

Introduction

The German Invention of Race

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Within four decades straddling the close of the eighteenth century, the word “race” was adopted in remarkably similar forms across Europe as a scientific term denoting a historically evolved, quite possibly permanent, and essentially real subcategory of the more inclusive grouping of living beings constituting a single species. The emergence of a *scientific* theory of race was the product of often fierce debate among scientists and philosophers, many of whom were clustered at universities in German-speaking lands. The figures most often cited include Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Samuel Thomas Sömmerring, Georg Forster, and Christian Meiners.

The complex and high-stakes philosophical and scientific debates, however, were not conducted in isolation. They were influenced, irritated, and accompanied by lively discussions and discoveries in theoretical and practical medicine, geology, geography, aesthetic theory, theology, and philology, to name just a few fields. As might be expected from such a multiplicity of discourses, theories regarding the “nature” and the usefulness of the race category varied widely. Subsequent histories of the idea of race have focused upon the details of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century racial science, and have tended to oversimplify eighteenth-century positions. In the process, they have significantly underestimated the conflicted legacy of the Enlightenment. The variety of race concepts has not received the thoughtful attention that scholars have devoted to the theories and practices of later periods. Nor has the variety of alternatives to these concepts been considered.

There have been and continue to be important investigations that look further back into the history of human cultures in order to identify and compare attempts at ascertaining patterns of human difference, many of

which come later to be identified as “racial.” Prominent genres train their focus upon the era of New World conquest and genocide, the Spanish expulsion of the Jews, and the development of the slave trade. Such studies are vital for a developed understanding of the relationship between economic policies of exploitation, religious ideals and ideologies, and quasi-racial accounts of human difference. In their focus on those defenses of racial hierarchy and oppression which lead directly to the more infamous nineteenth-century “race scientific” positions, however, these works tend to oversimplify the rich and contradictory positions held by those eighteenth-century thinkers who made race a relatively stable concept.

Another genre of studies investigating the history of racial thinking comes primarily out of American, African-American, and cultural studies programs in the United States. These works, concerned predominantly with racist ideas and practices in the Americas, draw fairly exclusively upon Anglo-American source material. This is due, no doubt, to the geographic and political focus of the works as well as to the fact that crucial primary source materials in languages other than English have not been widely available. Many have never been translated.

A sea change is in sight. Within recent years, continuing interest in the history of the race idea has produced something much needed: namely, several volumes of primary sources republished or translated into English, with more to come. These open a door vital to theorists of race, philosophers, anthropologists, and historians of life science.

As the eleven essays in this book show, however, it is not enough to study works explicitly focused on the theory of race. Further, it is misleading to suppose that there was a single great debate—one uninflected by the local concerns and categories of writers in significantly different disciplines and societies—giving rise to modern racism and antiracism. The studies in this book seek to illuminate the particularities of works from German-speaking lands, and show how questions as different as those of hygiene, aesthetics, comparative linguistics, Jewish emancipation, and the status of science and philosophy shaped and were shaped by emerging discourses of race. Our title is intended as a multiple provocation. In the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century period that is our focus, “race,” “invention” and—not least—“German” need to be interrogated. As the essays gathered here demonstrate, they need to be interrogated together.

I MODES OF DIFFERENCE: RACE, COLOR, CULTURE

This book opens with two essays that trace attempts made during the eighteenth century to make sense of, or write the significance of, human diversity as marked by skin color and by cultural practices. These essays each

address a critical moment in the developing tendency to translate visible and cultural differences (which traditionally had multiple and fluid significance) into a static and hierarchical system that conflates and reifies biology, history, and culture.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz has been thought a forerunner of the theory of race ever since Johann Friedrich Blumenbach identified him as such in his genealogy of racial typologies of 1795. In “What ‘Progresses’ Has Race-Theory Made Since the Times of Leibniz and Wolff?” Peter Fenves discusses Leibniz’ (few) references to “race,” and finds that Leibniz’ metaphysics is altogether incompatible with the later biological concept of race. The views of humanity compatible with his metaphysics acknowledge patterns of similarity and variation without attributing to such patterns or groupings any qualitative, let alone essential, differences. Indeed, every individual is a species in itself. Decisive is only the distinction between creatures endowed with reason—here, synonymous with language—and those who lack it. Leibniz’ position on the problem of diversity, according to Fenves, is that the problem should be understood through linguistic, not physiological difference.

