

Unlocking Humanity: Why the Key to a Post-Racial Future May Lie in Antiquity

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While race did not exist until at least the 15th century an examination of the events between A.D. 1 and its development, reveals the impact: evolution, identity, trade, technology, migration, and skin color had on the concept. Since it was initially conceived the concept of race has been used to create a hierarchy of groups and justify different forms of oppression. The idea that racial tolerance can heal wounds created by hundreds of years of discrimination and prejudice contrasts with the notion that colorblindness is key to achieving a post-racial future. What's interesting is that for most of human existence character was more important than skin color and race did not influence an individual's life chances. When we neglect telling the entire history of humanity including the events leading up to the development of the concept of race, it's harder to see a future where groups who have historically faced prejudice and discrimination can defend themselves, while simultaneously rejecting categorization.

Keywords: post-racial, humanity, the concept of race, social identity theory, skin color, character

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of the remains of the earliest known human ancestor in Ethiopia's Awash region who evolved through different pathways than apes or chimpanzees provided the first evidence that human origins began in Africa 4.4 million years ago (White et al., 2009). Nearly all genetic studies are consistent with the hypothesis that Upper Paleolithic Eurasians descended from a Sub-Saharan African population between 100-200 thousand years ago (Grine et al., 2007). Moreover, the examination of a 36,000-year-old skull from Hofmeyr, South Africa provided the first fossil evidence many humans left the continent 25-65 thousand years ago in the late Pleistocene era to colonize Eurasia (Grine et al., 2007). The vast number of archeological sites throughout Eurasia dating back to the Paleolithic period suggest the development of lighter skin facilitated human survival during winter months, when there were cooler temperatures which resulted in less UV exposure (Jablonski, 2004). During antiquity humans lived in small groups and would have only regularly seen their relatives and others living in neighboring areas (Jablonski, 2004). The earliest contacts between people with visibly different skin tones would have taken place in the context of routine trade which would have been possible beginning in A.D. 1 (Jablonski, 2004; The Metropolitan Museum of Art [The Met], 2010).

The Development of the Concept of Race, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the Revolutionary War

Those humans who remained on the continent or migrated to places with tropical climates maintained a darker skin complexion, which helped block out sunlight and protect their folate reserves (Driscoll, 2007). Despite the arduous nature of travel, the establishment of trade along the silk, spice, and incense routes began to necessitate communication between groups with different skin colors (The Met, 2010). Advances in transportation relating to the usage of animals and ships resulted in greater demand for surplus goods and created conflict between groups from commercial and rural areas (McCusker, 2006; Northrup, 2005; The Met, 2010). Tensions stemming from demand that outpaced supply laid the foundation for the concept of race resulting in oppression targeting humans with darker skin complexions (McCosky, 2012). The development of a biologically invalid yet socially accepted hierarchy favoring groups with lighter skin, known as race was used to justify the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which involved the enslavement of Africans who were transported to the U.S., South America, and the Caribbean for forced labor mainly on sugar, cotton, and tobacco plantations by the British, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and the Dutch from the 16th to 19th centuries (Eltis, 2007; McCosky, 2012). Disagreements relating to international trade and colonial policy, including the taxation of tea from China sold by the British East India company led to the Revolutionary War which began in 1775 and ultimately resulted in the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 (Independence Day) creating the United States of America (Slaughter, 2015).

The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration

By 1861 conflict between the union (which represented northern U.S. states and supported the abolition of slavery) and the confederacy (a conglomeration of southern U.S. states that were proponents of slavery) reached a boiling point (Serwer, 2021). On April 15, 1861 President Abraham Lincoln issued a declaration requesting military assistance to stop the confederacy after several southern states seceded from the union, marking the beginning of the American Civil War (National Museum of African American History and Culture [NMAAHC], 2019). By September 22, 1862 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which rendered all persons held as slaves by the confederacy free, although the practice remained intact in Texas until June 19, 1865 (Juneteenth) when union troops announced the news in Galveston (NMAAHC, 2019). Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his troops to Union General Ulysses S. Grant two months earlier in Virginia (NMAAHC, 2019). The period after the civil war known as reconstruction, gave rise to increased lynchings in the south aimed at suppressing the civil rights of the newly freed African American population, violence and intimidation coupled with the enactment of state and local Jim Crow laws which enforced racial segregation triggered perhaps the biggest and most rapid migration America had ever seen, when between 1916 and 1940 about 1.6 million African Americans moved from mainly rural areas in the south to industrial cities in the northern U.S. (Ferris State University, 2022; Frey, 2004; Harriot, 2021).

The Civil Rights Movement, Integration, and the Black Power Movement

While the Supreme Court in rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the south's local and state Jim Crow laws, racial segregation and violence did not go unchallenged by African American residents, who boycotted and protested in at least 25 cities from 1900-1906 (Sullivan, 1999). In addition, leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and Henry McNeal Turner debated a wide range of strategies focused on achieving social, economic, and political advancement for the black community (Sullivan, 1999). Over the next forty years, a mixture of landmark supreme court rulings, such as *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954 and violence perpetrated by white segregationists, such as the murder of Emmitt Till in 1955, resulted in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders organizing non-violent demonstrations in support of social, economic, and political reforms for African Americans (Ferris State University, 2022). Although the protests were largely successful in advancing equality and civil rights, African Americans who participated in them continued to be met with brutal violence at the hands of white segregationists and police officers (Sullivan, 1999). On April 4, 1968 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee where he was speaking on behalf of striking sanitation workers (Ferris

State University, 2022). By the early 1970's the civil rights movement had ushered in many social, economic, and political reforms, paving the way for tangible changes, such as integration in southern states where the black community faced the harshest and most violent resistance (Sullivan, 1999).

In the early to mid 1970's, with the African American community still grieving over the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, a new form of resistance (coined the Black Power Movement) calling for immediate and often violent action (heavily influenced by Malcom X's initial criticisms of civil disobedience — despite his views changing dramatically prior to his assassination in 1965) which stood in direct contrast with earlier non-violent protests against discrimination and prejudice gained steam (The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, 2022). While the concepts of self-defense and cooperative-economics resonated with the African American community, the violent tactics often employed by leaders of the Black Power Movement, including certain factions of the Black Panther Party lacked support among the majority of African Americans and led to a heightened amount of scrutiny and monitoring by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], 2022). Beginning in the 1980's, the Black Power Movement had started to decline as resisting discrimination with coordinated violent action was never really seen as a viable strategy to secure civil rights (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2017).

Colorblindness, Police Brutality, and Black Lives Matter

With a landmark study on human variation in 2002 and the conclusion of the mapping of the human genome in 2003, scientists from a myriad of disciplines agreed that there were no biologically distinct human races, as was previously thought (American Association of Biological Anthropologists [AABA], 2019; Chou, 2017; Petit, 1998). Scientific consensus on the concept of race was based on evidence that greater genetic variation existed within racial groups than between them (American Anthropological Association [AAA], 1998). Since race had no biological basis, it became referred to as a social construct (Flores, 2012). Two different perspectives informed the majority of debates on how to address the social construction of race (Einhorn, 2011). One idea was that injustice caused by hundreds of years of discrimination and prejudice could be countered by educating the public about racial tolerance (Berry, 2014). The other perspective was that the improvement of race relations was due to the declining significance of race as a concept (Milliman, 2014).

While many contended the nation reached a post-racial era after the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States in 2008 and again in 2012, racial tensions following the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump led to increased conflict between law enforcement and the black community, as evidenced by the murder of George Floyd by ex-Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin, who used a deadly knee restraint on Floyd's neck even after he was aware he couldn't breathe (Hill et al., 2020; SPLC, 2017). While some were energized by Trump's rhetoric, it also emboldened a new generation of African American civil rights activists from a decentralized organization with approximately eight years in operation called Black Lives Matter (Black Lives Matter [BLM], 2022). Following George Floyd's death and advocacy by Black Lives Matter activists U.S. companies pledged an unprecedented 50 billion dollars for racial justice, unfortunately further analysis of the commitment demonstrates that 90 percent of it was allocated towards programs the companies themselves stood to benefit from, while just 4.2 billion dollars was awarded in grants, and 70 million dollars — an even smaller portion went towards criminal justice reform (Jan et al., 2021). Analysis of corporate expenditures for racial justice after George Floyd died in police custody, reveals the limits of institutional power in addressing structural problems (Jan et al., 2021). Additionally, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021 introduced by Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA) passed in the House of Representatives, but Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) wouldn't negotiate in good faith in the Senate regarding requests to change qualified immunity for law enforcement officers — a central demand of those seeking accountability for unconstitutional policing, further exposing the ideological divide concerning racial and criminal justice in America (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal and Educational Defense Fund [NAACP LDF], 2021).

CONCLUSION

As a system of categorization race prompts humans to look for ways to identify with each other by differentiating themselves from one another (Tajfel et al., 1979). Moreover, social identity theory contends humans derive a sense of identity from our membership in racial groups and are motivated to draw favorable comparisons between our racial group and others (Tajfel et al., 1979). While race is a powerful predictor of intergroup relations exposure to an alternate social environment where the importance of race is diminished, reduces the tendency for humans to categorize each other by skin color (Kurzban et al., 2001). What's interesting is that for most of human existence character was more important than skin color and race did not influence an individual's life chances (Hochman, 2020; Prewitt, 2013). When we neglect telling the entire history of humanity including the events leading up to the development of the concept of race, it's harder to see a future where groups who have historically faced prejudice and discrimination can defend themselves, while simultaneously rejecting categorization (Hochman, 2020).

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