

Racial Science and British Society, 1930-62

Review Number:

742

Publish date:

Tuesday, 31 March, 2009

Author:

Gavin Schaffer

ISBN:

9780230008922

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

244pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Graham Macklin

The subject of race and science, particularly in the American context, has produced a number of superlative studies in recent years foremost among which are the works of William H. Tucker, author of *The Science and Politics of Racial Research* and *The Funding of Scientific Racism*.⁽¹⁾ An equally absorbing study worthy of mention in this context for its illuminating examination of the role played by science and scientists in supporting and sustaining the political fight against desegregation in America during the 1950s and 1960s is John P. Jackson's *Science for Segregation*.⁽²⁾

There have also been a number of noteworthy contributions dealing with the subject from this side of the Atlantic including Dan Stone's *Breeding Superman*, Elazar Barkan's *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* and Nancy Stepan's *The Idea of Race in Science*, to name but a few.⁽³⁾ These are now joined by Gavin Schaffer's erudite monograph, *Racial Science and British Society, 1930-62*, which sheds significant light on how the battle of ideas on the subject of 'race' was waged in a British context, whilst also maintaining the breadth to note some of the important international events which battered upon it. Schaffer's study makes a number of insightful and illuminating observations though perhaps the overarching one is its discussion of the passage of scientific authority on the subject of 'race' from biological to social scientific disciplines such as sociology after 1945.

In observing this overarching trend Schaffer's study is notable for its examination of the reaction and indeed interaction of members of the scientific community through the lens of the rise and fall of Nazism, the onset of the Cold War, the end of segregation in the Deep South, and the birth of the South African apartheid system, all of which helped to define and indeed re-define the scientific study of race. Through this tableaux of events Schaffer recounts how science, or moreover its practitioners, allowed their own views to intrude

upon their 'objective' scientific work in order to make the simple but engaging point that science and society have mutually informed and reinforced one another throughout the course of the 20th century. There has never been a 'one way traffic' of ideas from the hermetically sealed laboratory to the 'man in the street'. As Schaffer observes: 'It has often been factors outside science that have driven scholars to write on race, creating an influential movement of ideas in the opposite direction... from society to science' (p. 3). Political ideologies and political prejudices from Left and Right have, as Schaffer ably demonstrates, coloured the scientific understanding of 'race' as a concept, helping to determine the stance biologists and others took on the matter. In this sense Schaffer's is a searching study that says much about the social and political milieu in which certain scientists worked and its impact upon the production of their knowledge.

Such observations are of particular import given Schaffer's argument that key aspects of the construction of immigration policy cannot genuinely be understood without reference to the influence both of the prevailing scientific orthodoxy, which was by no means a cloistered undertaking, and wider social attitudes themselves which in many instances helped to mould scientific opinion itself. By taking this holistic approach Schaffer's study has much to commend it. Contrary to several previous studies Schaffer makes a convincing case for stating that far from being a period in which race disappeared as a concept the 1930s was a period in which the concept of race was 'reconsidered and rearticulated' (p. 16). His dissection of four racial studies reveals that far from dissipating during the inter-war period a 'near total consensus' remained within the scientific community that the scientific concept of race 'continued to mean something'. However, doubts about the 'origins and importance' of the concept were increasingly being expressed, which, Schaffer observed represented something of a 'sea change' (p. 25) even if it did not signal a sudden diminution of biological thinking.

To illustrate his case Schaffer explores the history of the book *We Europeans* (4) written by Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon (though they were not its sole authors), which was published in 1935 and is generally regarded as a radical assault on Nazi racial theory, which indeed it was. However, its message was 'not as radical as may appear at first glance' (p. 39) notes Schaffer. The authors themselves struggled to dismiss entirely the idea of mental inferiority based on ideas of 'race' or indeed the dangers of 'miscegenation'. Indeed whilst *We Europeans* represents an important moral challenge to the implications of Nazi *Rassenhygiene* Schaffer does not shy away from concluding that authors were themselves 'uncertain' about the absolute scientific validity of the arguments they themselves were making which were as political and moral as they were scientific. The overarching anti-racial message of *We Europeans* drove critics such as the biologist Reginald Gates to distraction. However, as Schaffer ably demonstrates Gates's critique was influenced just as much by his own racism, anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism and was later to become a key figure in the battle to confer a scientific veneer on the politics of segregation.