More than language had to fall away before skin color could become the key marker of “racial” identity. In “*Laocoön* and the Hottentots,” Michel Chaouli examines the “metaphoric exchange of racial and aesthetic terms” in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1766 *Laocoön*. Chaouli fixes attention on the curious mirroring that occurs in the book between discussions of the famous statue of *Laocoön* (a man entangled with his sons by snakes, considered for centuries by art historians to be the apogee of aesthetic representation), and Lessing’s account of the “disgusting deformations” of the Hottentots (the Khoi Khoi), who adorned themselves by darkening their skin and entangling themselves in entrails. Chaouli argues that nascent aesthetics required the beautiful human body be covered by a skin which bespoke a seamless and colorless—that is, a white—surface.

II RACE IN PHILOSOPHY: THE PROBLEM OF KANT

Our second section turns to an issue that has received considerable attention in recent years. Robert Bernasconi has argued that it is Immanuel Kant who should be credited with having “invented” the concept of race, since it is Kant “who gave the concept sufficient definition for subsequent users to believe that they were addressing something whose scientific status could at least be debated.”¹ Moving beyond both too quick a vindication of the emancipatory potential of the critical project and too quick a denunciation of Kant as mouthpiece of a racist Enlightenment, the next four essays offer new and more detailed perspectives from which to approach and analyze Kant’s relationship and contribution to the emerging understanding of race.

In "Policing Polygeneticism in Germany, 1775: (Kames,) Kant and Blumenbach," John H. Zammito investigates what Kant and Blumenbach had in mind as they wrote what have come to be seen as the pioneering essays addressing the far-from-established concept or fact of "race" in 1775. Zammito's microhistory shows the contingency of the particular themes that Kant and Blumenbach chose to take up in these works, and highlights the tentativeness of these essays, as well as the broad differences between Kant's philosophical understanding of science and Blumenbach's more empirical view. Kant and Blumenbach critiqued the polygenetic views which were becoming fashionable, but for remarkably different reasons.

In "Kant's Concept of a Human Race," Susan M. Shell takes on the important question of why Kant, whose moral philosophy might seem to have cleared the way (if not indeed forced the way) to antiracism, should have been so taken by ideas that we now unhesitatingly identify as racist. Shell argues that Kant's interest in race must be understood in terms of his peculiar reinvention of teleology, and his understanding of the uneasy relation between reason and the experience of those embodied creatures who possess it (or at least the means to pursue it). Kant's fascination with race, which in the case of what he called the "idle races" meant the de facto inability to achieve reason or freedom, had less to do with the peoples he was ostensibly describing than with the tension-riddled status of embodied reason.

Kant's view of race might never have affected anyone had it not made a convert of Blumenbach. This conversion, as Robert Bernasconi shows in "Kant and Blumenbach's Polyyps: A Neglected Chapter in the History of the Concept of Race," was far from assured. Blumenbach knew too much to accept Kant's view that skin color was a reliable marker of physiological difference, let alone sufficient on its own as such a marker. Nonetheless, Bernasconi argues that through discussions in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* not generally read as being concerned with the question of "race" at all, Blumenbach was gradually seduced, fatefully combining the very different authorities of nascent physical anthropology and philosophical teleology.

One interference pattern generated by the linkage of Blumenbach's and Kant's views of human diversity is explored in Mark Larrimore's "Race, Freedom and the Fall in Steffens and Kant." Through a reading of its appropriation by *Naturphilosoph* Henrich Steffens in Steffens' 1822 *Anthropologie*, Larrimore suggests that Kant's idea of race was understood by contemporaries in terms of theological narratives. Steffens claimed Kant's authority in presenting race as the consequence of the Fall, something which only redemption through Christ can overcome. Larrimore argues that Steffens' appropriation misunderstood the elusively "pragmatic" aim of Kant's, separation of the theory of "race" from any empirical account of the "races" or their relationship but so do most contemporary readings.

III RACE IN THE SCIENCES OF CULTURE

The ascent of race-theory in German lands was neither quick nor uncontested. The essays in the next section trace some of the other disciplines on the rise at this time. The sciences of culture were in some cases in their very origins explicitly opposed to those physical anthropological explorations which would congeal around the concept of race. By the early nineteenth century, however, they had blended with racial theories in unexpected, troubling ways. When Steffens' friend Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling gave race a virtually metaphysical significance in his lectures on the "Philosophy of Mythology," delivered from 1821 until his death in 1854, his position closely paralleled emerging theories in comparative linguistics. Race is seen as a religious stigma, the consequence of a Fall which only white Europeans had (or could) overcome.

