, slavery, serfdom, imperialism, and exploitation of the working classes, were scientifically justified.

Comte Georges Vacher de Lapouge was probably the second most important theorist of race as a power in history after Gobineau. Like Gobineau, he was sure that the French nation was degenerating, and the degeneration was traceable to race. Unlike Gobineau, he was working after the Darwinian revolution in biology, and adapted the idea of survival of the fittest to his theory. In his book *The Aryan and His Social Role* (1899), Vacher de Lapouge outlined his views that the superior Aryans were to conquer Europe and the world, and he understood this in Darwinian terms of natural selection. Unlike Gobineau, he based his ideas upon “scientific” measurements of skulls, and made much of the long-headed *Homo europaeus*. He divided Europeans into three races: *H. europaeus* (Germanic), *H. alpinus* (Latins), and *H. contractus* (Jews). There was much discussion at that time in France of the depopulation crisis, which fit right in with his pessimistic view of degeneration of the race. The racial struggle for existence was against the yellow peril and the Jews: the Aryan middle class could survive only by annihilating the Jewish bourgeoisie. Vacher saw both Catholicism and Judaism as parasites on the body of France.

Racial determinism in Europe, and especially this idea of a naturally superior Nordic racial type applied to Latins, Slavs, Celts, and others, and to Africans, Arabs, Indians, and Orientals, but most importantly in Europe it was used against the Jews. Emancipation of the Jews and ideal of equal citizenship held out by French Revolution
was effectively countered by biological doctrines of racial determinism, no longer based on religious differences or fear of the Jews as “Christ-killers,” but on racial grounds. A new term was coined by a German race theorist named Wilhelm Marr, “anti-Semitism.” Marr predicted a final conflict between Germans, Slavs, and Jews for control of Europe. Jews could escape the older anti-Judaism through conversion; the new racist anti-Semitism provided no “out” by assimilation or conversion. In this new racial sense, “anti-Semitism” was invented only after 1870.

The politics of race and anti-Semitism fed on nationalism and prestige of science. Anti-Semitic political organizations and parties were formed. Edouard Drumont, La France juive, 1886. His paper, La libre parole, attained great notoriety for its relentless anti-Semitism. Socialist and working class hostility to Jewish capitalists and bankers was common. pogroms were encouraged in tsarist Russia, driving many Jews to emigrate after 1881. Adolf Stoecker formed the Christian Social party in Germany, Karl Lueger was elected mayor of Vienna on an anti-Semitic platform. Hostility to socialism was based on Jewish origin of Marx and other socialist leaders. Tsarist secret police forged the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” to support idea of a vast Jewish conspiracy to control the world. Most important, the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) which revealed that even in France, the home of the Revolution, a virulent anti-Semitism was thriving.

Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman who had made Germany his home, published Foundations of the Nineteenth Century in 1899, setting the Aryan against the Jew as types, just as Hitler and the Nazis were to do later. In fact, there is virtually nothing in the racial doctrines of Hitler that is not found in Chamberlain. All true honor and spiritual creativity was Aryan, all cultural creativity was a product of the Aryan race; Jews were parasites, capable only of materialism, and had no culture of their own. There was of course the inconvenience of Jesus – but he must have been Aryan, and couldn’t have been a Jew. Chamberlain describes a comprehensive view of history and politics based on the view that race is all. The degeneration and decline of nations comes with the mixture of blood, the miscegenation of races. High culture is the product of a pure race, and racial mixture is responsible for the decline and fall of Rome and every other culture that degenerates. Since the Aryan and the Jew are opposites, the Jews are the great danger for the Aryans – not because they are weak or effete, but because they have preserved their racial purity like no other people. And as Aryans are lured into intermarriage and weakening their stock the Jews are more and more threatening because of their racial purity! This of course played into the same sexual insecurities as white racism did with respect to Blacks in the United States. The unspoken non-rational fear was that the Jews or the Blacks as a group were attempting systematically to pollute the blood of the Aryans or whites. Miscegenation would result in the degeneration of the Aryan or white race.

