

One Drop of Blood

I participated in a symposium on the book, *One Drop of Blood*, that included a sociologist, Martin Eisenberg, an historian, Joyce Toney, and a scientist, S. Maxwell Hines. This is a summary of some of the ideas raised in our discussion.

In *One Drop of Blood: the American misadventure of race*, Scott L. Malcomson asks why a nation supposedly “dedicated to freedom and universal ideals produces, through its obsession with race, an unhappily divided people.” Unlike most commentators on race in the United States who focus on a bilateral division into black and white, Malcomson describes a society historically separated into three parts -- Native American, African American and European American. Because of this framework, Malcomson periodically centers his story on race relations in Oklahoma, an area of the United States with a large concentration of people from all three groups.

Biology of Race and Social Policy

Malcomson’s descriptions of race are based primarily on skin color and secondarily on ethnicity. In a sense, Malcomson’s book leaves intact a late nineteenth century biological understanding of race, an understanding that was actually more complicated than Malcomson suggests, and was clearly used to justify social inequality. Harvard University paleontologist Stephen J. Gould, in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) and in essays in *Natural History* magazine (Gould, 1977a; 1977b; 1983a; 1985), documents ways that racial preconceptions both tainted science and shaped social policy. Possibly the three most famous incidences of scientific bias and blundering are Broca’s measurement of skull capacity, Cyril Burt’s twin “experiments”, and Piltdown Man.

Broca was a meticulous scientist who attempted to document unequal intelligence in men and women and in different “racial” groups by measuring the volume of their brain cavities. He stuffed an assortment of skulls with seeds and then counted the seeds to determine volume. When Gould repeated the experiment, he discovered that if he used ball bearings, that could not be compressed, instead of seeds, differences in cranial capacity could largely be explained by the height and weight of subjects. Broca, influenced by his preconceptions about race and intelligence, had inadvertently squeezed extra seeds into the skulls of dead white men.

Cyril Burt’s “experiments” with identical twins have been used to support claims that intelligence is overwhelmingly determined by heredity. When scientists were unable to replicate results showing that sets of identical twins, separated at birth and raised in different social settings, had the same scores on

intelligence tests, they reexamined his documentation. They discovered that in order to prove what he already “knew to be true,” Burt had apparently fabricated his data.

The Piltdown controversy was the result of a hoax in the era prior to World War I intended to prove that human beings evolved in England rather than Germany or Africa. Someone, whose identity is still disputed, buried a human skull with an ape’s jaw in a gravel pit -- setting up British scientists to discover the missing link and proclaim English biological superiority.

In the United States, with its long history of racist thought and law, the faulty nineteenth century biological doctrine of race was used to direct social policy decisions. As early as the 1880s, Chinese immigrants were barred as unassimilable. During World War I, U.S. army “intelligence tests” were used to exclude Blacks and Europeans of Slavic descent from work requiring higher level thought, as they were classified as having sub-normal intelligence. One of the inexplicable ironies of these tests was that they showed northern Blacks with higher average scores than southern Whites.

These tests were also used as the ‘empirical evidence’ that provided the rationale for limiting the immigration of Jews and southern Europeans to the U.S. during the 1920s. The biological understanding of race also provided a rationale for the Nazi ideology of ethnic cleansing and the social Darwinism of ‘nature vs. nurture,’ and ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,’ both of which still persist in some form today. William Jennings Bryan, was so upset with the use of Social Darwinian ideas to justify racism and war that in the 1920s he launched a campaign against the teaching of evolution that culminated in the infamous Scopes trial, where a biology teacher was convicted of violating a Tennessee state law that prohibited the teaching of “any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible” (Gould, 1983b, p. 264; 1991).

With the advent of more precise and empirical means of scientific study, it is difficult to understand how any serious discussion of race could fail to challenge the underlying precepts that allow the concept of race to continue to flourish unchallenged. Scientists have quietly abandoned the concept of race, concluding that the concept of race cannot be justified using truly scientific paradigms and discounting skin color and ethnicity as fundamentally ambiguous and imprecise descriptors.

Stripped of its scientific credibility, the concept of race can be seen for what it was used for; as a means to legitimize the subjugation or elevation of various people, ultimately for monetary gain. Malcomson’s historical examination of race provides a perfect opportunity to situate and examine postmodern theories of the concept of race. It is unfortunate that he missed this opportunity. This is especially serious because Malcomson had an opportunity to address the continued use of biological

arguments to justify social inequality in contemporary America, especially recent debates over differential intelligence among “racial” and ethnic groups (the Bell Curve controversy) and over affirmative action.

A Theory of Race in the United States

One of the most important debates in the sociological scholarship of race is over how to theorize race relations. Is race a form of ethnicity? Is the subordinate race a hyper-exploited proletariat? Should we understand race, especially the subordinate race, as a nation or as a local manifestation of a global diaspora? Or, should race be considered a unique social formation?