The earliest ethnology, based in the University of Göttingen, understood itself as antiracist. As Han F. Vermeulen recounts in "The German Invention of *Völkerkunde*: Ethnological Discourse in Europe and Asia, 1740–1798," the concepts and categories of the study of culture were as uncertain and contested as their counterparts in physical anthropology. No less than *Volk* and *Rasse*, the nature and possibilities of a human *Wissenschaft* were at stake. The contributions of particular thinkers, such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, to debates on race need to be understood against the backdrop of this shifting landscape of efforts to understand human diversity in non-physiologically reductive ways.

In "Gods, Titans, and Monsters: Philhellenism, Race, and Religion in Early Nineteenth-Century Mythography," George S. Williamson revisits and complicates Martin Bernal's claim that racism played a decisive part in the development of modern classical and mythographical scholarship. Through an account of the controversy around Friedrich Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der Alten Völker* in the 1820s, Williamson shows that the Philhellenism of the romantic inventors of an autochthonous white Greece was not always allied with racism, nor were Philhellenism's proponents the only racists in view. Philhellenism had important affinities also with the aspirations of a liberal-republican middle class, while the evocation of an Oriental—whether Egyptian or Indian—origin for Greek and Christian culture was often explicitly linked to political reaction.

The Aryan myth, Germany's other baleful contribution to the history of racial thinking, emerged entirely outside the "sciences" of race. As Tuska Benes shows in "From Indo-Germans to Aryans: Philology and the Racialization of Salvationist National Rhetoric, 1806–30," the origins of the Aryan myth lie in the complicated history of the secularization and re-theologization of accounts of "Indogermanic" history anchored in the study

of language. It was only a matter of time before the characteristics of “Indogermanic” languages were linked at once to physiological differences, to agility and creativity of thought, to moral progress—and to a tendency toward territorial expansion. The “salvationist” rhetoric was only strengthened over the course of these developments.

IV RACE IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

The final section brings us back down to Earth, if for some writers it is the sacred earth of German nationalism. While it may have seemed to some a scientific category par excellence, “race” had its grip on reality because of emerging views and practices of breeding, as well as political and cultural questions concerning both the assimilation of Jews and Germany’s historical destiny. The cultural-nationalist context of early-nineteenth-century discussions made these questions always more than theoretical. The “natural” and “human sciences,” for their part, were intimately linked to nationalist concerns by scientific views of the relation of *Volk*, language, and territory.

In “Policing the *Menschen=Racen*” Sara Eigen identifies the role that “race” played in theories of human improvement that broached the possibility of selective, state-controlled breeding. Reading Johann Peter Frank’s widely influential *System einer vollständigen medicinischen Policey* [*System for a Complete Medical Police*], initially published in 1779, Eigen finds a provocative manipulation of the terminology associated with the idea of race in Frank’s prescriptions for building and maintaining a healthy, fertile population. “Race” is for Frank a polemical term, designating real hereditary boundaries that might, for the purposes of argument and of hygienic-policy implementation, be located at orders of population magnitude ranging from a family through a clan, a region, a nation, and what we now think of as a “race,” to the collective “human race” or species. Frank argues, surprisingly, that the physical and spiritual well-being of individuals, communities, and humanity as a whole requires the dissolution of boundaries between such varying groups by means of migration and intermarriage.

The language of racial theories had immediate political implications. Jonathan M. Hess argues in “Jewish Emancipation and the Politics of Race” that the key concept of “degeneration,” assimilated into racial thinking from Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon may be compatible with the worst forms of racial prejudice, but is still committed to the unity of humanity. As advocates of Jewish emancipation argued, what degenerates is capable also of regeneration. As a monogenetic concept, race inevitably resonated with debates about the political, no less than the theological, status of German Jews.

The discourse of race that emerges from these many projects and controversies is distinct from, but deeply resonant with, the “scientific” discourse of race perfected in Anglo-American practice. It is our hope that the interdisciplinary studies which compose this book help us understand why, and how, the concept of race was able to exercise such extraordinary power in Western thought and practice in the ensuing years. As the study of the German invention of race shows, race science did not have to build bridges to the human sciences, philosophy, and philosophies of history: it was in large part constituted by them.

NOTES

1. Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.