The most important single intellectual challenge to the understanding of human life and its connection with nature in the 19th century was of course the idea of evolution by means of natural selection, as Charles Darwin called it, or “survival of the fittest” as T. H. Huxley called it. Actually the first stab at this notion came long before Darwin and Wallace published their ideas in 1859. In 1813 a South Carolinian who had sided with the English in the Revolution and taken up residence in London in 1784, Dr. William Wells, had examined a black woman whose skin was partly white. He saw this as a throwback,
assuming that white was the original skin tone of the first humans. Five years later in 1818 he published his speculations on the origin of the Black race. He wrote this:

“Of the accidental varieties of man, . . . some would be better fitted than others to bear the diseases of the country [Africa]. This race would consequently multiply, while the others would decrease, not only from their inability to sustain the attacks of disease, but from their incapacity of contending with their more vigorous neighbors, . . . A darker race would in the course of time occur, and, as the darkest would be best fitted for the climate, this would at length become the most prevalent, if not the only race.” A guess based on little empirical evidence, but remarkably close to Darwin’s conclusions in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).

Racism was one of the great solvents of the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the individualism of the Liberal tradition. It was very useful for rulers and elite groups because it provided an “objective” scientific validation for their power, especially in its post-Darwinian form; those who were on top deserved to be there; they were the fittest. Racism buttressed technological superiority with a moral argument in support of imperialism. It justified slavery. Racism was useful to nationalists too, because it ignored divisions of social class and served as a weapon against socialism. For many states it provided a justification for claims of supremacy or territory as against neighbors who were culturally or racially inferior. Ultimately it served to biologize history.

So by the turn of the twentieth century, all the pieces had been put into place for the Nazi ideology. Anthropology and Darwinian natural selection had made the idea of race “scientific.” The myth of the Aryan race as a superior type had been loosed on the world. History had been turned into the story of how the genius of one race or another expressed itself over time, legitimating national or racial states. Social Darwinism had given the cachet of science to the notion of eugenics, preventing racial decline by weeding out the unfit types. Anti-Semitism was now based on ideas of race rather than religious prejudice, and had shown promise as a way of attracting mass political support. All that was needed for the arrival of the era of genocide was for a major European State to fall into the hands of some group committed to turn these ideas into practice. And in January, 1933 when Adolf Hitler, Führer of the National Socialist German Workers Party, was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany, the last nail was hammered into place for that to happen.

II. From ‘Race is All’ to ‘Race is Nothing’: The Last Hundred Years

For many years I taught 19th and 20th century world history and European history. One of the difficulties with the textbooks and my lectures when they got to the recent past was that the threads of continuity that had served so well up to that point suddenly frayed and it was less like a story than a miscellaneous bunch of unrelated stuff. That may well be true of this final presentation of the history of the idea of race over the last century. However, I will try to organize this material enough to prevent it from seeming to be just a list of stuff. To do that, I will have to bring out certain themes more and ignore other matters. And remember, this is a history of the idea of race in western civilization, not a history of racism or genocide.
At the start of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, leading scientists as well as ordinary people mostly held to the position that “race is all.” A century later, most scientists and increasingly most educated people believe that race is nothing. Some of the story of this dramatic shift comes from science. Most of the rest comes from war.

Arguably the climax of the belief that science demonstrated the inherent superiority of white people over other races was just about a century ago. In the United States, Jim Crow segregation of Blacks reached its high point after 1890. In Europe, anti-Semitism pervaded the politics of most countries at the turn of the century. Anti-Semitism was not merely the ancient religious prejudice against Jews as “Christ-killers”; it was a system of racializing Jews, defining them as a separate race, and therefore possessing inherited essential and unchangeable features of intelligence, character, morality. Jews were the opposite of the Aryans or Nordic race, which also had permanent and unchangeable characteristics. By the 1890s race thinking was pervasive, not just among Germans but almost all European peoples; down to World War I, race was the pre-eminent category believed to define human groups and individuals. Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1899, was the high water mark of the idea that “race is all” in history and culture. All history was the product of one race, the Aryans, the “great race,” the white race. This belief was supported as scientific by most biologists, anthropologists, and other scientists. It was supported and believed by most theologians. One of the important aspects of this racial science was the belief in the importance of racial purity: the mixing of races would necessarily lead to the degeneration of the higher race. Darwin’s “natural selection” was applied to human races and became “the survival of the fittest.”

Darwin’s initial influence on the idea of race was based on the notion that human evolution was linear. The already established belief that some races were superior to others was combined with linear evolution and the result was the idea that whites were the leading edge of evolution while other races were survivals of earlier stages of evolution. Predictably, Africans were regarded as the least evolved, and thus the closest to the great apes. It was not until the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that biologists and anthropologists gave up the idea of linear evolution for the (to us) familiar idea of evolution as a branching process.

In 1883, Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton coined the term *eugenics* for a new science based on the belief that mental and moral characteristics were inherited like physical characteristics, and proposing a program to breed the superior and more intelligent and eliminate the inferior and less intelligent. The great pioneer of statistics, Karl Pearson, applied himself to compile the statistical evidence to support a program of sterilizing the unfit. Eugenics was promoted as a policy of “racial hygiene,” medicalizing the old idea of purity of a race. In the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when America still had a policy of open immigration from Europe, there was a great concern about the “new immigration” from Eastern and Southern Europe. These were Italians, Jews, and Slavs, and they were immigrating by the millions, filling up the northern cities. Laws were enacted to keep Japanese and Chinese immigrants out, but Blacks and Indians were already here, and now the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon stock was being further compromised
by the new immigration. In 1916, Madison Grant published a sensational book *The Passing of the Great Race*, in which he argued that only rigid segregation and a program of selective breeding and sterilization could prevent the otherwise inevitable dilution of the white race by the inferior new races and the spread of feeble-mindedness, insanity, and disease.

Science began to turn away from the “race is all” position only in the early 20th century, but the biological basis for that turn was really laid by the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel in 1867. Mendel demonstrated in his experiments with heredity in plants that characteristics were inherited by separate and discrete combinations of genetic material, what we call particulate inheritance. But no one, not even Darwin, recognized the significance of his findings until 1900, when three different scientists in three different countries stumbled upon Mendel’s work and understood its meaning almost simultaneously. And so at the very start of the new century, the science of genetics was born, leaving behind the idea of “blood” or some fluid-like transmission of the characteristics of parents to offspring.

Anthropology, which had been virtually founded as a science of race, began to move away from those origins only in the early 20th century with the work of Franz Boas, a German-born scholar who taught at Columbia University. In a famous series of measurements, he showed that the round-headed and long-headed “races” could not be separate fixed types, because when round-headed types immigrated to America from Europe, their descendants within a few generations became more long-headed. Environment, not immutable race, seemed to matter. Boas argued that human evolution was not linear but branching, more like a tree than a rising line. Boas created the modern science of ethnography and gathered around himself a whole generation of new anthropologists including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and A. L. Kroeber, who began to oppose the idea of race as the determining factor of intelligence and character.

None of this reached the wider public before the 1930s, of course. In the meantime, there was the catastrophe of World War I and the reaction of the 1920s. In Europe, World War I had a profound effect on the idea of race. The balance of forces on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 was so indecisive that those powers, chiefly Britain and France, that had overseas empires populated by non-white colonized people, drew their colonials into the fight. Hundreds of thousands of Africans served in the French Army, as did hundreds of thousands of Indians from the British Empire. Europeans had their first experience of large numbers of dark-skinned people on their soil and among them. This experience fed previously theoretical teachings about such people as dangerous, ignorant, barbaric, diseased sexual predators. At the end of the war, the French used African troops to occupy the Rhineland, provoking racially-based fears among almost all Germans. European racism, directed primarily against Jews before 1914, was immensely widened by World War I and its aftermath to include Asians and Africans. The U. S. Army had also used Black troops in France, and extraordinary measures were taken by the American government to control these men so that when they returned they would not be tainted by the more open and integrated society, and the availability of white women, into trespassing against the rules of race in America.
The African troops in the Rhineland were not in fact bloodthirsty primitive sages raping every woman they saw, but in the aftermath of their defeat, the German leaders needed explanations for their loss, and one of these was that the internationalist Jews had deliberately used Blacks to introduce disease and feeble-mindedness through mixing of the races, to weaken Germany. The idea that the Jews were somehow responsible for Germany’s defeat was widespread after the war, part of the “stab in the back” legend. German troops had not lost the war, they had been betrayed by the socialists and the Jews. Many nationalistic Germans found this comforting and grabbed on to it after 1918. Hitler believed that the French had deliberately used Black troops to pollute the blood of the Germans and weaken them further. This helps explain the appeal of the Nazi movement and the bizarre ideas of Adolf Hitler. In prison in 1924, Hitler wrote his book entitled Mein Kampf, or my struggle. Rambling and almost incoherent, Hitler’s underlying system of belief was made plain: “all the great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning.” It followed then that “no Jew can be a member of the German race” or a citizen. When the Nazis came to power, they sterilized a quarter million Germans as “unworthy of living” and in the famous Nuremberg Laws of 1935 prohibited all marriage and sexual relations between Aryans and Jews. In December 1935, the medical profession was put in service to the goal of “race hygiene,” and a few years later the logical end point was reached in the decision to exterminate all the Jews of Europe.

It was the breathtaking application of ideas of racial hygiene and eugenics in Germany that slowly discredited these notions in the eyes of many in the United States and western Europe. But the policies of the interwar period in the U. S. did not show much change in this respect. States continued to sterilize women regarded as mentally defective or unfit, lynching continued as a daily occurrence, and the immigration quota system set in place in 1921 and reinforced in 1924 was explicitly designed to encourage immigration from northwestern European countries, limit immigrants from east and south Europe, and virtually end immigration from other parts of the world.

The effects of the war on the countries of Europe were far more devastating than on the U.S. Millions of men had been lost from the population and the economies deeply affected. France and Britain required large numbers of immigrants to restart their economies. Inevitably, many of the colonials who had come to fight were allowed to stay as workers, and these countries were never again entirely white demographically.

The Great Depression of the 1930s almost entirely ended immigration. Countries raised tariff barriers to protect their jobs and immigration barriers to protect their workers. At the same time, the rise of totalitarianism and militarism in Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Stalinist Soviet Union threatened the democracies of the West. Even in those few countries that tried to use governmental policy to provide employment and social insurance, like the U.S. under the New Deal, only baby steps were taken to deal with inequalities and suffering based on race and racial discrimination. Yet it was during the thirties that the first efforts were made to convince the general public that “race is nothing.” In 1935, the year of the Nuremberg laws, Julian Huxley, the son of T. H.
Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” and some colleagues published *We Europeans*. Huxley’s argument was that Mendelian genetics demonstrated that races do not exist as separate “real” things in nature. In 1937 a young Frenchman who had come to America, cultural historian Jacques Barzun, published *Race: a Study in Modern Superstition*, arguing that race did not exist in nature, but was socially constructed. It was in the mid-1930s that the neologism “racism” was coined as a word, parallel to capitalism, socialism, nationalism, etc. – in other words, designating an ideology, not a science. There is all the difference in the world between saying “race science” and “racism.”

In paleontology, the 1930s also saw the first statement of the theory that humans evolved not in Asia or Europe, where the earliest civilizations emerged, but in sub-Saharan Africa. Louis B. Leakey, working in East Africa, asserted this theory and was scoffed at by the scientists of his time. But over the years as Leakey and his family found more fossils of pre-modern hominids in East Africa, the scientific world reluctantly came around to accepting the “out of Africa” hypothesis. I used to shock my students in the first class of the semester on world history by telling them that they were all Africans, it was just a question of how recently they had left.

The great shift in the understanding of race came during and immediately after World War II. The demands of wartime production and the need for a total national effort combined to force all the belligerents to fight this truly global war in new ways. Particularly in America, the mass of the public that had refused to involve itself in European affairs had to be motivated to fight. Since we were allied with the Soviets, the argument could not be made on the grounds of opposition to totalitarianism as such. The American government and entertainment industry had to engage in massive propaganda to convert Americans to engage in the war. Americans had to be told why we were fighting. It was the Nazis’ racism that was attacked. But clearly this left a racially segregated America vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy. One aspect of racism that did change during the war was anti-Semitism. Jews, even wealthy Jews, had been excluded from elite academic institutions, residential areas, social groups, and country clubs. That began to change. Then at the end of the war, with the horrifying discovery of the unimaginable scale of Nazi extermination policies, anti-Semitism was utterly discredited. The benchmark for this change was a movie of 1947 called *Gentleman’s Agreement*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture that year although it was a fairly ordinary picture except for its theme, denouncing the anti-Semitism of the upper-class elite of America.

The end of the war also began what, looking backwards, seems the inevitable collapse of racial segregation. In 1947 President Truman ordered the Armed Forces to be integrated. All through the war, Blacks had fought in separate units from whites, often with white officers. There were very few Black officers and none in command over white troops. Blacks were not allowed to serve on the ships of the Navy except in menial roles as cooks and cleaners. Separate blood banks were kept to prevent the mixing of blood between races. After 1947, the culture of the military was required to change, and anyone today who grew up in a postwar military family can testify to the difference between the racial culture on base and in the surrounding society, especially if the base was in the South.
In Europe too, the defeat of Nazism meant the discrediting of anti-Semitism and the race thinking on which the Holocaust rested. More than that, the far-right nationalist parties that had used racialist arguments, allied themselves with Nazism, or collaborated under Nazi occupation were also discredited. So in the political reconstruction of Europe, from the spring of 1945 onwards, politics was in the hands of those center and left parties that had formed the resistance to Nazism during the war. What followed in the next years was the decolonization movement, the remarkably swift end of the British, French, and Dutch colonial empires, followed by the Belgian and Portuguese a few years later. The need for the justification of European domination of the non-white world disappeared. The United Nations changed from being the allied countries of World War II to a body whose majority lay in the newly independent ex-colonies. In 1949 UNESCO, the U.N. cultural agency, set up a Committee of Experts on Race, and the following year they published the first official U.N. Statement on Race, which asserted that race was a scientifically untenable concept.

As the Cold War began, Europe itself was divided between two spheres of influence, one looking to Washington and the other to Moscow. In the West, economic recovery was the priority. The U. S. set up the Marshall Plan and the French and British governments estimated that the rebuilding of their economies would require millions of new workers. After the end of the Allied occupation in 1949, West Germany had the same need. So these countries opened the floodgates to “guest workers.” Where did these migrants come from? From the disappearing Empires, mostly. Millions of Africans and Middle Easterners went to France. Millions of Indians, Pakistanis, and Caribbean peoples went to England. Millions of Turks and Balkan peoples went to Germany. There was rising racial tension in places, but on the whole things were relatively peaceful until 1973.

The year 1973 was a major watershed of the post-war period. It dramatically ended the long era of sustained growth and prosperity in Europe and America. It was the year of the Arab oil boycott and the enormous rise in the price of petroleum, the fuel that now powered most of the world’s industry. The result was economic stagnation plus inflation, massive political dissatisfaction, and a sharp contraction in European and American economies. And part of the fallout from all that was the end of the need for guest workers. In fact, these millions of foreigners, many of whom had been there for a generation, now seemed a threat to white Europeans’ jobs. As a result, the right-wing politicians who had been silenced before 1973 reappeared using nativist appeals against the dark-skinned immigrants, very effective in reaching those who feared the violence, disease, and cheap labor they believed the outsiders brought. Leading the way was Enoch Powell, a Conservative M. P. who broke with his party over the immigration issue. By the 1980s, actual neo-Nazi parties had emerged: violent skinheads, the more respectable Front National of Jean Marie Le Pen, the Republikaner party in Germany, Jorg Haider in Austria, and others.

In a sense the new extremists were not like the old racists; in a sense they were. What they did was to substitute culture for heredity. The claim was not that Blacks, Muslims, or others could never be integrated because they were of a different race whose “blood”
would contaminate the white population, but that they had cultures and religious beliefs that could never be reconciled with European civilization. But for all practical political purposes, this was simply the encoding of race as culture. Similarly, these anti-immigrant parties and leaders increasingly encoded anti-Semitism as anti-Zionism. So it is culture instead of color, Zionism instead of a Jewish race, a program of expulsion instead of genocide. But do not make the mistake of imagining that the underlying ideas are not the same. The argument is that Turks, Algerians, Blacks or Indians and Pakistanis should go “back home” because they are incapable of being assimilated culturally.

A parallel development took place in this country. Since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, half a century ago, American politics has been transformed as the Solid South switched from solidly Democratic to solidly Republican. What Nixon called the “Southern strategy” was based on taking advantage of the backlash of white voters after integration and the civil rights acts of the mid-1960s, while avoiding any direct reference to race, but associating Democrats and their urban base instead with criminality. The “war on drugs” has subsequently justified the mass incarceration of young Black men and their accompanying political disenfranchisement in ways that can be presented as unrelated to race. One in four Black men in our population will be imprisoned. And one has to wonder whether states like Arizona and Alabama would be passing laws to try to force people designated as illegal aliens to leave if the said illegal aliens were white Canadians instead of dark-skinned Mexicans and Central Americans. So we too have our encoded politics of race, even in 2014. But it is a kind of progress that these messages have to be encoded, that open appeals to race are unacceptable.

Even as all of these developments have been going on, scientists have completely given up on race. The key event was the discovery in 1953 of the reason for the random variation of characteristics in reproduction: a curious molecule called deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA. The double helix structure of this molecule allowed the combination of the DNA of the father and the mother to form a new combination unique to the offspring. Charles Darwin was conscious that his theory of evolution by natural selection lacked two important things: he had no explanation for how traits were passed from parents to offspring, and no explanation for the constant random variation within populations. The first missing piece was supplied by Mendelian genetics. The second was answered by DNA. DNA is what allows us the “aha!” moment of understanding of why there will always be variations. In 1998, the American Anthropological Association issued its official repudiation of race as a scientific concept: it noted that 94% of the variation among human beings is within, not between, racial groups. Only 6% of the variation is between racial groups. Thus there is much greater variation within than among so-called races, and “physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them.” Race is a social construct. Biologically, race determines nothing. Race is nothing.

Fifty years after the discovery of the double helix of DNA, the entire human genome was sequenced in April, 2003. Within a few years, it was possible to establish with a high degree of accuracy the geographical movements of populations. Genetic testing using hundreds of DNA markers and sampling different populations groups allowed the
statistical measurement of the genetic distance between populations, which reflects the
time since they had a common ancestor. In effect, the new science of molecular biology
and DNA sequencing allowed science to state with great precision the genetic distance
between races. One of the conclusions was the validation of Louis Leakey’s hypothesis
that all modern humans were descendants of African hominids. We are all Africans. Only
after true human species had evolved did any of our ancestors move out to occupy Asia,
Europe and the Americas.

Most recently, a new phase of science has begun examining what is called mitochondrial
DNA. Almost all our cells have within them these virus-like things called mitochondria.
Since sperm cells do not have them, all our mtDNA comes through the maternal line.
Using mtDNA analysis of populations and computing genetic distance, it was possible to
say that all modern humans are the descendants of one woman or a very small number of
women who lived in Africa between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. There is a similar
indicator that comes to us through the paternal line, because only the male has the Y
chromosome. Looking at the sequences on the Y chromosome, we find that all modern
humans came from one man or a very small number of men in Africa 200,000 to 500,000
years ago.

The physical features of skin color, hair type, width of nose, and so forth have no relation
to intelligence or morality. There are of course survivals of the idea of race in our culture.
Race is still listed on the U. S. Census form, and many laws and Federal programs require
identification by race. Meanwhile, interracial marriages and mixed-race children are
increasingly common, even among Presidents, further blurring the meaning of the term.
We can only hope that the popular and legal view of race as nothing will soon catch up
with the scientists’ understanding.

Ivan Hannaford, *Race: the History of an Idea in the West*, p. 57-58:

The meaning of race is dependent upon the following premises:

1. that human beings are independent of ethical, moral, religious, and
   mythological laws or rules, and are subject to the laws of nature; man is a
   primate . . . .

2. that origins are only to be found in physical-mechanical motions or in simple
   ideas implanted on the mind by nature, and that these provide a more rational
   explanation of beginnings than myth or legend.

3. that descent is about the transmission of biological characteristics, once
   ‘blood,’ now ‘genes,’ sometimes linked via the concept of evolution to soul,
   spirit, or mind.
4. that races may be distinguished and arranged hierarchically so as to allow recognition of peoples by ‘types.’
5. that differences between human beings may be explained by reference to structural characteristics that are assumed to be held in common by people who may be grouped, classified, and ordered into divisions taken to be ‘real’ because they are empirically observable.
6. that all people, as part of nature, belong to an enormous physical or natural entity, divisible into ‘races,’ or subdivisible into ‘ethnic groups,’ which are regarded as actual things and that they are linked together in some way from these material origins.


Race-thinking occurs when someone implies any of the following propositions:
1. that mankind is divided into unchanging natural types recognizable by physical features, which are transmitted ‘through the blood’ and that permit distinctions to be made between ‘pure’ and ‘mixed’ races.
2. that the mental and moral behavior of human beings can be related to physical structure, and that knowledge of the structure or of the facial label which denotes it provides a satisfactory account of the behavior.
3. that individual personality, ideas, and capacities, as well as national culture, politics, and morals, are the products of social entities variously termed race, nation, class, family, whose causative force is clear without further definition or inquiry into the connection between the group and the spiritual ‘product.’

Early Meanings of the Word *Race* (from the *Oxford English Dictionary, Webster’s Third New Unabridged Dictionary*)

Basic meaning: a lineage or line of descent
A group of persons, animals, or plants connected by common descent or origin.
A group of persons, animals, or things having some common feature or features.

16th – 17th – 18th century examples:
The act of breeding or producing offspring: “male he created thee but thy consort female for race.”
Descendants of a common ancestor; a tribe or nation:
“the outward race and stock of Abraham”
“the getting of a lawful race, and by a gem of women.”
A breeding stock of animals:
“a race of mares”
“the wolfish race appear with belly gaunt and famished face.”
“the fauns and satyrs, a lascivious race.”
“the plumy race, the tenants of the sky.”
“of all the race of animals, alone the bees have common cities of their own.”
A class of people with common interests or pursuits:
“the race of doctors”
“such a race of worthy learned gentlemen as this Realm never yet did afford.”
“she is beautiful beyond the race of women.”
“the whole race of the bishops succeeding Justus in this see”
“you preserve a race of idle people here about you.”
A lineage, particularly one of distinction
“you might have derived your claims from a more early race of ancestors.”
“A mighty people come! A race of heroes!”
“some were Dukes, and came of regal race.”
“Llewelyn ap Gruffith, last Prince of Wales of the British race.”

19th century examples:
“...I will take some savage woman; she will rear my dusky race.” (Tennyson)
“...courage was a heritage of the whole German race.” (T.R. Green)
“...they were all different tribes and peoples of the one great Hellenic race.”
(Kingsley)
“considerable differences occur in the general stature of the several races of mankind.”
“...race in the negro is of appalling importance.” (Emerson)
“...his ablest servants were of Oriental race.” (Dixon)
“...the furious race-hatred that has been raging all over the South.”

**Ingredients in the Pot:**
*The Cookery of the Idea of Race, from the Middle Ages to the 20th Century*

Religion: Medieval Christian universalism, but with the Noachic division of mankind into the sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.
Separation of the Jews from the Christian community
Racialization of anti-Semitism

Natural history/Biology: Medieval ideas of the occult, significance of blood
Enlightenment effort to classify and order species and varieties
Concern with origins of races, focus on origins as explanations
Evolution, Social Darwinism project significance of race into the future
Eugenics movement advocates using science to weed out the unfit
Blood inheritance replaced by Mendelian particulate inheritance (genes)

Linguistics: Indo-European hypothesis
Common ancestral language implies common descent (race)
Racialization of language: Aryan and Semite

Anthropology: Humans seen as part of the animal kingdom, a species of primates
Monogenesis and the need for a mechanism to explain the origin of races
The cult of anthropometry, measurement of skulls, cephalic index, etc.
Assumption that skull size, physiognomy imply intelligence, character
Effects of evolution: races are stages of development, from primitive to
Advanced History:
Franks and Gauls: The Two Races hypothesis and the rights of the nobility
Herder and the *Volksgeist*
Romanticism and the turn to the uniqueness of peoples
Niebuhr, Thierry, and the revolution in historiography
19th Century Historiography as the history of the national-racial state

Colonialism/Imperialism: Discovery of the Americas and the Encounter with the Savage
The need for a justification of African slavery
Christian mission becomes the civilizing mission, White Man’s Burden
Imperialism justified scientifically as survival of the fittest

Recipe for a Holocaust: Blend ingredients and stir for five hundred years. Add a pinch of totalitarianism.