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1 We Are a People

Miskito Indian leader Steadman Fagoth was asked in 1985 what he thought about the policy of Nicaragua's Sandinista government toward his "ethnic group." "Ethnic group!" he snorted. "We're not an ethnic group. Ethnic groups have restaurants. We are a *people*!"[1]

One may quibble that "ethnic group" means "people" (after all, *ethnos* is the Greek word for "a people"). But Fagoth's point is a good one. Ethnicity is not trivial. It is not just having a Polish last name, going to a Chinese restaurant, or wearing a button that says, "Kiss me, I'm Irish." Ethnicity—that powerful bond of peoplehood—is one of the most important forces organizing individual understandings of reality and the grouping and dividing of peoples in the world today. It organizes and gives meaning, as groups, to the Basques in Spain, Byelorussians in the former Soviet Union, Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, Uygurs in China, and Whites in America.[2]

It has been ever thus. England was formed out of the mixing and battling ethnic consciousnesses of Angle and Celt, Saxon and Norman. South Africa's history is defined by the confrontation of Boer and Briton and Zulu and Xhosa. India was built by Dravidians dominated by Aryans and conquered in turn by Turko-Afghans and then by English people. Yugoslavia was built out of Croat and Serb, Slovene and Macedonian, Muslim and Montenegrin—and then it fell apart on those same ethnic lines. Ethnicity is one of the primary organizing principles of human history.

Having said that, it is also true that no one seems to understand very well how ethnicity works. There is at present no satisfactory theory that unites the field.[3] There is not even a common definition of what ethnicity is, or exactly how it relates to other, contiguous concepts such as "race" and "nation." Some students have interpreted ethnicity as a naturalistic phenomenon, with emphasis on biology or ancestry. Others have pursued social scientific explanations that emphasize the factors—such as group interests, culture, and institutions—that have shaped the creation, maintenance, and change of ethnicity in groups. Psychologists and humanists have delved into ethnicity as individual experience and expression.

The tasks of this collection of essays are to try to sort out some of the confusion surrounding ethnicity; to explore the linkages between naturalistic, social scientific, and humanistic ways of understanding ethnicity; and to move toward some common

theoretical understandings of ethnic phenomena. In particular, the authors whose work comes together in this volume are concerned with narrative and multiethnicity as key issues in understanding ethnic questions.

Naturalistic Explanations of Ethnicity

The first thing to be said about an ethnic group is that it is an arrangement of people who see themselves as biologically and historically connected with each other, and who are seen by others as being so connected. Whether the biological connection is true or not is less important than that the people in question and others around them believe it to be true. It may be that many east European Jews were not in fact biological descendants of the ancient Israelites—they perhaps did not issue from the loins of Abraham. Rather, they may in fact have been the descendants of Central Asian Khazar tribes who converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages.[4] Nonetheless, they believed themselves to be descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and non-Jews believed it, too. That sense of shared ancestry and the thousands of years of shared history that went with it form the basis of Jewish ethnic identity.[5]

Race vs. Ethnicity

Beyond that common understanding of ethnicity as shared ancestry, there is plenty of confusion surrounding the subject. There is confusion, for instance, about the nature of the relationship between ethnicity and race. There was a time when most Americans, Europeans, and others who had imbibed Western education—at least those who thought about ethnicity—would divide the human population conceptually first into discrete races: red, yellow, black, brown, and white. These "races," supposedly based in biology, were simply a bottom-level extension of the system of classification of all living things, first constructed in the eighteenth century by Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist and taxonomist, and extended to human "races" by nineteenth-century pseudoscientific racists such as Blumenbach and Gobineau. According to such a system, an individual from sub-Saharan Africa would be a member of the kingdom Animalia, the phylum Chordata, the class Mammalia, the order Primates, the family Hominidae, the genus *Homo*, the species *Homo sapiens*, and the race *africanus*.[6] The rationale for putting certain people in one race and others in another derived from geography and observed physical differences.

Ethnic groups, according to such thinking, were simply subdivisions of these larger phenotypic categories called "races." Thus, a person whose ancestors came from Bavaria belonged to the German ethnic group and the Caucasian race, while a person from Kyoto was seen as a member of the Japanese ethnic group and the Mongolian race. These, then, were the ideas of Gobineau and Blumenbach, a century ago and more.

Even today, in talking about ethnic issues, many people intuitively divide humankind up into large groups that they call "races" and smaller subgroups that they call "ethnic groups." According to that way of thinking, a partial listing of racial and ethnic groups might look like the schema in Figure 1.

Species	*Homo sapiens*								
Race	White			Black			Yellow		
Ethnic Group	English	German	Italian	Ibo	Zulu	Fon	Korean	Chinese	Japanese

FIGURE 1. Pseudoscientific racists divided the human species conceptually into big "races" and smaller "ethnic groups."

