

Introduction

“Caucasians” and the Political History of Racial Identities

[T]he Light of human minds is Perspicuous Words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; *Reason* is the *pace*; Encrease of *Science*, the *way*; and the Benefit of man-kind, the *end*. And on the contrary, Metaphors, and senselesse and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)¹

The classificatory thinking of each individual is one of the ways by which [human beings] try to adapt to reality in a way that best meets their needs. But . . . [t]he world which is given to the individual and which he [*sic*] must accept and take into account is, in its present and continuing form, a product of the activity of society as a whole. . . . The facts which our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity.

—Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937)²

How shall we think about the status of our social identities? By social identity I mean the identities we have as blacks, Caucasians, women, Latinos, gays, and so on.

—Georgia Warnke, “Social Identity as Interpretation” (2002)³

One of the many telling artifacts of the modern world is the fact that there are Caucasians and then there are “Caucasians.” That is, there are the various Caucasian peoples of the Caucasus Mountain region

—for example, Georgians, Dagestanis, Circassians, Chechens, Ossetians, and others—and there are the presumed members of the “Caucasian race.” The latter is a curious invention of the modern age; it has been a basic component of numerous influential racial classifications from the late eighteenth century through the dawn of the twenty-first.

This book is primarily concerned with the peculiar career of the idea of a Caucasian race. Yet the histories of the two concepts of Caucasians—peoples of the Caucasus and the Caucasian race—are intertwined. Consider the following:

Caucasian Slaves in the Middle Ages

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE, before there was any notion of a Caucasian race, Caucasian peoples were bought and sold as slaves by Venetian and Genoese merchants. This was part of a long history of enslavement of Christians by Muslims and of Muslims by Christians in the Middle Ages that “prepared the way for the vast Atlantic slave system” in which Europeans subjugated sub-Saharan Africans.⁴ David Brion Davis reports that the Venetian and Genoese merchants, also involved in the ongoing enslavement of the Moors,⁵ “established a booming slave trade from Black Sea ports, purchasing thousands of Georgians, Armenians, Circassians, Mingrelians, and other Caucasian peoples who were classified as infidels even if they were eventually baptized.”⁶

This source of slaves was mostly abandoned in the latter half of the fifteenth century. By that time the Portuguese sold increasing numbers of “black” African slaves, especially after the Ottoman Turks’ conquest of Constantinople in 1453, which redirected slave traders to sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

“Goddess with Caucasian Face”

In late May 1989, students of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China built a statue for the planned pro-democracy demonstration that began May 30 in Tiananmen Square, in the heart of Beijing. The ten-meter-tall statue came to be known as the Goddess of Democracy. Journalists and commentators from the United States quickly concluded that the statue was intentionally modeled after the Statue of Liberty in New York City. In the words of Neil Kottler, a program officer of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States who coedited a book on the “universal” significance of the Statue of Liberty, “The statue symbolized the

yearning for freedom among ordinary Chinese people; its resemblance to the Statue of Liberty was intentional, not accidental.”⁸

Political theorist Linda Zerilli observes that it was not clear that the Goddess of Democracy was “nothing but a replica of that all-American icon, Lady Liberty.”⁹ Nonetheless, this perceived similarity was expressed in the *New York Times* by reporter Nicholas Kristoff: “[T]he Goddess closely resembles the Statue of Liberty, to the point of having Caucasian features and a large Western nose.” Kristoff added: “A few spectators said they thought it might have been more appropriate for her to have Chinese features, but nobody seemed too concerned about such particulars.”¹⁰

“Caucasians” by U.S. Law

In U.S. Census counts of 1930 and 1940, “Hindoo” was included as a racial category.¹¹ This convention followed a series of legal cases between 1878 and 1923 in which U.S. federal courts were called upon to interpret the phrase “free white person” in U.S. naturalization law, which privileged “white persons.”¹² The courts adjudicated the claims of a number of prospective U.S. citizens of non-European backgrounds to be counted as “white.” Ian Haney López notes that applicants from Hawaii, China, Japan, Burma, and the Philippines and “mixed-race” applicants all failed in their arguments. Meanwhile, the courts declared Mexican and Armenian applicants “white” but “vacillated over the Whiteness of petitioners from Syria, India, and Arabia.”¹³ In a few cases, judges appealed to English anthropologist A. H. Keane’s scholarly analyses of the “Caucasian race” category to determine who was and who was not “white.” Then, in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court, while also citing Keane, rejected the claim to “whiteness” of a high-caste Hindu. The Court now declared that the term *Caucasian* “is at best a conventional term, . . . which, under scientific manipulation, has come to include far more than the unscientific suspects.”¹⁴

These U.S. cases did not resolve the “racial” and legal status of South Asians in general or South Asian Hindus in particular vis-à-vis the “Caucasian race.” Even recently, a California Superior Court judge ruled that Dale Sandhu, a person of East Indian origin, was ineligible to bring a discrimination claim against his former employer, the Lockheed corporation. Sandhu had claimed that his layoff by Lockheed had been racially motivated. The judge accepted Lockheed’s view that Sandhu was “Caucasian” by law and therefore had no legal standing under the California Fair Em-

ployment and Housing Act. Subsequently, the Sixth District Court of Appeal reversed the Superior Court's ruling in Sandhu's favor. The appeals court, citing the appearance of the "Asian Indian" category in the 1980 census, ruled that Sandhu was "subject to a discriminatory animus based on his membership in a group perceived as distinct."¹⁵

