

A Four-Letter Word That Hurts

A Columbia University professor of anthropology makes a sober plea for the abandonment of the mischievous and meaningless term "race"

By MORTON H. FRIED

TAKING the great white race away from today's racists is like taking candy from a baby. There are sure to be shrieks and howls of outrage. But it will be very hard to take away this piece of candy, because, to drop the metaphor, nothing is harder to expunge than an idea. The white race is not a real, hard fact of nature; it is an idea.

In 1959 a young anthropologist named Philip Newman walked into the very remote village of Miruma in the upper Asaro Valley of New Guinea to make a field study of the Gururumba. It was late that first afternoon when it began to dawn upon his native hosts that he had made no move to leave. Finally a man of some rank plucked up his courage and said, "How long will you stay, red man?"

Most people are probably amused, but a few will be puzzled and chagrined to know that what passes in our own culture as a member of the great white race is considered red by some New Guineans. But when did anyone ever really see a *white* white man? Most so-called white men are turned by wind, rain, and certain kinds of lotion to various shades of brown, although they would probably prefer to be thought bronze. Even the stay-in who shuns the sun and despises cosmetics would rarely be able to be considered white in terms of the minimal standards set on television by our leading laundry detergents. His color would likely be a shade of the pink that is a basic tint for all Caucasoids. (That, like "Caucasian," is another foolish word in the service of this concept of race. The Caucasus region, as far as we know, played no significant

role in human evolution and certainly was not the cradle of any significant human variety.)

Actually, even the generalization about pink as a basic skin tint has to be explained and qualified. In some people the tint of the skin is in substantial measure the result of chemical coloring matter in the epidermis; in others there is no such coloring matter, or very little, and tinting then depends on many factors, including the color of the blood in the tiny capillaries of the dermis. Statistically, there is a continuous grading of human skin color from light to dark. There are no sharp breaks, no breaks at all. Since nobody is really white and since color is a trait that varies without significant interruption, I think the most sensible statement that can be made on the subject is that there is no white race. To make this just as true and outrageous as I can, let me immediately add that there never *was* a white race.

WHILE at it, I might as well go on to deny the existence of a red race, although noting that if there was such a thing as the white race it would be at least esthetically more correct to call it the red race. Also, there is not now and never has been either a black race or a yellow race.

To deny that there are differences between individuals and between populations is ridiculous. The New Guineans spotted Dr. Newman as an off-beat intruder as soon as they clapped eyes on him. Of course, they were noticing other things as well and some of those other things certainly helped to make the distinctions sharper. After all, Newman was relatively clean, he had clothes on, and, furthermore, he didn't carry him-

self at all like a Gururumba—that is to say like a human being. I was spotted as an alien the first time I showed up in the small city of Ch'uh sien, in Anhwei province, China, back in 1947. Even after more than a year in that place, there was no question about my standing out as a strange physical type. During the hot summer, peasants who had never seen anything like me before were particularly fascinated by my arms protruding from my short-sleeved shirt, and I almost had to stop patronizing the local bath house. I am not a hirsute fellow for someone of my type, but in Ch'uh sien I looked like a shaggy dog, and farmers deftly plucked my hairs and escaped with souvenirs. Another time, a charming young lady of three scrambled into my lap when I offered to tell her a story; she looked into my eyes just as I began and leaped off with a scream. It was some time before I saw her again, and in the interval I learned that in this area the worst, bloodthirsty, child-eating demons can be identified by their blue eyes.

Individual differences are obvious, even to a child. Unfortunately, race is not to be confused with such differences, though almost everybody sees them and some people act toward others on the basis of them. I say "unfortunately," because the confusion seems so deeply embedded as to make anyone despair of rooting it out.

Most laymen of my acquaintance, whether tolerant or bigoted, are frankly puzzled when they are told that race is an idea. It seems to them that it is something very real that they experience every day; one might as well deny the existence of different makes and models of automobiles. The answer to that analogy is easy: cars don't breed. Apart from

what the kids conjure up by raiding automobile graveyards, and putting the parts together to get a monster, there are no real intergrades in machinery of this kind. To get a car you manufacture parts and put them together. To get our kind of biological organism you start with two fully formed specimens, one of each sex, and if they are attracted to each other, they may replicate. Their replication can never be more than approximate as far as either of them, the parents, is concerned, because, as we so well know, each contributes only and exactly one-half of the genetic material to the offspring. We also know that some of the genetic material each transmits may not be apparent in his or her own makeup, so that it is fully possible for a child to be completely legitimate without resembling either side of the family, although he may remind a very old aunt of her grandfather.

The phenomenon of genetic inheritance is completely neutral with regard to race and racial formation. Given a high degree of isolation, different populations might develop to the point of being clearly distinguishable while they remained capable of producing fertile hybrids. There would, however, be few if any hybrids because of geographical isolation, and the result would be a neat and consistent system.