Malcomson is very clear about the reciprocal relationship between whiteness and blackness. The “race relation” he describes is a form of domination in which one term, or category of people, cannot exist without the other. But, he has not conceptualized the nature of this domination. Max Weber’s conceptualization of *status groups* is more useful to denote and analyze race than other concepts for several reasons (Weber, 1978). As a social scientific term, *status group* is more useful than *race* because it explicitly refers to social rather than allegedly biological distinctions. It is a more useful term than *class* because class divisions exist within racial groups, and because class is an economic term whereas status groups refer to the unequal distribution of social esteem even when there are no class distinctions. Further, treating race as a status group, instead of as an social formation of its own kind provides us with a tool for comparative analysis of super-/subordinate relations at other times and places. Finally, *status group* is more useful than *ethnicity* because status refers specifically to the relationship of super-ordination and subordination. Ethnic groups are convinced of the excellence of their own customs and the inferiority of alien others, and they are potentially bases for political mobilization. But, they compete with one another on a horizontal plane where none dominates the other. Status “transforms ethnically segregated groups into a vertical system of super- and subordination” that is institutionalized on a societal basis. The race relation is a form of stratification; ethnicity is not.

For Weber, there are at least three dimensions of social stratification - class, status and political parties - that crystallize as consequences of group struggles to acquire and monopolize three humanly valued goods: wealth and economic position, social honor, and political power. Each of these are structured forms of unequally distributed power. The term “status” refers to the ranking of a group, not of individuals. A status group is either a group within the larger society that successfully claims positive social honor, or it is a group upon which negative privileges and negative social honor are imposed. The status order in a society emerges out of the historical process of groups, often in ferocious and violent

struggles, to conquer, enslave and exploit others in order to appropriate and monopolize benefits and privileges and to secure social honor.

As Weber uses it, status is a relational term. The victories and dominance of one group mean the losses and subordination of the other. The positive social honor claimed by one group entails the imposition of negative social honor and negative privileges upon the other. Status groups, in short, are reciprocally constitutive. In a sentence, we can define the status group relationship as a hierarchical social structure of super-ordination/ subordination based upon the coerced and unequal distribution of social honor and power. But, none of this is fixed. Race (or the status structure) is a relationship that can grow more or less permeable over time depending upon political economic processes. Weber argues that when the economy is in the process of transformation, class comes to the foreground; when the economy is static, status group formations (i.e., institutionalized racial inequality) grow less permeable and social honor becomes more important. That is another reason that the political direction we pursue must incorporate both political economy and status (racial) structure at the same time.

Conceptualizing race in the contemporary United States has always been difficult because African Americans are both an ethnic group and a status group (as are Jewish-, Italian-, and Polish-Americans) - one reason race is so paradoxical for Malcomson. The shift to using the term African American in the late 1980s was a conscious effort to move from the language of race to a language of ethnicity, and to connect the group to its history and culture in a way that “black” does not. Nevertheless, we must not neglect a history, including the present that stigmatized African Americans and created a social structure that perpetuates the unequal distribution of social honor, and economic and political opportunity.

Specific Problems with Malcomson’s History

Malcomson’s decision to focus on a tripartite division and on race relations in Oklahoma distorts the history of race in the United States, especially the significance of the “color line” described by W.E.B. DuBois (1903) four years before Oklahoma became a state. In the end, Malcomson tells the story of essentially peripheral developments rather than integral economic and social relationships that defined slavery and segregation and continue to support prejudice and inequality in the United States.

For example, Malcomson places tremendous significance on Cherokee efforts to assimilate into white America in the early 19th century by acquiring black slaves and moving from collective life in towns to individual family homesteads. However, if he had focused his discussion of native people on the Navaho, who fight American imperialism much longer than the Cherokee and retain national and linguistic integrity today, or the Seminole, who adopted escaped Africans as warriors and created a

Maroon society on the Georgia-Florida border in the early 19th century, he would have written a very different book.

Even more serious problems emerge in Malcomson's discussion of the African and African American experience, which focuses on three issues - the origin and development of Black separatist movements, the origins of racist attitudes among Europeans, and African complicity in the slave trade. In this story of the Black experience in America, the horror of slavery, the injustice of Jim Crow and the impact of racism fade into the background and racial separatism becomes a mere philosophical preference.

Color, class and ethnic differences within the Black community do not receive much attention from the author. Because his work frequently focuses on Oklahoma, he misses the ethnic nuances that exist in a diverse Black community such as the one in New York City. In New York, Blacks from the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and South America constitute a large presence in the Black community. In many cases, these Blacks come to the United States with a different concept of race. In the Caribbean, for example, the "one-drop" rule does not apply. People are generally classified according to their appearance and based on how they see themselves. A white man in the West Indies may be considered Black in the United States.

Recently, the "one-drop" concept has been questioned by the offspring of 1960s and early 70s interracial relationships. Bi-racialism is as old as slavery, but in the past most mothers of mixed race children were Black. Today, we increasingly see situations where mothers are white. Under these circumstances, children tend to be less sure about their ascribed racial position. Some who oppose the "one-drop" concept believe that people should be able to claim the race of both parents and there was an unsuccessful effort prior to the last federal census to include a bi-racial designation on forms.

Ironically, many African Americans are ambivalent about emerging bi-racialism and the denial of the "one-drop" rule and their response is not as illogical as it may seem. In South Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere, mixed race people have been used by whites to separate and dilute Black numbers and Black power. To some, it appears highly suspicious that one group of Blacks is offered a new status outside of the race just when Blacks are beginning to achieve some of the benefits of American society. Viewed against the background of political betrayal and the ignoring of Black concerns by whites, one can understand their hesitancy. Black immigration and the bi-racialist movement both promise to continue in the twenty-first century and they should add greater complexity to the definition of race in the United States.