"Kennewick Man"

In July 1996, two college students found a human skull at the edge of the Columbia River in Kennewick, Washington. After they reported their find to the police, the county coroner called on James Chatters, a forensic anthropologist, to look at the skull. Chatters said that the skull and its skeleton were from a male "Caucasoid" individual, approximately forty to fifty-five years old. Yet Chatters also noticed the crowns of teeth worn flat in a manner characteristic of prehistoric Native American skulls, and a large projectile lodged in the right hip that proved to be a stone spear point. The spear point resembled those used by hunters of the region between forty-five hundred and nine thousand years ago. A second anthropologist concurred with Chatters, describing the skeleton as that of a "Caucasian male." Soon thereafter, carbon dating established that "Kennewick Man" was between ninety-two hundred and ninety-five hundred years old. Even so, "Caucasoid" and "Caucasian" designations for Kennewick Man were circulated widely in articles in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.¹⁶

The Kennewick Man generated considerable speculation about its "racial" character and the origins of the first inhabitants of the Americas. Some scientists asked, "If this Kennewick Man indeed has many Caucasoid traits, how [as was the case] can an Indian tribe claim his remains?"¹⁷ A number of scientists regarded the Kennewick skeleton as "evidence that the earliest inhabitants of the New World may have been a Caucasoid people"; and a headline that introduced the story in *Discover* magazine declared, "Europeans invade America: 20,000 BC."¹⁸ Recent scholarly reassessments suggest that attempts to fit Kennewick Man into modern "racial" categories were dubious and misleading.¹⁹

"Dark-skinned" Caucasians

The current war in the Caucasus between Russia and Chechen rebels has sometimes been construed, especially by Russians, in racial terms. This

racialization recalls not only a history of Russian imperialism in central Asia and the Caucasus but also one of disputes concerning the “European-ness”—and, implicitly, the “whiteness”—of Russians compared to the supposed “Asiatic” character of Muslim nationalities within Russia and in the Caucasus.²⁰ One legacy of this history is the recent upsurge of racial epithets that Russians have directed against “dark-skinned” people of the Caucasus, including “Kill the blacks.”²¹

These episodes indicate the convoluted history of the “Caucasian race” category. The Chinese Goddess of Democracy and the Kennewick Man have been associated with the idea of the Caucasian race while an actual Caucasian people, the Chechens, have been excluded—at least sometimes—from this designation. Given prevalent ideas about “race,” these stories might lead some to wonder whether the Goddess of Democracy or Kennewick Man were really Caucasian, or whether the Chechens really are dark-skinned compared to the “typical” Russian. Yet such questions obscure the more basic one: How have racialized tropes involving the Chechens and the notion of a distinct Caucasian race come to be readily employed by people to describe these events? My immediate objective, therefore, is to explore what the history of the “Caucasian race” category can teach us about the politics of “race” and racism.

To be clear, this study in no way tracks the history of an actually existing *Caucasian race*. Rather, it critically examines the changing fortunes of an intellectual conceit: the rise and fall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the twentieth-century revival, and the possible final fall in twenty-first century of the notion, manifest in a variety of scientific and popular theories and social practices, that certain people constitute a distinct Caucasian race. Tracing the historical vicissitudes of the “Caucasian race” category demonstrates that race itself is a social and political construction rather than a biologically meaningful concept.

In 1785, German popular philosopher Christoph Meiners posited two great branches of human beings—Caucasian and Mongolian—in his *Outline of the History of Humanity*. Then, in 1795, German physician and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, counted among the founders of modern anthropology, adopted the term *Caucasian* in the third edition of his book *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*.²² Referring to Mount Caucasus, Blumenbach said that he chose Caucasian as a name for what were then called the “white” peoples of Europe and contiguous regions “both because its neighborhood, and especially its southern slope, produces the

most beautiful race of men, I mean the Georgian; and because all physiological reasons converge to this, that in that region, if anywhere, it seems we ought with the greatest probability to place the autochthones of mankind.”²³ Significantly, as a “racial” designation for the “white” peoples of Europe and contiguous regions, the notion of a Caucasian race was not completely unprecedented.

Blumenbach’s innovation is part of a much larger story in which the complex interplay between politics (broadly understood) and science has shaped the development of “race science,” the still-prevalent use of “race ideas” to interpret human diversity, and the production and reproduction of racialized social and political inequalities. Within a generation after Blumenbach delineated a “Caucasian variety” of human beings, this “race” idea was widely adopted in Europe and North America. It was partially eclipsed, however, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the start of the twentieth. During this era an upsurge of European nationalism led European race scientists to posit “racial” differences among European peoples who had previously been grouped together as “Caucasians.” The fortunes of the “Caucasian race” category shifted again in the 1930s. The Nazi movement in Germany generated a new scrutiny of the “race” concept generally and of existing racial classifications in particular. This gave rise to a more benign—and sometimes explicitly anti-racist—racialism.²⁴ Anthropologists now reclaimed the notion of a Caucasian race as one of the three great “races of man,” alongside “Negroes” and “Mongolians” (sometimes called “Caucasoids,” “Negroids,” and “Mongoloids”).

