

Still Our Most Dangerous Myth: The Race Fallacy

Allegations recently made by Macquarie University academic Andrew Fraser against certain migrant groups in Australia have depressingly returned us to a debate on the nature of human differences that most social scientists assumed was resolved and archived long ago. While from the scientific viewpoint the idea that humanity is divided into distinct “races” or “racial groups” is a fallacy, it persists strongly in the thinking of many people about human differences. That a senior Australian academic today not only seeks to encourage this mistaken notion, but invokes it to denigrate the human worth of sections of our multicultural society is as disturbing as it is astonishing.

In European thought until well into the 1700s, human physical and cultural diversity was often understood to be the manifestation of divine grace, or of a fall from grace. For all its ethnocentric ignorance, that antiquated Biblical vision at least had the virtue of not assuming a natural divide between superior and inferior peoples. Those seen to have fallen from God’s grace were not considered to be inherently inferior.

The more pernicious idea of “race”, the notion that humanity is divided into discrete types of people distinguished by their biologically fixed superiority or inferiority in the possession of mental and moral capacities, derives from the use of speculative concepts of natural science to validate the oppressions of slavery and colonialism perpetrated on non-European peoples when new ideas were emerging in support of human equality. How else to resolve this contradiction and justify continuing the profitable oppression of subjugated peoples than with a belief that they are by nature inferior to their masters, and so not eligible for equality. The idea of race difference was formulated in inextricable relationship to realities of power and exploitation that required a new ideological validation in an age of revolutionary social change.

Darwin’s work was used by some to argue the notion that “race” differences represented evolutionary levels of human achievement. In the late 19th C and early 20th C, the eugenics movement used such understandings about human differences to argue for the

engineering of racial purity by a political regulation of reproduction. Although this vision found its most extreme expression in the policies of Nazi Germany, the movement had been particularly strong in the USA and the writings of American eugenicists helped inspire Hitler. There were many organisational manifestations of the eugenics movement in the USA. One of them, the Pioneer Fund, continues to support especially research on questions of “race” differences. Its current president, J.P. Rushton, is one of the principal researchers Andrew Fraser cites in support of his claims against people of African descent.

The view that human group differences are to be understood in terms of divides between superior and inferior types of human beings, has long been repudiated by anthropologists and biologists. It is of course true that geographically separated populations came to differ in respect to such physical traits as skin colour, hair shape, facial structure, blood type, susceptibility to certain bodily diseases, etc. However, these differences form gradients (clines) that are causally independent of each other. There is no convincing evidence of correlated genetically based variations in psychological and behavioural attributes. And most certainly there are no discrete, clearly bounded “racial” groups distinguished by “packages” of related physical, mental, and behavioural attributes. The designation of people as distinct and unequal “racial” groups has figured prominently in the organisation of social and political life in many countries during the last two centuries, particularly as a means of maintaining relationships of domination. But such divisions have no natural existence. They are social constructs, not biological entities.

Genetic differences within populations that are often characterised as racially distinct are far greater than the genetic differences between such populations. Ironically, a striking illustration of this is the very population that Andrew Fraser targets in his claims about inherent inferiority: the sub-Saharan Africans (including the descendants of African slaves in the USA). Genetic diversity within this allegedly “racial” population is greater than in any other “racial” population.

What then are we to make of Fraser’s claims, especially his assertion that African Australians are mentally deficient and disposed to criminal behaviour? In his strident denigration of this

migrant community, he enthusiastically invokes certain results of IQ tests, instruments of Western scientific culture which have questionable validity as adequate measures of the capacities of peoples of other cultures and of peoples who have long been subject to discrimination. Fraser naively extrapolates from these very limited data of ambiguous meaning, to judgements about the human worth of entire populations.

The significance of “racial” differences in performance on IQ tests has been debated among Western psychologists for several decades, a debate spurred partly by the determined efforts of a few in the profession to find ostensibly scientific evidence that might be useful in supporting claims about the inferiority of “Blacks” (namely Afro-Americans). The human genome project, with its findings of genetic bases for various physical and emotional attributes and disorders, has also strengthened interest in the question of genetic factors contributing to intelligence.

It is generally agreed among Psychologists that genetic factors do play an important part in determining IQ differences among individuals. However, there is no compelling evidence of genetic causation of differences in average IQ test performance between so-called racial groups (eg Euro-Americans and Afro-Americans). Aside from the issue of genetic causation, there is the contentious question of what human “intelligence” really is. What are its dimensions? What are the variety of mental and moral capacities? IQ tests produced by Western academic culture assess abilities in certain kinds of cognitive tasks under special conditions. But what can they tell us about practical intelligences, social intelligence, and perhaps most especially wisdom which has often been lamentably deficient in the practical applications of abstract reason?

These matters have been given close attention in critical reviews published by the leading professional journal *American Psychologist* in its issues for February 1996 and January 2005, partly in response to claims of the kind that Andrew Fraser has been making.

The first of these reviews, conducted by a panel of eleven scholars appointed by the Association, found that no convincing reasons had yet been demonstrated for reported average IQ test score differences between Afro-Americans and Euro Americans (“Blacks” and “Whites”). The report concluded : “Explanations based on

factors of caste and culture may be appropriate, but so far have little direct empirical support. There is certainly no such support for a genetic interpretation". The review also emphasised that the IQ tests "do not sample all forms of intelligence" : "Obvious examples include creativity, wisdom, practical sense, and social sensitivity; there are surely others. Despite the importance of these abilities we know very little about them: how they develop, what factors influence that development, how they are related to more traditional measures".

The most recent review, by three Yale University scholars including a former president of the American Psychological Association, does not differ substantially from the earlier one in its conclusions. The authors firmly repudiate the view that IQ tests are a reliable "tape measure" of human mental capacities, and they find that "attempts to link intelligence, race, and genetics have lacked an adequate scientific foundation" : "The statement that racial differences in IQ or academic achievement are of genetic origin is, when all is said and done, a leap of imagination. The literature on intelligence, race, and genetics constitutes, in large part, leaps of imagination to justify, post hoc, social stratifications".

It is very clear that Andrew Fraser's assertions about racial superiorities and inferiorities reflect a gross misunderstanding of the significance of psychological research findings. Moreover, the vast evidence from anthropology on the diversity and complexity of human cultural creativity cutting across the so-called racial divides repudiates a simple-minded equation of IQ test measures with human mental and moral capacities.

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