Much too neat and consistent for man. Never in the history of this globe has there been any species with so little *sitzfleisch*. Even during the middle of the Pleistocene, way down in the Lower Paleolithic, 300,000 or more years ago, our ancestors were continent-hoppers. That is the only reasonable interpretation of the fact that very similar remains of the middle Pleistocene fossil *Homo erectus* are found in Africa, Europe, and Asia. Since that time movement has ac-

celerated and now there is no major region of this planet without its human population, even if it is a small, artificially maintained, nonreproductive population of scientists in Antarctica.

THE mobility so characteristic of our genus, *Homo*, has unavoidable implications, for where man moves, man mates. (Antarctica, devoid of indigenous population, is perhaps the only exception.) This is not a recent phenomenon, but has been going on for one or two million years, or longer than the period since man became recognizable. We know of this mobility not only from evidence of the spread of our genus and species throughout the world, but also because the fossils of man collected from one locality and representing a single relatively synchronic population sometimes show extraordinary variation among themselves. Some years ago a population was found in Tabun Cave, near Mt. Carmel, in Israel. The physical anthropologists Ashley Montagu and C. Loring Brace describe it as "showing every possible combination of the features of Neanderthal with those of modern man." At Chouk'outien, a limestone quarry not too far from Peking, in a cave that was naturally open toward the close of the Pleistocene geological period, about 20,000 years ago, there lived a population of diverse physical types. While some physical anthropologists minimize them, those who have actually pored over the remains describe differences as great as those separating modern Chinese from Eskimos on one hand and Melanesians on the other. All of this, of course, without any direct evidence of the skin color of the fossils concerned. We never have found fossilized human skin and therefore can speak of the skin colors of our ancestors of

tens of thousands of years ago only through extrapolation, by assuming continuity, and by assuming the applicability of such zoological rules as Gloger's, which was developed to explain the distribution of differently pigmented birds and mammals.

The evidence that our Pleistocene ancestors got around goes beyond their own physical remains and includes exotic shells, stones, and other materials in strange places which these objects could have reached only by being passed from hand to hand or being carried great distances. If our ancestors moved about that much, they also spread their genes, to put it euphemistically. Incidentally, they could have accomplished this spreading of genes whether they reacted to alien populations peacefully or hostilely; wars, including those in our own time, have always been a major means of speeding up hybridization.

Even phrasing the matter this way, and allowing for a goodly amount of gene flow between existing racial populations through hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, the resulting image of race is incredibly wrong, a fantasy with hardly any connection to reality. What is wrong is our way of creating and relying upon archetypes. Just as we persist in thinking that there is a typical American town (rarely our own), a typical American middle-class housewife (never our wife), a typical American male ("not me!"), so we think of races in terms of typical, archetypal, individuals who probably do not exist. When it is pointed out that there are hundreds of thousands or millions of living people who fall between the classified races, the frequently heard rejoinder is that this is so now, but it is a sign of our decadent times. Those fond of arguing this way usually go on to assert that it was not so in the past, that the races were formerly discrete.

In a startlingly large number of views, including those shared by informed and tolerant people, there was a time when there was a pure white race, a pure black race, etc., etc., depending upon how many races they recognize. There is not a shred of scientifically respectable evidence to support such a view. Whatever evidence we have contradicts it. In addition to the evidence of Chouk'outien and Tabun mentioned above, there are many other fossils whose morphological characteristics, primitivity to one side, are not in keeping with those of the present inhabitants of the same region.

Part of the explanation of the layman's belief in pure ancestral races is to be found in the intellectually lazy trait of stereotyping which is applied not only to man's ancestry but to landscape and climate through time as well. Few parts of the world today look quite the way they did 15,000 years ago, much



"Now, how about my doing one of you smiling?"

less 150,000 years ago. Yet I have found it a commonplace among students that they visualize the world of ages ago as it appears today. The Sahara is always a great desert, the Rockies a great mountain chain, and England separated from France by the Channel. Sometimes I ask a class, after we have talked about the famous Java fossil *Pithecanthropus erectus*, how the devil do they suppose he ever got there, Java being an island? Usually the students are dumbfounded by the question, until they are relieved to discover that Java wasn't always cut off from the Asian mainland. Given their initial attitudes and lack of information, it is not surprising that so many people imagine a beautiful Nordic Cro-Magnon, archetypical White, ranging a great Wagnerian forest looking for bestial Neanderthals to exterminate.