According to this new view of race, the differences among Europeans were merely “ethnic,” while those distinguishing Caucasians, Negroes, and Mongolians were racial. Since 1952, the “Caucasian race” category has retained a prominent place in everyday discourse about race, particularly in the United States, but it has increasingly been called into question by anthropologists and biologists, along with the “race” concept itself, in relation to the changing race politics of this era.

One revealing indicator of the extent to which the career of the “Caucasian race” category is both strange and instructive is how its fate has differed from that of the “Aryan race” idea during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Leaving aside the views of certain white supremacists, it now generally goes without saying that there is no such thing as an Aryan race.²⁵ The “Aryan race” myth was cobbled together from various sources in the mid-nineteenth century—notably, from evidence of an Indo-European language group—and championed by such nineteenth-century

racialists as Comte Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, the German-born English philologist Friedrich Max Müller (for a time), and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, before it became a linchpin of Nazism. Eventually, critical reflection on the horrific legacy of Hitler's Third Reich, ideologically based on the doctrine of Aryan supremacy, thoroughly discredited the Aryan myth—along with related ideas of “Nordic” racial supremacy—among post-World War II raciologists and intellectuals, and then in popular understanding. Not surprisingly, historians of the “race” concept and of European racism have subjected the “Aryan race” myth to much more sustained critical scrutiny than they have given to the “Caucasian race” myth.²⁶

By contrast, the notion of a Caucasian race has gone in and out of vogue, and then back into vogue, among raciologists and in popular usage since it was invented in the late eighteenth century.²⁷ Moreover, as I explain in chapter 4, the decisive refutation of the “Aryan race” idea after World War II coincided with a recovery of the “Caucasian race” category, which had been out of fashion in Europe for most of the previous century. In effect, then, raciologists brought about a dramatic shift in race thinking between the 1930s and 1950s in part by reviving the “Caucasian race” category. Yet the status of Caucasian (or Caucasoid) as a scientifically credible racial category (along with Mongoloid and Negroid) is arguably no better than that of an Aryan race—a point that will become clear through the course of this study.

The contrasting fates of these two race ideas raise several important questions that this study seeks to answer, if only indirectly: Why the difference? Why has the idea of a Caucasian race stubbornly persisted if, ultimately, it has no greater scientific validity than the idea of an Aryan race? Is the difference due solely (or at least largely) to the unique association of “Aryan race” ideas with the Nazis' enormous crime against humanity? If so, how can the difference be squared with the fact that the career of the “Caucasian race” category is also bound up with various crimes against humanity during the past two centuries, even if it has not yet been called into account for its role in these crimes? Or, alternatively, is any comparison with the “Aryan race” myth itself questionable because, quite apart from politics, the revival of the “Caucasian race” category actually marks a scientific advance in our understanding of race?

My thesis is that the changing fortunes of the “Caucasian race” category are the result not of progressive refinements in “race” science but of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that social and political forces have shaped

scientific knowledge of race.²⁸ Race, in short, is an effect of power. Consequently, this study of the Caucasian race is fundamentally a study of power: how social and political power have produced scientific knowledge of race and what the history of racial knowledge reveals about modern power. It is not that political actors merely exploited the findings of modern race science; instead, the science itself was thoroughly political, with its guiding assumptions and questions informed by prevailing relations of power in society. Thus, the history of the “Caucasian race” idea bears out Stephen Jay Gould’s observation that in such matters there is often great value in “treating generalities by particulars.”²⁹

My broader aim is to contribute to a critical theory of social identities. Social identities, as Georgia Warnke says, are “the identities we have as blacks, Caucasians, women, Latinos, gays, and so on, identities that we grow up as, assert in struggles for recognition, or try to eliminate and avoid.”³⁰ These identities are sources of meaning and affiliation, but they are also bound up with social relations of power and domination. Racial identities in particular have provided people with a way to interpret their place in modern societies; but they have been used to justify oppression and social stratification as well as forms of anti-racist politics. The emergence of race and racism in modern Western societies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coincided with the gradual diffusion of modern egalitarian ideals.³¹ Equality has always been difficult for modern nation-states to manage, especially in relation to the dislocations and class-based inequality generated by capitalism. In conjunction with class stratification, race has served as means for nation-states to govern and apportion claims of equality (i.e., who is entitled to equality of what) by providing an ideological justification for selective inequality.³² For instance, race ideas and categories have been used to limit the workings of competitive labor markets through slavery, colonialism, immigration restriction, and labor market discrimination.

A critical theory of social identity will identify and support a cultural politics of group differentiation—of public recognition for social identities—only insofar as this “can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality.”³³ Accordingly, such a theory will illuminate what kinds of public recognition of racial identities, if any, will best support a politics of human equality.