There are at least three problems with this way of thinking about race and ethnicity. In the first place, although this purports to be a biological classification system, "race" as defined here has only a tiny basis in biology. It is, in fact, primarily a social construct (with obvious economic and political motives and implications), as are the ethnic groups that are supposed to be subdivisions of races in this schema. James C. King, a prominent U.S. geneticist of racial matters, contends: "Both what constitutes a race and how one recognizes a racial difference are culturally determined. Whether two individuals regard themselves as of the same or of different races depends not on the degree of similarity of their genetic material but on whether history, tradition, and personal training and experiences have brought them to regard themselves as belonging to the same group or to different groups. . . . [T]here are no objective boundaries to set off one subspecies [his term for 'race'] from another."[7]

The process of racial labelling starts with geography, culture, and family ties and runs through politics and economics to biology, not the other way around. That is, a group is defined by an observer according to its location, its cultural practices, or its social connectedness. Then, on looking at physical markers or genetic makeup, the observer may find that this group shares certain items with greater frequency than do other populations that are also socially defined. But even in such cases, there is tremendous overlap between racial categories with regard to biological features. As Yale psychologist Edmund Gordon writes: "The problem of reliably identifying biological subgroups of human beings is intractable. . . . [T]here are [quoting A. K. Appiah] 'few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or China, and few too (though more) that are found in Zaire but not in similar proportions in China and England.' . . . [T]he differences within so-called races are more significant than the differences between them. Nonetheless, race designations have been arbitrarily assigned based almost solely on a few physical differences such as skin color, hair curl, and eye-fold. . . . [T]he colloquial designation of a group as a race is thus not a function of significant biological or genetic differences."[8]

The second problem with thinking of "ethnic groups" as subdivisions of "races" is that the manifestations of these supposed racial categories are not clearly distinct. Races do divide people into groups that are, *on the average*, physically different from each other. For example, Black people do, on the average, have darker skin, longer limbs, and more wiry hair than do White people, on the average. And Asians do, on the average, have shorter limbs and darker hair than do Caucasians, on the average. But those averages disguise a great deal of overlap.

Let us take just one marker that is supposed to divide races biologically: skin color. Suppose people can be arranged along a continuum according to the color of their skin,

from darkest to lightest. The people we call Black would nearly all fall on the darker end of the continuum, while the people we call White would nearly all fall on the lighter end. On the *average*, the White and Black populations would differ from each other in skin color. But a very large number of the individuals classified as White would have darker skin than some people classified as Black, and vice versa. This situation inevitably leads one to the suspicion that so-called "races" are not biological categories at all, but primarily social divisions that rely only partly on physical markers such as skin color to identify group membership.

Sometimes, skin color and social definitions run counter to one another. Take the case of Walter White and Poppy Cannon. In the 1930s and 1940s, White was one of the most prominent African Americans. An author and activist, he served for twenty years as the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Physically, White was short, slim, sandy haired, and blue-eyed. On the street he would not have been taken for an African American by anyone who did not know his identity. But he had been raised in the South in a family of very light-skinned Blacks, and he was socially defined as Black, both by others and by himself. He dedicated his life and career to serving Black Americans. In 1949, White divorced his African American wife of many years' standing and married Cannon, a White journalist and businesswoman. Although Cannon was a Caucasian socially and ancestrally, her hair, eyes, and skin were several shades darker than her new husband's. If a person were shown pictures of the couple and told that one partner was Caucasian and the other Black, without doubt that person would select Cannon as the Afro-American. Yet, immediately upon White's divorce, the Black press erupted in protest. White was accused of having sold out his race for a piece of White flesh, and Cannon, of having seduced one of Black America's most beloved leaders. White segregationists took the occasion to crow that this was what Black advocates of civil rights really wanted: access to White women. This was because White was socially Black and Cannon was socially White; biology—at least physical appearance—had nothing to do with it.[9]

Despite the idea of "race" having little biological basis, it has been used as if it had such a foundation, to the detriment of a lot of people. The ideas about race described here—as the bottom layer in an orderly, enduring, nested hierarchy of groups and subgroups, based on biological criteria—were picked up by pseudoscientific racists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and put to vicious use. Such racists arranged the "races" hierarchically, with northwestern Europeans at the top and a rough hierarchy of color descending. Differences between peoples were deemed to be immutable, the inevitable product of their gene pools. Such ideas provided much of the justification for the U.S. anti-immigrant movement of the first quarter of the twentieth century.[10] The most prominent recent published example of peudoscientific racism is *The Bell Curve*, by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, which purports to find genetic differences at the root of such a phenomenon as ethnic variation in school performance.[11]

The third problem with the notion of large "races" and smaller "ethnic groups" as subdivisions is that "races," so defined, do not classify very much that is important. According to this way of thinking, Vietnamese and Koreans are supposed to be of the same race. If one grants that they may look a bit similar to outsiders (they certainly do not to insiders), in what other ways are they similar? In what other ways is grouping

them in one "race" significant? Do they act alike? Do they worship in the same way? Are their governments or family systems similar? Are they more like each other in action, thought, worship, and political behavior than either is like Swedes or Jews? Insofar as they may in fact be similar, is it because of their biology, or is it because of centuries of contact and sharing Chinese imperial culture?