Once again, there is no evidence whatsoever to support the lurid nightmare of genocide that early *Homo sapiens* is supposed to have wreaked upon the bumbling and grotesque Neanderthals. None either for William Golding's literary view of the extirpation of primitive innocence and goodness. The interpretation that in my view does least damage to the evidence is that which recognizes the differences between contemporary forms of so-called Neanderthals and other fossil *Homo sapiens* of 25,000 to 100,000 years ago to have been very little more or no greater than those between two variant populations of our own century. Furthermore, the same evidence indicates that the Neanderthals did not vanish suddenly but probably were slowly submerged in the populations that surrounded them, so that their genetic materials form part of our own inheritance today.

Then, it may be asked, where did the story come from that tells of the struggle of these populations and the extinction of one? It is a relatively fresh tale, actually invented in the nineteenth century, for before that time there was no suspicion of such creatures as Neanderthals. The nineteenth century, however, discovered the fossils of what has been called "Darwin's first witness." After some debate, the fossil remains were accepted as some primitive precursor of man and then chopped off the family tree. The model for this imaginary genealogical pruning was easily come by in a century that had witnessed the hunting and killing of native populations like game beasts, as in Tasmania, in the Malay peninsula, and elsewhere. Such episodes and continuation of slavery and the slave trade made genocide as real a phenomenon as the demand for *laissez-faire* and the Acts of Combination. It was precisely in this crucible that modern racism was born and to which most of our twentieth-century mythology about race can be traced.



"So long, dear, he's putting the show on the road!"

In the vocabulary of the layman the word "race" is a nonsense term, one without a fixed, reliable meaning, and, as Alice pointed out to Humpty Dumpty, the use of words with idiosyncratic meanings is not conducive to communication. Yet I am sure that many who read these words will think that it is the writer who is twisting meaning and destroying a useful, common-sense concept. Far from it. One of the most respected and highly regarded volumes to have yet been published in the field of physical anthropology is *Human Biology*, by four British scientists, Harrison, Weiner, Tanner, and Barnicot (Oxford University Press, 1964). These distinguished authors jointly eschewed the word "race" on the ground that it was poorly defined even in zoology, *i.e.*, when applied to animals other than man, and because of its history of misunderstanding, confusion, and worse, when applied to humans.

SIMILAR views have been held for some time and are familiar in the professional literature. Ashley Montagu, for example, has been in the vanguard of the movement to drop the concept of human race on scientific grounds for twenty-five years. His most recent work on the subject is a collation of critical essays from many specialists, *The Concept of Race* (Free Press, 1964). Frank B. Livingstone, a physical anthropologist at the University of Michigan, has spoken out "On the Non-existence of Human Races" (*Current Anthropology*, 3:3, 1962). In the subsequent debate, opinions divided rather along generational lines. The older scientists preferred to cling to the concept of race while freely complaining about its shortcomings. The younger sci-

entists showed impatience with the concept and wished to drop it and get on with important work that the concept obstructed.

QUITE specifically, there are many things wrong with the concept of race. As generally employed, it is sometimes based on biological characteristics but sometimes on cultural features, and when it is based on biological traits the traits in question usually have the most obscure genetic backgrounds. The use of cultural criteria is best exemplified in such untenable racial constructs as the "Anglo-Saxon race," or the "German race" or the "Jewish race." Under no scientifically uttered definition known to me can these aggregates be called races. The first is a linguistic designation pertaining to the Germanic dialects or languages spoken by the people who about 1,500 years ago invaded the British Isles from what is now Schleswig-Holstein and the adjacent portion of Denmark. The invaders were in no significant way physically distinct from their neighbors who spoke other languages, and in any case they mated and blended with the indigenous population they encountered. Even their language was substantially altered by diffusion so that today a reference to English as an Anglo-Saxon language is quaint and less than correct. As for the hyperbolic extension of the designation to some of the people who live in England and the United States, it is meaningless in racial terms—just as meaningless as extending the term to cover a nation of heterogeneous origin and flexible boundaries, such as Germany or France or Italy or any other country. As for the moribund concept

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Poets Among the Demagogues

By LILLIAN SMITH

I WANT to discuss the poet in a world filled with demagogues, I want to stress the power of the poetic spirit in a time of clamor and hate and anarchic confusion. The demagogues are everywhere: not only in Selma, Alabama, and Neshoba County, Mississippi; not only on the streets of Birmingham and Harlem and in sheriffs' offices and governors' mansions, but in the United Nations, in new countries and old, new institutions and old. Of them all, perhaps the most dangerous demagogues are those that crouch in our own minds, whispering lies at a time when we so desperately need to hear the poet's deep truths. For we have desperate and difficult problems to deal with: problems that reach inside our homes and our hearts and pull us to the ends of the earth; problems that won't leave us alone; problems that shock us and frighten us.