The Political History of “Race”

It is clear that racial categories and identities have played an enormous and ignominious role in modern politics. The development of a socially and politically influenced scientific racialism buttressed racist social and political practices by insisting on a supposedly natural hierarchy of cognitive capabilities among the so-called races of man (see chapter 2). Meanwhile, there is ongoing debate among scholars over whether or not racism, as distinct from other forms of intergroup prejudice and ethnocentrism, is distinctly modern and Western in its origins.

As George Fredrickson explains, forms of rigid “othering” and ethnocentrism roughly analogous to the racism existed in Western societies in the Middle Ages and in non-Western societies before the modern Western invention of the “race” concept.³⁴ Some commentators maintain that racism as *race*-ism is a distinctive product of the modern West that subsequently spread—along with “race consciousness”—to other parts of the world as an effect of Europe-centered capitalist development, the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, and European colonialism and imperialism.³⁵ An alternative view is that the forms of prejudice and ethnocentrism that existed in parts of the premodern West and in non-Western prior to “Western” influence were sufficiently similar to the racism of the modern West (where the term *racism* first came into usage in the 1930s) to be counted as racism as well. Thomas Gossett asserts, with reference to ancient India, China, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and the Jews, “The racism of ancient history, even though it had no science of biology or anthropology behind it, was real, however difficult it may be to judge the extent of its power.”³⁶

This book will not resolve this controversy, but it will shed light on it. As I explain in chapter 1, there is good reason to conclude that racism, as a specific set of beliefs about human “races” that is used to justify exclusionary practices, institutions, and social structures, is a distinctive product of the development of race thinking in the modern West. From this perspective it is important to recognize that racism in this sense can now be found within many (if not most) societies around the globe; yet it would be misleading to equate other traditions and practices of ethnocentrism, which lack any clear analog to the modern concept of race, with racism per se.

The development of the modern Western scientific project of racially classifying people was shaped by a number of epochal events: the consolidation during the late Middle Ages of the idea of Europe as a geographically distinguishable region within the larger Eurasian land mass; the rise

in the early modern period of Europeans' assumptions of their innate physical, intellectual, cultural, religious and moral superiority—assumptions that European elites reinforced and refined in relation to European “discoveries” of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the development of modern “Negro” slavery, and increasing European colonization of the Americas, Africa, and Asia; and the gradual growth and diffusion of a world capitalist economy, based in Europe and linked to the European “voyages of discovery” and conquest in the fifteenth century.

During the course of the twentieth century a number of insightful social commentators and scientists noted the problematic character of race. In the words of anthropologist Ashley Montagu, an early proponent of the “social constructionist” view of race: “It is a common human failing to believe that if a word exists then there must be something in reality which corresponds to it. Do ‘devils’ exist, or ‘succubi’ or ‘incubi’ or ‘dragons’ or a thousand and one other figments of our imagination? ‘Race’ belongs in the same category with these words. It is an invented category, not a discovered one.”³⁷ The claim that race is a political construction and not a biologically meaningful concept is often countered with the claim that there are obvious, observable *racial differences* among people. That is, there are significant phenotypic or morphological differences between groups of people from distinct geographic origins, and the “race” concept denotes precisely these differences.³⁸

Yet this seemingly commonsense view begs fundamental questions about race.³⁹ Given the historical meanings of “race,” why should we persist in calling such differences *racial*? What of the fact that there is greater genetic variation among people *within* each of the various groupings of people that are typically classified as distinct races than there is between these so-called races? Moreover, what should we make of the fact that people are now, in our historical moment, likely to assume that *certain* superficial differences—particularly, differences in skin tone, hair texture, and facial features—truly distinguish distinct *human races*, while other comparable differences among people—for example, differences in eye color, the shape of people’s skulls (or cranial forms), and blood type—are discounted as indexes of race difference? And what of the fact that the traits taken to be the defining criteria of racial difference have varied widely at different times and places?

The suggestion here is that the “race” concept is best understood in terms of social and political processes of *racialization*, or race-making. To speak of processes of racialization is to call attention to the ideological

representational processes whereby “social significance is attached to certain (usually phenotypic) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct [racial] collectivity.”⁴⁰ There is no “discovery” of true *racial* differences among groups of people. Rather, racialization emerges from processes by which socially and politically dominant ethnic groups use certain superficial physiognomic differences between themselves and other groups to create a naturalized “sense of group solidarity or peoplehood that can provide the basis for a claim of dominance or privilege over those considered outside the group.”⁴¹ One crucial implication of this view is that any talk of “race relations” as a subject for scholarly analysis or public policy making, as if at stake are the relationships among actually existing, biologically distinct *races* of people, is a misnomer; actually, it is racialized relations and racialized identities that are at issue—that is, relationships between various groups of people that have been socially and politically constructed as “racially” distinct.⁴² Therefore, to address the distinctive politics of racialized identities (as distinct from ethnic or cultural identities) requires a somewhat different approach from efforts to address problems of cultural diversity or multiculturalism (sometimes addressed under the heading of “cultural pluralism”). Racialized identities have notable cultural dimensions, but they are primarily a manifestation of unequal power between groups and only secondarily about cultural diversity.⁴³ The injustice produced by systemic racism is not primarily a matter of cultural misunderstanding or disrespect for certain cultures. Instead, racism involves exclusionary practices that establish and perpetuate unequal distributions of social status, opportunity, income, wealth, and power among racialized groups.⁴⁴

The racialization approach to “race” enables us to steer a path between two pitfalls that haunt much popular and scientific thinking about race, historically and still today. The first pitfall is the resort to racial explanations to account for social and political inequalities and cultural differences between groups (e.g., in income, wealth, social status, educational achievement, cultural practices), which mistake the effects of racialization processes for the cause. For instance, since the seventeenth century there have been scholars who have claimed that *racial* (i.e., innate, irremovable) differences between the groups we now call Whites, Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos/as are the chief cause of social, political, and economic inequalities between these groups (on average).⁴⁵ Yet this view conveniently ignores the theoretical difficulties of race

as a biologically meaningful concept and discounts the effects of the different and unequal treatment accorded to the different groups historically, which has been rationalized by dominant groups in racist terms.

The second pitfall is the temptation to move too quickly from the observation that there are no *races* of human beings in the old biological and ethnological sense to the conclusion that we should now renounce any use of racial categories in efforts to overcome racism and its effects. According to social theorist Paul Gilroy, to continue to use “racial” categories, even in efforts to combat racism, is to be complicit “in the reification of racial difference.”⁴⁶ Gilroy’s view, while motivated by commendable goals, fails to address adequately the powerful continuing effects of processes of racialization in shaping the social structures of many modern societies and the lived experience of members of these societies.⁴⁷ Understanding race in terms of racialization avoids any reification of racial difference because it emphasizes the historically changing and politically contingent character of processes of racialization; at the same time, it points to the enormous social and political impact of processes of racialization and to the current reality and changeability of *racialized* identities.

Power, Knowledge, and “Race”: Notes on Method

To understand race as a political construction poses challenging epistemological and methodological issues for students of race and racism. We are confronted with difficult questions concerning the status *as knowledge* of historically changing scientific discourses about race. My approach to this issue principally involves a historical genealogy of the career of the “Caucasian race” category. Michel Foucault defines genealogy as a “political history of truth”: it explores how the production of criteria for what counts as true or false in various fields of knowledge in different historical contexts—what Foucault calls “regimes of truth”—“is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.”⁴⁸ Taking a genealogical approach to race requires that we go beyond an analysis of how shifting social and political struggles and power relationships (e.g., European colonialism; the Atlantic slave trade; emergent nationalisms; and struggles over immigration, citizenship, and labor market regulation) have shaped the relations between so-called races of people. It simultaneously demands that we explore historically how such power dynamics have shaped the production of scientific and popular knowledge about race.⁴⁹

My point of entry into this vast history is an examination of the changing place of the “Caucasian” category within the “sciences of race” and in prevailing modes of racial classification in the period that stretches from the late eighteenth century to the present. My account focuses on how these shifts are exemplified in the work of key historical figures in the development of the sciences of racial classification, including Carolus Linnaeus (1707–78), Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840), James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848), Samuel George Morton (1799–1851), Anders Retzius (1796–1860), Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95), Joseph Deniker (1852–1918), Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), and Ashley Montagu (1905–99). Through their varied writings, rooted in botany, zoology, anatomy, ethnology, and anthropology, we can trace the major trends in the dominant modes of scientific racial classifications. These trends include major shifts in the scientific discourses through which the “Caucasian race” category has been authoritatively invented, embraced, displaced, and recovered. It is worth noting that each of these thinkers was a member of the group racialized as dominant in his or her society.⁵⁰ Indeed, prior to the twentieth century this was true of almost all the scientists of race whose work introduced significant changes to prevailing racial classifications.⁵¹ I also consider the race ideas of a number of intellectuals from subordinated racialized groups, such as African American physician Martin R. Delany (1812–85), Russian Jewish physical anthropologist Samuel Weissenberg (1867–1928), and African American historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). These thinkers offer us some insight into how the prevailing modes of race science and racial classification were perceived, reinforced, and resisted by intellectuals who were considered members of “lesser races” in the predominant racial schemes.

As K. Anthony Appiah points out, “throughout the nineteenth century the term ‘race’ came increasingly to be regarded, even in ordinary usage, as a scientific term.” In other words, the concept “race” came to be understood as a way to make true generalizations about the way the world is—specifically, a way to comprehend the true natures of the various peoples who make up the world. As such, scientists and scholars have had a special claim to be considered “experts on how the term worked.”⁵² Moreover, while it hardly needs to be said that how nonscientists speak about race is influenced by social and political forces that escape their immediate awareness, we might be tempted to think that this has not been the case with scientists. The latter are presumably impelled by the pursuit of knowledge. The history of science is not so pure, however.⁵³

This difficulty is strikingly evident in the history of the sciences concerned with race, notably comparative anatomy, ethnology, craniology, anthropology, eugenics, and biology.⁵⁴ Gould observes that the scientists of race did not discover and describe an objective reality of naturally occurring human races; instead, their conceptions and perceptions of race and races were deeply shaped by the social, political, and cultural influences of their time.⁵⁵ In effect, the anatomists, ethnologists, and anthropologists who developed various schemes of racial classification helped produce our racialized world.

At the same time, despite manifest “impurity” of the scientific study of race over the past two hundred-plus years, it would be a mistake, as Adam Lively warns, “simply to dismiss the anthropology of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as ‘bad science.’ Its significance goes beyond that, both because of the support it gave to racial[ized] oppression in the real world, and because it was one aspect of a broader ‘naturalisation’ of European thought that occurred in the eighteenth century. This process of naturalisation was fundamental to the invention of the modern European idea of race.”⁵⁶ In short, to learn well the myriad lessons that the history of race science can teach us about our present racialized world, we need to develop a historically informed understanding of both how race science was shaped by surrounding social, political, and cultural forces and how it progressed *as science*—that is, as the activity of scientists who typically understood themselves as objectively describing and classifying naturally occurring human races.

For this reason, strict adherence to Foucault’s genealogical approach to power and knowledge would be troublesome. If all claims of knowledge are corrupted by relations of power, and if all types of power relationships—from totalitarian regimes to democratic forms of intellectual inquiry—are comparable in how they generate “regimes of truth,” then we are left in a distressing predicament: we would have no credible way to adjudicate between the truth claims of racist and anti-racist discourses. In other words, we would have no critical standpoint from which we could “assess the relative adequacy of different accounts of the world, of different regimes of truth.”⁵⁷ Foucault also leaves us without a way to specify key agents in the development of scientific and popular ideas about race—especially who has done “what to whom, under what circumstances, and why.”⁵⁸

Therefore, to move beyond Foucault’s important point about the pursuit of truth being enmeshed with relations of power, we need to address

the concrete interrelationship of a given society's *cultural system*, its *social structure*, and *human agency* (i.e., people acting to shape their circumstances in relation to inherited ideas and social structures). Within this framework, a society's cultural system consists of the existing stock of ideas and beliefs concerning its practices and institutions at any given time. The social-structural components of a society include relatively enduring (but changeable) social relationships and institutions: the prevailing mode of production and class relations, gender relations, ethnic and racialized hierarchies, government institutions, educational institutions, religious institutions, and prevailing forms of sexual practice.⁵⁹ The *agents* of social change in this scheme are primarily collectivities of persons, such as classes, nations, ethnic groups, or people organized around gender or sexual identities or in social movements or political parties; they are not abstract individuals who somehow stand above or outside prevailing social structures and cultures.

The agents bring about social change (or “make history”) through social and political interaction with other agents under conditions established by the inherited social structures and cultural systems that define their society at that time. The society's cultural system determines the range of ideas, norms, values, and theories with which different social groups or agents interpret and respond to their world, while the existing social structure determines the allocation of material resources that different groups (e.g., social classes and racialized groups in a racialized capitalist society) bring to their interaction and competition with each other.⁶⁰

This framework yields a fruitful way to make sense of how social and political forces have shaped the changing fortunes of the “Caucasian race” category through its history. This history involves three kinds of conceptual transformation: the genesis of “race” as a scientific concept and a historically novel way for people to describe and interpret human diversity; several distinct shifts in modes of racial classification across time, which determined the changing status of the “Caucasian race” notion; and the recent rise—mostly during the last seventy years—of deep skepticism about the credibility of “race” as a scientific concept. Regarding these conceptual shifts, the existing social structure in a society at any given time, by making certain groups socially and politically dominant, enables some social groups (or agents) to be more influential than others in shaping the prevailing ideas about race and schemes of racial classification. For example, until recently members of dominant ethnic and racialized groups (especially race scientists from these groups) were consistently more influen-

tial in the determination of prevailing schemes of racial classification than were the members of subordinate ethnic and racialized groups.

When a change in race ideas is effectively incorporated into a society's scientific, political, and popular discourse, this brings to an end one cycle of social and cultural change and begins another one. Thus, the introduction and diffusion of the "race" concept in a society that previously had *racelike* ideas but no "race" concept per se would constitute the completion of one such cycle. In this way, as I explain later, we can grasp how changing social and political circumstances in the mid-twentieth century helped pave the way for the now prevailing anti-racist science of race (see chapters 5 and 6). In the same breath, because of the complex constellation of factors involved in such conceptual changes—including historical shifts in the place of science in society—a genealogy or conceptual history of this sort cannot hope to be definitive. Sometimes it will only be able to intimate the likely explanations for particular shifts in race thinking.⁶¹

One crucial factor in the transformations of racial thought has been the history of the human migrations in the modern world—between regions of Europe; from Europe to the Americas, Africa, Asia, New Zealand, and Australia; from Africa to the Americas and to Europe; from Asia to the Americas, Europe, and Africa—along with struggles to regulate immigration in receiving countries. It is not that these migrations have merely spurred "racial conflicts" among actually existing races of people. Rather, migrations, which have been "determined by the interrelation of production, trade and warfare," have been a key factor in shaping and reshaping racial thought in general and racial categories in particular.⁶²

In addition, we must not abandon the scientific enterprise entirely if we hope to move constructively beyond Foucault's insight that power relationships shape prevailing forms of knowledge historically. As Tom Nairn observes, a critique of racist pseudo-science that involves a blanket rejection of science undermines "the very foundation of non-racial (and anti-racist) development."⁶³ In this spirit, critical realist social theory points beyond the relativism implied by Foucault's genealogy—namely, that all discourses of truth are equally contaminated by power relationships—by insisting that there is an external reality, independent of human descriptions of it, against which competing claims of truth can ultimately be assessed. For example, the existence or nonexistence of human races (in the biological sense) is an empirical question about the true *nature* of human beings. Insofar as the idea of biologically distinct human races is illusory, it is crucial to recognize that "this illusoriness can only be demonstrated

within scientific discourse."⁶⁴ Simultaneously, we need to understand that this claim about the nonexistence of races is distinct from the claim that there *are* still *racialized* identities and inequalities.⁶⁵

Foucault rightly insists that all human access to reality is mediated by existing languages, concepts, and theories. This means that we always struggle to interpret the world in better and worse ways, with fallible conceptual frameworks and theories. Yet different forms of power do not have the same corrupting effect on the pursuit of truth. All other things being equal, forms of power that are relatively inclusive, democratic, and egalitarian are more likely to generate true knowledge about such things as race, gender, and sexuality than are forms of power that are undemocratic, exclusionary, and asymmetrical. This point applies, for example, to modes of intellectual inquiry that are conditioned by relatively democratic social contexts and marked by relatively democratic, nonhierarchical, and inclusive relations of cooperation as opposed to those conditioned and characterized by authoritarian tendencies and social exclusivity.⁶⁶ Consequently, democratizing social and political movements such as movements for political democratization, feminist movements, post–World War II decolonization, and the U.S. Civil Rights movement, have often revealed limitations of existing theories about the world and generated advances in human knowledge. Indeed, democratizing movements of the twentieth century arguably helped establish social conditions that fostered a more truthful science of “race.”

“Race,” Political Theory, and Planetary Humanism

What follows is a work of historical synthesis written by a political theorist and guided by contemporary ethical and political concerns. My genealogy of the “Caucasian race” category relies on the work of many historians and social scientists concerning various dimensions of the histories of race, racism, and related issues. For a political theorist, the histories of race and racism raise a number of fundamental political questions: How have these notions shaped the character and uses of power in various historical contexts? How has power been related to the production of knowledge in the modern world? How has the “race” concept, a notion rooted in natural history and biology, figured in the construction of transformations of modern political communities? And what does this teach us about the various ways in which political communities and citizenship have been es-

established, defined, and regulated?⁶⁷ To what extent and in what ways has modern liberal theory and policy melded an avowed commitment to basic human equality with significant qualifications to that commitment?

Other scholars in the field of political studies have recently explored related themes. Rogers Smith examines how lawmakers throughout U.S. history have “pervasively . . . structured U.S. citizenship in terms of illiberal and undemocratic racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies.”⁶⁸ Michael Goldfield traces how racialized politics in the United States is “the product of a long process of American social and political development,” while Anthony Marx compares the historical role of state and nation building in constructing the “boundaries of race” in the United States, Brazil, and South Africa.⁶⁹ Closer in spirit to the current work, political theorists Charles Mills, Joel Olson, and Jacqueline Stevens contribute to what Olson calls a “political theory of race.”⁷⁰ Mills contends that global white supremacy “is *itself* a political system”; Olson, focusing on democratic citizenship in the United States, notes that “white” or “Caucasian” “is not a neutral physical description of certain persons but a political project of securing and protecting privileges”; Stevens looks at how “races are constituted and sustained . . . through explicit and implicit invocations of the state.”⁷¹

The present study approaches the theory and politics of race and racism from a different but complementary angle. By exploring the career of the “Caucasian race” category, it illuminates how various modern forms of power have shaped prevailing scientific and “commonsense” knowledge of race.⁷² In doing so, this study offers a unique perspective on how the history of racial domination is bound up with and also reaches beyond the history of racialized “whiteness.”⁷³ The history of the Caucasian race is part of the larger histories of white racialized identity and white supremacy, which emerged in tandem with race theories and racial domination.⁷⁴ The idea of a white race preceded the development of the Caucasian race idea by more than a century. Yet during its years of prominence the “Caucasian race” category has represented racial “whiteness” ratcheted up to a new epistemological realm of certainty.⁷⁵ At the same time, the “Caucasian race” category experienced a partial eclipse among race scientists between 1840 and 1940, when European nationalism surged and (“white”) Europeans sought to dominate each other *racially*. Historian Matthew Jacobson has already discussed some of this history with respect to changing immigration policies and transformations of racialized whiteness in the United States. Yet he leaves much of the larger story un-

told, particularly its European and global aspects, including the history that produced the Caucasian race idea.

To redress this history of racism, this study highlights the vital need for what Paul Gilroy calls a pragmatic, planetary humanism.⁷⁶ Against all forms of racialism and racism, planetary humanism insists on the fundamental equality of all human beings *as human beings*. To actualize a planetary humanist ethic requires, among other things, an understanding of the ways in which the “race” concept has been employed historically to establish hierarchies of “humanness” and human rights and to reinforce other forms of inequality, such as class and gender inequalities.

This legacy has led Gilroy to call for the “renunciation of ‘race’ as a critical concept.”⁷⁷ Here my approach to planetary humanism departs from his. Gilroy rightly warns us of the risk involved in using racial categories in efforts to overcome racism—that this practice may perpetuate racialist thinking about human diversity despite the most vigilant efforts to deconstruct race. Yet his call to renounce any use of race as a critical concept is problematic in a world of persistent racialized social and political inequalities. If we hope to achieve an egalitarian planetary humanism in a world structured by deep racialized inequalities of opportunities, income, wealth, and power, then we must not forget or evade the ethical, social, and political damage that has been and continues to be done by racialist and racist thought and action.

The consequent ethical and political imperative is, as Richard Lewontin says, to “abolish the conditions that require . . . the illusion of race.”⁷⁸ Yet to achieve this objective may sometimes require policies that use existing racialized categories and identities in a self-critical and historically contingent way *as a means to dismantle racialized inequalities*—for instance, through affirmative action policies to redress inequities produced by systemic racism. With regard to the “Caucasian race” category in particular, Lewontin’s proposition implies a corresponding imperative: that those persons who have, in different ways in different contexts, gained material, psychological, and social status benefits from being racialized as members of dominant races (e.g., as “Caucasian” or “Nordic” or “white”) acknowledge and take responsibility for these advantages. People who have been racialized as Caucasians must acknowledge our historically racialized identities as Caucasian—along with the social and material advantages it entails—even as we work with others to end the myth of a “Caucasian race.” This is ultimately an ethical and political challenge that must be faced to realize a planetary humanism. It demands concerted collective

political action. Among other things, this project demands an understanding of the distinct history and struggles of the actual *Caucasian peoples* in the Caucasus region.

Outline of a History

With regard to my title, I have been asked if the history of the “Caucasian race” notion is really a “rise and fall” story.⁷⁹ My tentative answer is that it is a rise and fall and rise . . . and *possible* fall story. In chapter 1, on the period from roughly 1000 to 1684, I survey beliefs about physical, social, religious, and cultural differences among peoples within and beyond medieval and early modern Europe that prefigured later race thinking and subsequently influenced the contours of modern racial categories. I also examine the rise of the “race” concept and the development of modern racial thought in the seventeenth century.

Chapter 2 examines the social and political forces and scientific developments between the late 1600s and late 1700s that help to explain Johann Blumenbach’s fateful use of the “Caucasian race” category in 1795. This time period saw a maturation of natural history along with systematic schemes to classify nature, including human beings. European race scientists in this era were generally inclined to propose racial classifications that scientifically and hierarchically distinguished white people such as themselves from nonwhite peoples.

Chapter 3 examines the period between the end of the eighteenth century and the mid–nineteenth century. During these years Blumenbach’s “Caucasian race” notion passed quickly into scientific discourse and ordinary usage in Europe and in the United States. Yet, where Blumenbach used the “Caucasian race” category to refer to one of five principal “varieties” of human beings that “*run into one another by insensible degrees,*”⁸⁰ it was now adapted to more explicitly racist modes of racial classification. Raciologists such as Georges Cuvier, William Lawrence, and Samuel George Morton asserted the superiority of the Caucasian race. At the end of this era, English ethnologists James Cowles Prichard and Robert Gordon Latham persuasively pointed out the dubious character of the “Caucasian race” category. Nonetheless, the Caucasian race had already become well established in both scientific and ordinary discourses.

Chapter 4 follows the partial displacement of the “Caucasian race” in race science from about 1840 to about 1940. Between the 1840s and 1870s,

a complex set of developments in physical anthropology and European politics and demographics combined to radically alter the prevailing discourse of racial classification, including major migrations of European peoples, the rise of European nationalism, the invention of the “cephalic index” (an index of relative “long-headedness” or “short-headedness”), and the rise of “Aryan race” theory. European raciologists now directed their energies toward identifying the so-called races of Europe—a proliferation of “white races.” This trend yielded the racially restrictive Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 in the United States and the German Nazis’ doctrine of Aryan supremacy. Meanwhile, the “Caucasian race” category remained useful to those Europeans and Euro-Americans (also Euro-Australians and Euro-New Zealanders) who were preoccupied with uniting their fellow Europeans against what they saw as a “rising tide” of “colored” peoples.

In chapter 5, I turn to the social and political forces behind the recovery of the “Caucasian race” category between roughly 1935 and 1952. The horrors of Nazism along with significant shifts in global geopolitics provoked European and North American anthropologists to rethink prevailing race ideas and racial classifications. This new racial reasoning culminated in two major United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Statements on Race in 1950 and 1951.

Chapter 6 explores the gradual decline of the “Caucasian race” category, at least among scientists, from 1952 to the present. Once again, momentous social, political, and cultural shifts around the world spurred changes in race science. Especially notable events were the post–World War II decolonization struggles of people of color in Africa and Asia and the Civil Rights movement in the United States (1954–65).

In chapter 7 I briefly consider the history of Russian expansion into the Caucasus region to make sense of the Russians’ racialization of the “dark-skinned” Chechens and other Caucasian peoples, particularly during the ongoing Russian-Chechen wars. The Chechens’ struggle highlights the historically contingent and paradoxical relationship between peoples of the Caucasus region and the history of the “Caucasian race” category. It also demonstrates that, as Étienne Balibar says, “the discourses of race and nation are never very far apart.”⁸¹