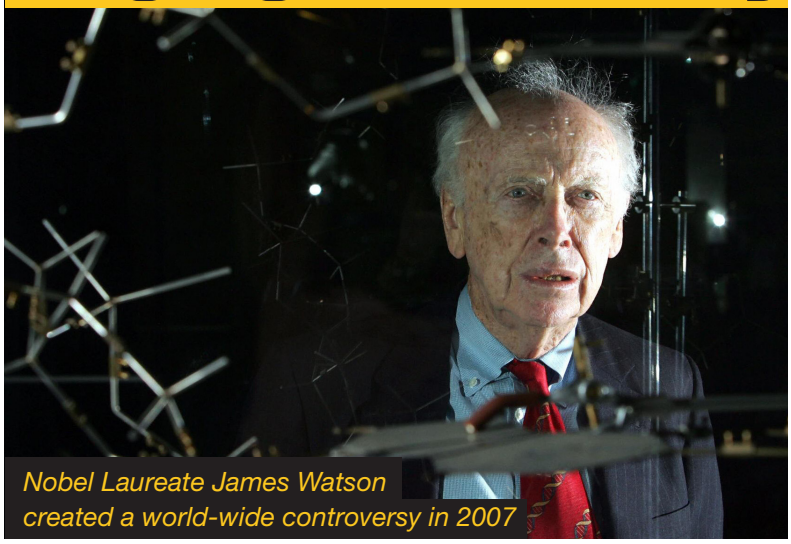
# The new language of diversity



*Nobel Laureate James Watson created a world-wide controversy in 2007*

The idea of race has returned in a big way to scientific research and medical practice. Where once the concept was a scientific embarrassment, with most scientists dismissing racial differences as merely skin deep, now it is becoming central to much scientific debate. Where once only the lunatic fringe embraced racial ideas, now they have become the currency of distinguished, mainstream thinkers.

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- The US government has licensed a heart drug to be used only on African Americans.

- In a follow-up to the Human Genome Project, geneticists have launched an international study to map genetic differences between races to help provide data for treating diseases. Anthropologists have developed software to determine an individual's race from the shape of his skull.

- A genetic study from respected researchers has claimed that Jews are more intelligent because their history of money lending and other financial occupations has favoured genes associated with cleverness.

- Another suggests that white Britons are genetically distinct and can trace their ancestry back to a few hundred Stone Age hunters who lived here some 14,000 years ago.

The return of racial ideas to scientific research has led to a debate not just about whether race has a scientific meaning, but also whether scientists should investigate racial differences at all. Many worry that we are seeing a return to old-fashioned racial science, of the kind that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became the justification for savagery and genocide, culminating in the Holocaust. One influential policy paper in America has recommended that all researchers receiving federal grants should be banned from linking genetics with race and ethnicity, and suggest a 'standing committee' to scrutinise all papers to decide whether their use of racial categories is socially acceptable. Some go further, believing that not only should scientists not investigate racial differences, they should not talk about them either.

This shift has led to a fierce debate about the scientific meaning of race. The geneticist Craig Venter, one of the key figures in the unravelling of the human genome, has suggested that 'The Human Genome Project shows there is no such thing as race'. Neil Risch, as equally a distinguished a geneticist as Craig Venter, disagrees. 'A decade or more of population genetics research' he insists, 'have documented biological differences between the races'.

## Watson's Words

In October 2007, the Nobel Laureate James Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, created a world-wide controversy when he suggested in a newspaper interview that blacks were innately less intelligent than whites. 'I am inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa', he said. 'All our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours – whereas all the testing says not really.'

Censure was swift and universal. The Federation of American Scientists condemned Watson for choosing 'to use his unique stature to promote personal prejudices that are racist, vicious and unsupported by science'. London's Science Museum, at which Watson was to have delivered a lecture, cancelled his appearance, claiming that he had gone 'beyond the point of acceptable debate'. New York's Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, of which he was director, not only 'vehemently' disowned Watson's remarks but also forced him to resign.

## Debating Difference

As in many controversies about the human condition, the argument over race is a debate not so much about the facts of human differences, as about the *meaning* of these facts. Nobody on either side of the debate denies that there are myriad genetic differences between human populations. The question is: what is the significance of such differences and in what context are they significant? And answering this question has proved difficult for both scientific and political reasons.

## The Formation of Groups

One reason that we have such difficulty with the idea of race is that while human populations are not usually naturally created groups, but have been forged through social and historical developments, there are nevertheless, biological consequences to being a member of such groups. 'If we look at enough genes', the doyen of population biologists Luca Luigi Cavalli-Sforza observed more than a decade ago, 'the genetic distance between Ithaca and Albany in New York or Pisa and Florence in Italy is most likely to be significant, and therefore scientifically proven.' He added that while 'the inhabitants of Ithaca and Albany might be disappointed to discover that they belong to separate races', the 'people in Pisa and Florence might be pleased that science had validated their ancient mutual distrust by demonstrating their genetic differences.'

Geneticists, in other words, can distinguish between all sorts of populations. Some of these distinctions are useful scientifically, some are not. Whether or not they are useful depends on the question we want to ask and the context in which we ask it. But the populations that geneticists distinguish are socially defined ones. That is because there is no such thing as a 'natural' human population.

Migration; intermarriage; war and conquest; forced assimilation; voluntary embrace of new or multiple identities whether religious, cultural, national, ethnic or racial; any number of social, economic, religious, and other barriers to interaction (and hence to reproduction); social rules for defining populations such as the 'one drop rule' in America under which anyone with even one drop of 'black blood' (such as, for instance, Barack Obama and Tiger Woods) is deemed 'black', irrespective of their other ancestries – these and many other social factors impact upon the character of a group and transform its genetic profile. That is why racial categories are so difficult to define scientifically.