Let me name only a few: police brutality, the Ku Klux Klan and its killers, capital punishment, drug addiction of the young, political tensions that grip Israel and Bonn and the Arab nations, that stir Indonesia, Vietnam, that tear at Cuba and China; there are our ghettos and our school dropouts and our babies so bereft of love that learning is impossible; there are counties in Alabama where not one Negro has ever voted; there is the violent death of the good and valiant, Negro and white, who are trying to win dignity and freedom for others; there are the starving children of Asia; there is quiet but terrible rural depravity; there is automation and massive conformity; and there is, always threatening us, nuclear warfare.

"What a terrible time we live in," the demagogue shouts. "Come with me and we'll go back to the old way, the good old times that never existed. Just follow me, we'll somehow get there."

But actually these horrendous, multiple, interlocking problems are only aspects of one big thing. This is the vast, urgent hunger of men everywhere to become more human. What could be

more exalting than this amazing upsurge of the spirit, the push forward, the sudden longing? The details can scare us to death, of course. But the phenomenon as a whole can excite us, lift and fill us with enormous energy and determination.

Once we see it, once we begin to realize, by act of imagination and heart, the meaning of what is happening to us, once we feel the direction we are going, then things will fall in line, chaos will resolve into new forms. And it is the poet's job to show us. For only the poet can look beyond details at the total picture; only the poet can feel the courage beyond fear, only he can grasp the splinters and bend them into a new wholeness that does not yet exist. It is his job to think not in years but in spans of thousands of years; his job to measure the slow movement of the human spirit evolving; his to see that the moment is close for all mankind to make another big leap forward; it is his job to scoop up the debris of our times and show us the giant outlines of the human spirit becoming more able to relate to the unknown and the unseen.

Teilhard de Chardin was a great poet as well as a fine scientist, and, as poets do, he now and then spoke as simply as a child. He said, "It is because the earth is round that we have become human: you see, we could not get away, we could not help but rub against each other; and this rubbing polished our minds, sent the mental temperature up; in such heat minds became flexible, moved with speed; became involved and convoluted and related in ten billion ways. Now, suddenly today, we are only a few hours from every man on earth, and our minds are showing a startling leap forward toward complexity: men in small groups, collaborating, can solve problems in a few weeks or months or even days that one man, working alone and in isolation, could never have solved had he lived a thousand years." In the last fifty years, he often said, more scientific problems have been articulated, more new questions asked, more discoveries made than in the past ten thousand years.

But where will all this activity take us? It is the poets' job to tell us. Are they doing it? What are they saying? What are novelists and dramatists saying about this tremendous thing that is happening to us? I'm afraid they are saying almost nothing. Most are still talking the old

nihilisms of the nineteenth century redressed in new clothes; most are still fixated on narcissistic problems that have sloshed over from Victorian days; most are still moaning about the human condition, the tragic absurdity of man's plight, the hideous lack of cosmic purpose; most mistake an earth-size movement for no motion at all. I cannot think of one who is creating characters who might have qualities needed for this adventurous age. What has Albee given us? Genet? Sartre? Mailer? Self-absorbed, most cannot tear their eyes from their own small depravities. So they are giving us fragmented sketches of sick people; they hold before us in play and story a never-ending bleak view of miserable, lost, lonely schizophrenics. Of course we should look with compassion at our sick and lost ones—young and old—but they should not be presented to us in drama and novel as though they are the whole of contemporary life, as though they are all we have to count on for the future.

TURNING big issues into small ones because, however talented, they are not poet enough to grasp the vastness of contemporary possibilities—what could be more dangerous today? Turning small issues into large. Here is where poets reduce themselves to demagogues. By using the big distortion they become guilty of arousing needless fear and despair; they force their listeners into dead ends that don't exist; sealing the present tight with their own anxieties they declare, "This age has no exit." They treat *hope* as the only four-letter word you must never be caught using.

I do not want to be misunderstood: it is not the presence of splintered, sick, empty people in books and on stage that is wrong; it is the acting as if there is nobody else in the world; it is the omission, the absence of context, that so dangerously distorts things.

We cannot act as if this is all, as if there is nothing more to count on; how do we dare when here we are in the midst of the greatest transformation the human race has ever experienced? How can it be carried through unless the young believe in it, unless they feel it in the big? Unless they sense an exalted purpose behind this amazing evolution of the spirit? We know man's evolution is now in his own hands; we know from here on out it is up to him; from here on out he makes the decisions; he has stepped out (or God has let him step out) of natural law—not into chaos but into a new creativity that must find its needed forms. But do the young know this? Have the poets offered them a new vision, a new faith, a courage that races through their blood?

It is so easy to panic, to give up in
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Lillian Smith is a novelist who has long had a close interest in racial problems and other social issues. This article is adapted from a talk prepared for presentation earlier this year in Washington, D.C., at the National Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress.