

## The Value of Race

Coming off the heels of Enlightenment figures, the idea of race was important and elusive. Many academics were discussing it, each with their own unique approach on what it was, how it was measured, and what these conclusions entailed for each race. Charles Darwin tried to find some biological basis for the conception of races, and although he came up short, there was still a desire among many for there to be some link between the two. This lack of evidence ironically paved the way for figures like Arthur De Gobineau and Francis Galton to assert that there must be some biological basis for race, and further extended this argument to claim that some races were inherently superior to others. To combat these dangerous ideas, anthropologists like Franz Boas and Ashley Montagu, and sociologists like W.E.B. Dubois developed new ways to think about race. Despite the systematic discrimination Montagu posits race creates, Boas and Dubois's compatible perspectives validate that race should be preserved due to the unique experiences and unifying force it provides.

Franz Boas strictly rejects the view that race is hereditary, also causing him to refute the idea of "stability of human types" which claims that each race has a set of unchangeable mental, physical, and moral capacities. Boas instead argues for the opposite, which he deems the "instability of human types." "It follows from this consideration," Boas claims, "that social and geographical environment must have an influence upon the form of the body of the adult, and upon the development of his central nervous system" (Bernasconi and Lott 85). It is one's circumstances and experiences that determine their characteristics according to Boas, not something as arbitrary as their race. He uses the physical differences between babies born in Europe and those born in America to illustrate his point. Even those whose parents had only

emigrated to America in the few months before birth showed markedly different features. This is due to a variety of factors, like different diets, different cultural practices like swaddling, and other influences (87). One's environment has such a profound and intricate effect upon his/her development that it can not be nullified by something like race.

Montagu, on the other hand, has arguably the boldest claim of any anthropologist of the time. He asserts that the term race "be dropped from the vocabulary of anthropologists, for it has done an infinite amount of harm and no good at all" (Bernasconi and Lott 101). Montagu agrees that the anthropological conception of race is true, which states that there "exists in nature groups of human beings comprised of individuals each of whom possesses a certain aggregate of characters which individually and collectively serve to distinguish them from the individuals in all other groups" (103), but maintains that this is only useful as a convenience. In Montagu's eyes, the categorization of races are in reality, fundamentally erroneous. It has no basis in actual fact. This anthropological definition refuses to acknowledge both the subtle and conspicuous group to group or person to person differences of those which are lumped together into the same "race".

The views of both Boas and Montagu deny the propositions espoused by scientific racists. Boas's approach diametrically opposes scientific racism. If the capabilities and traits of all people are dependent on external social and geographical factors, then there is no support for the claim that some races are intrinsically better. Everybody is able to grow, learn, change, and adapt as time goes on. It is immediately evident how Montagu's philosophy completely shuts down all facets of scientific racism as well, but in a different way. Without the use of race to categorize people in the first place, there is no way to assert that one group is better than another;

there are no different "groups" to begin with. This is precisely the solution that Montagu aims for.

Du Bois was an African American sociologist who was deeply concerned with the question of race. He chooses to embrace the idea of race, which he defines as "a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life" (Bernasconi and Lott 110). Du Bois's formulation of race is based on a collective culture that encompasses language, history, beliefs, and values. Like others, he attempts to distance himself from the genetic basis of race, claiming that "The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences - undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them" (111). Race is an important part of who everybody is, and serves as an essential tool for oppressed people, like African Americans.

Additionally, he wanted African Americans to unite around the communal identity that race provided them with. By maintaining that people can be differentiated by race, Du Bois can make the claim that some races have values, talents, or some other gift that they uniquely possess and are able to present to all other races. If we were to give up the concept of race, Du Bois fears that African Americans would be absorbed by the white majority, forfeiting any and all aspects of their invaluable culture. This is why Du Bois calls for Negro colleges, newspapers, and business organizations. He wants race, and all of the things that accompany it, to be preserved.

Although Boas and Du Bois are not necessarily arguing for the same thing, they seem to have corresponding views of race. Du Bois's argument relies on Boas's "stability of human types." If it were true that certain races were only able to occupy certain mental or physical

thresholds, then there would be no point in requesting things like all-black colleges and universities in hopes of advancing their education. Du Bois seems to be responding in part to Boas's statement that "Unfavourable conditions retard growth; exceptionally favourable conditions accelerate it" (Bernasconi and Lott 85). Du Bois was not happy with the circumstances African Americans had to live in. Things like poor living conditions, little access to education, virtually no access to quality education, prejudice in the job market, and other forms of discrimination undoubtedly halted the progression of African Americans since the end of slavery. Du Bois's order for better opportunities shows he believes that African Americans have what it takes to succeed, they just need a conducive environment for that to occur. He is worried that if race is dissolved, and that proper opportunities are not provided to African Americans as a result of an assimilation into one, homogenous mostly-white group, then the African Americans will never be able to thrive in America. This is why some level of separation between races is essential for Du Bois's argument, which echoes the sentiments of Boas throughout.

The comparison between Montagu and Du Bois's philosophy is much more complicated. Montagu wants the concept of race to be eliminated, while Du Bois wants it to be celebrated. Montagu reasons that as long as people can be categorized, there will be room for systematic discrimination, as evidenced by the emergence of scientific racism. Du Bois recognizes this danger, acknowledging it in his paper by saying blacks have "been led to deprecate and minimize race distinctions" (Bernasconi and Lott 108). They are aware that being black only serves as a marker to differentiate them as inferior beings, rather than symbolize the unique gifts they have. They must feel fear instead of pride. Forgetting race is not the answer though, according to Du

Bois, as that itself is dangerous. The solution is to modify race from a tool of oppression to one of power. If African Americans are able to cultivate their culture, demonstrate their worth, and own their race apart from the rest of America, then there would be no way that they could be discriminated against. If African Americans were to forget race, they would be forgetting all of the things that make them unique. Not only this, but there are more far-reaching consequences that Du Bois points out. "...the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history." (110) Not only is this highly dangerous, but it seems impossible to change the way that history has been viewed for centuries.

Strangely enough, however, the two have a highly similar definition for what exactly race is. They both agree that race describes a group of people who collectively share the same set of characteristics, at least enough to distinguish themselves from another group. Montagu admits that this definition is erroneous, resulting in his wish for it to be removed entirely. Du Bois strongly believes in this definition, but upon closer inspection, it is easy to see that the very definition of race Du Bois provides is contradictory. Du Bois tries to distance himself from the biological conception of race, yet uses "common blood" as a criterion, and claims that people of the same race share common history, although this can mean multiple different things, be impossible to trace, and encompass many additional people if applied broadly enough. Whether explicitly stated or not, the definition of race they are using is simply a falsity.

The only way that the racial oppression will ever be eliminated is if the concept of race is thrown out with it. This is a somber but simple truth. As long as the idea of race has existed,

there has been widespread prejudice, discrimination, violence, and oppression based upon it. From the horrors of the slave trade, to the present day genocides in Asia and the Middle East, people have always been unjustly subjugated because of race. Du Bois tells us that "race prejudice really is ... nothing but the friction between different groups of people," (Bernasconi and Lott 113) so as long as something like race is able to distinguish two groups as different, this tension will exist. This is true across divisions of race, religion, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. It would not guarantee an end to the problem, but it is a necessary precondition. Simply because abolishing race is the only way to end oppression, however, does not mean it is the correct choice.

As a white male, telling me that I do not fully understand the consequences or implications of my claims is an easy criticism to make. It is natural that I hold this position, one might add, as it comes at no cost to me. I do not have to withstand the racial oppression that comes with designations like "black" or "hispanic". But it is not without extreme forethought that I retain support of my claim that race needs to be preserved. I benefit from the diversity of experience, thought, and values that other groups possess, and I would suffer too if this were to be given up. Other minorities might have a more comprehensive understanding when it comes to deciding what should be done to maximize progress and acceptance, but all people, including myself, are invested in the matter.

While keeping race has its drawbacks, the advantages of this solution outweigh them significantly, for many of the reasons Du Bois discussed. So much culture, history, and value is lost when race is forgotten. This would be just as ridiculous as suggesting to rid the world of other labels like religion, gender, or nationality. The Bosnians were not asked to give up their

nationality during the Srebrenica massacre, nor were the Bahá'í asked to denounce their religion due to harsh persecution in Iran. Although nationality and religion are much easier to define than race, the principle still applies. Montagu's warnings should still be heeded; racism will live as long as race itself does. This does not mean that it has to be as prevalent as it is today. Keeping race is the optimal solution, but we can still work morally and politically to help alleviate the intensity to which racism is felt by minorities.

Work Cited

Bernasconi, Robert, and Tommy Lee Lott. *The Idea of Race*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.