## Unnatural Division

Many of the ways in which we customarily group people socially – by race, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, geographic locality and so on - are not arbitrary from a biological point of view. Members of such groups usually intermarry more often than they marry members of other groups. So two members of any such group are likely to be biologically closer than two people chosen at random from across groups. The difference will only be very slight, but it can, nevertheless, be useful medical and scientific research.

Races are not natural divisions of humankind. But socially defined populations provide, nevertheless, a rough and ready means of dividing humans into groups that show different degrees of biological relatedness. The irony is that in order to study human genetic diversity, scientists need socially defined categories of difference. The danger is that by using socially defined groups in research, biologists will endow differences between such groups with greater importance than is warranted. Even Nobel Laureates fall into this trap.

## Too taboo to talk about?

There was little merit in James Watson's argument about race and intelligence. But neither was there much merit in many of the criticisms of Watson. Implicit in much of the outrage was the belief that certain views cannot be expressed, because they are politically unpalatable. That, too, is a deeply unscientific way of looking at the world. Race is a legitimate area for scientific inquiry. Watson had every right to express his opinion even if that opinion was factually wrong, morally suspect and politically offensive. That is the essence of scientific debate.

## Out of the mouths of liberals

The irony is, that for all the vitriol directed at figures like Watson, racial talk today is as likely to come out of the mouths of liberal anti-racists as of reactionary racial scientists. At the heart of traditional racial science was the idea of difference. Racial scientists divided humanity into a set of distinct groups : they insisted that every group possessed a certain set of qualities that distinguished it from every other group ; they believed that the differences between racial groups, rather than any common features they might possess, were the key features that shaped human interaction and development and attempted to create a hierarchy of superior and inferior groups.

## Cultures not races

Today few people believe that races exist in the old-fashioned sense of clearly delineated groups of people each with a special, essential quality. Rather, the idea of race today expresses a much vaguer belief about the importance of human differences, a sense that what matter are our particular identities, and that preserving and celebrating such differences and identities is essential to the healthy functioning of human societies. Race, as the award-winning biologist Armand Leroi has put it, 'is merely a shorthand that enables us to speak sensibly, though with no great precision, about genetic rather than cultural or political differences'.

And such a celebration of difference has today become the hallmark, not of old-fangled, reactionary racism, but of modern, liberal *anti-racism*. *We're All Multiculturalists Now* observes the American sociologist Nathan Glazer in the title of a book. And indeed we are. The celebration of difference, respect for pluralism, avowal of identity politics - these have come to be regarded as the hallmarks of a progressive, antiracist outlook and as the foundation of modern liberal democracies.

## Genealogy: the heritage stamp

The old arguments about race have become recycled through new ideas about culture and identity. And these ideas can crop up in unexpected places. Take, for instance, the current mania for genealogy. One of the 'pleasures' of the return of racial concepts into science, Armand Leroi suggests, is 'the discovery of a new kind of genealogy'. Race, for Leroi, is simply a badge to say 'This is who I am, this is who my family is, this is where we've come from'. And not only has race become a form of genealogy, but the new vogue for genealogy is also helping rehabilitate racial ideas about human differences.

Over the past decade geneticists have traced the histories of countless populations. Dozens of commercial companies have sprung up to help individuals trace their family history. Many see this not as an entertaining bit of genealogy, but a fundamental act of recovering their authentic identity.

Rick Kittles is co-director of National Human Genome Centre at Howard University, Washington. He is also the founder of African Ancestry Inc. which, for $349, will test the ancestry of African Americans. Kittles traced his maternal ancestry to the Hausa tribe in Nigeria. 'I then went to Nigeria and talked to people and learned a lot about the Hausa's culture and tradition', Kittles has written. 'That gave me sense about who I am. In a way, it grounded me.'

One of the first such genealogy companies to set up in Britain was the Cambridge-based Roots for Real. Among its first customers were Rachel Hunt and Matthew Barrett. They were married in October 2003. The couple turned to Roots for Real 'to bring something from their ancestral roots into the ceremony' so they could understand 'who they are and where their culture comes from'. 'Our DNA holds perhaps the most intact record of our family, our lands, language, tribes, customs and traditions', Rachel Hunt told a reporter. 'It would be so satisfying to know that our children can grow up with a strong sense of identity and heritage by being able to unravel a time we thought would be lost for ever.'

## The new language of diversity

Where once black identity might have been seen as a cultural or a political expression, now it is increasingly seen as genetic heritage, inextricably linking race, culture and identity. As Joseph Harker, former editor of the *Voice*, Britain's leading black newspaper, has put it, genetics provides African Caribbeans with 'a route to a new identity', a reconnection with 'their own brothers sisters and cousins' and the possibility of 'a whole new history and culture'.

The changing concept of identity has provided new opportunities for racists who now use the language of diversity rather of racial superiority. Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party talks of the need to protect 'white history and heritage' and insists that only those who can 'trace our ancestry… through to the tribes who came to what is now the British Isles at the end of the last Ice Age', are true Britons. Any later migrants are 'colonists'. A BNP member interviewed for BBC Radio's

Newsbeat programme decried racial integration on the grounds that 'If everybody integrated it would take away everybody's identity.'

There is a paradox, then, in the way we think today about race. On the one hand we worry too much that the return of racial categories to scientific research is heralding the resurrection of old fashion racial science. On the other hand we don't worry enough about the ways in which cultural ideas of identity are helping rehabilitate racial concepts of human differences. The irony is that it is not so much reactionary racial scientists but liberal anti-racists whose ideas should give us cause for concern.

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