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RACE

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Race has always been a vague and slippery concept. In the mid-18th century, European naturalists such as Linnaeus, Comte de Buffon, and Johannes Blumenbach described geographic groupings of humans who differed in appearance. The philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant both were fascinated by human physical diversity; they held that extremes of heat, cold, or sunlight extinguished human potential. Hume, writing in 1748, contended that "there was never a civilized nation of any complexion other than white."

Kant felt similarly. He was preoccupied with questions of human diversity throughout his career and wrote at length on the subject in a series of essays beginning in 1775. He was the first to name and define the geographic groupings of humans as "races" (in German, *Rassen*). There were four of them—characterized by skin color, hair form, cranial shape, and other anatomical features, and also by their capacity for morality, self-improvement, and civilization. And they were arranged hierarchically, with only the European race, in his estimation, being capable of self-improvement.

Why did the scientific racism of Hume and Kant prevail in the face of the logical and thoughtful opposition of Johann Gottfried von Herder and others? Perhaps because Kant was recognized as a great philosopher in his own time, and his status rose in the 19th century as copies of his major philosophical works were widely distributed and read. Some of his supporters agreed with his racist views; some apologized for them; most commonly, many just ignored them. Moreover, racism—which diminished or denied the humanity of non-Europeans, especially Africans—bolstered the transatlantic slave trade, which had become the overriding engine of European economic growth. This view was augmented by biblical interpretations popular at the time which depicted Africans as destined for servitude.

Skin color, as the most noticeable racial characteristic, was associated with a nebulous assemblage of opinions and hearsay about the inherent natures of the various races. Skin color stood for morality, character, and the capacity for civilization; it became a meme. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of "race science." The biological reality of races was confirmed by new types of scientific evidence amassed by new types of scientists—notably anthropologists and geneticists. This era witnessed the birth of eugenics and its offspring, the concept of racial purity. The advent of Social Darwinism further reinforced the notion that the superiority of the white race was part of the natural order. The fact that all peoples are products of complex genetic mixtures resulting from migration and intermingling over thousands of years was not admitted by the racial scientists, nor by the scores of eugenicists who campaigned on both sides of the Atlantic for the improvement of racial quality.

The mid-20th century witnessed the continued proliferation of scientific treatises on race. By the 1960s, however, two factors were contributing to the demise of the concept of biological races. One was the increased rate of study of the physical and genetic diversity of human groups worldwide; the

other was the emergence of the civil rights movement in the United States and elsewhere. Before long, influential scientists were denouncing studies of "race" because races themselves could not be scientifically defined. Where scientists looked for sharp boundaries between groups, none could be found. But despite these major shifts in scientific thinking, the sibling concepts of human races and a color-based hierarchy of races remained firmly established in mainstream culture. Racial stereotypes were potent and persistent, especially in the United States and South Africa, where subjugation and exploitation of dark-skinned labor had been the cornerstone of economic growth.

After its scientific demise, race remained as a name and concept but gradually came to stand for something quite different. Today many people identify themselves as belonging to one or another racial group regardless of what science may say about the nature of race. The shared experiences of members of such groups create powerful social bonds. For many people, including many scholars, the concept of race, while no longer biological, has become a mélange of social categories of class and ethnicity.

Clinicians continue to map observed patterns of health and disease onto old racial concepts such as "White," "Black" (or "African American"), "Asian," and so on. Even after it has been shown that many diseases (adult-onset diabetes, alcoholism, high blood pressure, to name a few) show apparent racial patterns because people share similar environmental conditions, groupings by race are maintained. The use of racial self-categorization in epidemiological studies is defended and even encouraged. Medical studies of health disparities between "races" become meaningless when sufficient variables—such as

differences in class, ethnic social practices, and attitudes—are taken into account.

Race's latest makeover arises from genomics and mostly in biomedical contexts. The sanctified position of medical science in the popular consciousness gives the race concept renewed esteem. Racial realists marshal genomic evidence to support the hard biological reality of racial difference, while racial skeptics see no racial patterns. What's clear is that people are seeing what they want to see, constructing studies to provide the outcomes they expect. In *Race Decoded: The Genomic Fight for Social Justice* (2012), the University of California sociologist Catherine Bliss cogently characterizes race today as "a belief system that produces consistencies in perception and practice at a particular social and historical moment."

Race has a hold on history but no longer has a place in science. The sheer instability and potential for misinterpretation render race useless as a scientific concept. Inventing new vocabularies to deal with human diversity and inequity won't be easy, but it must be done.