All of this is not to argue that "race" does not matter. It is, on the contrary, very important: people kill people over "race." The argument here is merely that "race," like "ethnic group," is primarily a social and political, not a biological, means of classifying people. It does not mean that "race" is not an important category in human relationships, only that what are often called "races" are for analytical purposes varieties of what we here are calling "ethnic groups".[12] The mechanisms that divide races from each other are the same mechanisms that divide ethnic groups from one another. The processes that bind a race together are the same processes that bind an ethnic group together. For the purposes of the essays by the editors of this volume, we use "ethnic group" as the generic term.[13]

Racialization

There is another school of opinion on this question, and it is represented within this volume as well. Scholars of the racialization school are active opponents of racism yet adopt the terminology, hence the oppressive categories, of the pseudoscientific racists. They contest racism but not racial thinking. As one of their most outspoken advocates, Roger Sanjek, puts it, their use of "race focuses on the present and future of the *contemporary* racial order."[14] That is, they note that "race," while it is an artificial social and political construction, lies at the heart of the current social hierarchy. They are preoccupied with fighting oppression within that social hierarchy, and they choose to use the categories of the racists to fight racism.

For racializationists, "race" means a variety of "ethnicity" where one group uses power negatively against another, and where there is emphasis on the body. The emphasis on the physicality of "race," a holdover from the pseudoscientific racists, is only a minor key for the racializationists. For writers of this school, "ethnic group" is the generic term for a group of people who share common descent and culture; they become a "race," according to this kind of thinking, when someone does something bad to them on account of their ethnicity. "Race," so understood, entered the world as a key support for a system of "racism," part of the intellectual apparatus created by Europeans and North Americans to justify the capitalist colonial (later neocolonial) system of exploitation that began to emerge in the fifteenth century and came to dominate world affairs and oppress colonized peoples most mightily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such authors speak of "racialization": when ethnic groups are oppressed, they become racialized. The locus of causality is placed in biology, rather than in human relationships.[15]

April Henderson locates the value of the racialization approach in its usefulness as a tool for organizing resistance: "oppression serves as rationale enough to organize. . . . [T]he connection between oppression and race is then made; because the politics of oppression are so often cast in terms of the politics of race, the politics of resistance

have also been imbued with racialized language."[16] Michele Dominy notes that White lesbians and Maori women activists in Aotearoa (i.e., New Zealand) both use the word "Black" to describe themselves, "as an oppositional marker rather than as a biological category."[17] Henderson notes that this equation of Blackness (and we may extend her analysis to include the idea of race itself) not with racial typology but with the experience of oppression "provides an alternative framework for discussing blackness at a time when scientific typologies are for the most part denounced and rejected. Stripped of its shaky biological underpinnings, race becomes a state of existence, even a state of mind."[18]

Consideration of ethnic situations outside the U.S. context makes obvious the limitations of the racialization model for ethnic analysis. The twentieth-century actions of Turks murdering Armenians and Germans exterminating Jews both fit the racializationists' criteria for "racial" encounters: domination based on ancestral identity that is supposedly grounded in biological differences. Yet the racializationists' model of big races and little ethnic subgroups would force Turks and Armenians, Germans and Jews, all into the White or Caucasoid race. It would seem important to examine the oppressive qualities of these ethnic interactions as well.

The racialization model does not sufficiently illuminate ethnic interaction in Asia and the Pacific, either. In those regions, ethnic processes happen mightily and with immense negative force, but terms like "race" make little sense. In Fiji, for example, ethnic Fijians (mixed Melanesians and Polynesians, a little less than half the population) complain of economic discrimination at the hands of ethnic Indians (a little less than half the population), who complain that ethnic Fijians have disenfranchised them and monopolized the political system. Both charges are more or less true, and both groups see their identities as ethnically based, but no one talks of race. In the People's Republic, Han Chinese are the worst sort of colonial oppressors of Tibetans and Uygurs, yet they are all Asians, and "race" is the term of almost no one's analysis.[19]

Because this book has an international focus, we are searching for terminology that works in many contexts around the globe. We think "ethnicity" fills that bill. We do not wish to have this preference of ours for using "ethnicity" as the generic term overshadow other aspects of this book or this essay. It is really just a minor terminological quibble. We hold no particular brief for the term "ethnicity" and welcome proposals for another term.[20]

Perhaps which term is most appropriate may depend on a scholar's main purpose in a particular piece of work. In using "race," the focus is either on the body (a minor key) or on political action. People who speak of "racialization" use the term as a starting point for pursuing an antiracist political project. One can make a distinction between "race" and "ethnic group" and still work at understanding group processes, but for that purpose the racializationist approach is ultimately confusing. By the same token, antiracist political action is possible using "ethnicity," no less than with the racializationist choice, although we must admit that calling someone an "ethnist" lacks the punch of calling someone a "racist." The danger with the racializationist position is that one may easily slide over into speaking of "racializing" other sorts of difference, such as gender and class, making "race" an amorphous synonym for "oppressed." To adopt the rhetorical posture of our racializationist colleagues is, in the larger scheme