Setting aside the vast political and moral differences between such scientists Schaffer demonstrates that, when considering the question of race itself, the views between these two seemingly polarised scientific extremes did not differ appreciably on the questions of physical and psychological attributes or indeed on the apparent dangers of race-mixing. The disputes between the progressive and conservative camps had as much to do with politics as they did with science and 'rather minor scientific differences were utilised in an attempt to reset the racial views of the nation' (p. 48).

Even before the end of the Second World War when moral opprobrium surrounding Nazi racial policies had become near universal it was the progressive camp that had gained the upper hand largely because their 'trump card' – the one that defined the fault line between progressive and conservative science – was that there was no longer a scientific certainty with regards to the idea of race. The apparent triumph of progressive ideals did little to contest the core ideas of innate racial difference, however, which continued to permeate science, society and policy. This was perhaps due to the conceptual limitations of progressive science itself argues Schaffer. It could go so far and no further. Its luminaries did not and indeed perhaps could not, despite bold projects such as *We Europeans*, provide daring and dynamic leadership on the issue of race largely because they shared so many of its basic premises with their conservative rivals, namely that racial difference existed.

It would take the Second World War for a further shift to take place. Indeed whilst Britain's progressive biologists undermined Nazi racial theory even for the radicals amongst them the idea of completely dismissing the idea of group racial inheritance for instance 'was a step too far' (p. 74). Whilst they were comfortable arguing that race was an idea 'mostly' in the minds of people, and which had been richly abused by the Nazis, they could not rid themselves of the idea altogether. 'They wanted to help the nation beat Hitler,' observes Schaffer. 'They did not want to destroy race totally as a biological category' (p. 74). That they were unable to do so is implicit in the stance of leading biologists towards the treatment and internment of enemy 'aliens' between 1939 and 1945 and the wartime utilisation of black British subjects in Europe neither of whom were able to escape from hoary though widespread racial stereotypes which continued to bedevil the implementation of a more enlightened government policy. Ultimately, notes Schaffer, science proved most vociferous in its leadership on the issue of Jewish refugees than on the subject of the desirability of a black presence in Britain. The latter was to increasingly come to the fore with the onset of mass immigration from Britain's colonies and former colonies in the post-war period.

Schaffer's discussion of how racial conservatives like Arthur Keith and Reginald Gates continued to keep the torch alight during the aftermath of the Holocaust is instructive. So too is his discussion of the markedly more successful strategy pursued by the admittedly more liberal-minded C. P. Blacker, head of the Eugenics Society to steer his organisation through the hard days that confronted the organisation in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Keith and latterly Gates, who was a vocal opponent of the progressive stance, were left marginalised even before the end of the 1930s. Gates was unable or more likely unwilling to admit that authority in science was passing from geneticists to social scientists or indeed to acknowledge that science had become increasingly politicized to the detriment of those who held views considered retrograde by both the academe and the wider general public. Gates blamed his loss of prestige on a malign Jewish conspiracy against him. 'Ultimately, Gates was not under attack from within his own discipline but had fallen victim to a new social scientific authority,' posits Schaffer. 'The very parameters of Gates's research agenda isolated him and led to criticism even before his racist conclusions compounded his troubles' (p. 105).

In an ironic reversal of fate the post-war period saw many left-wing scientists, appalled by the emerging realities of Stalinism and the corruption of science by Trofim Lysenko and the purge of orthodox Soviet geneticists, move to disconnect politics from science. 'It taught them the hard way that there were good reasons to keep science and politics apart' (p. 118). From the other side of the fence it was a lesson that all but the most die-hard racist conservative scientists like Gates had learned in the 1930s.

Following on from an expertly told examination of the tortured travails of British biologists as they wrestled with the construction of the UNESCO statements on race Schaffer moves on to discussing the impact of three further international issues on the thinking of British scientists of race: segregation in the US, apartheid South Africa and Commonwealth immigration.

Gates who had become something of an isolated figure in the immediate period experienced an Indian summer in the 1950s through his interaction with American segregationists who were battling to uphold Jim Crow. Schaffer's analysis of the transformation of his fortunes and indeed those of an associated clique conservative racial scientists came in the early 1960s through the journal *Mankind Quarterly* is extremely interesting. This is in large part due to Schaffer's judicious use of Gates's personal papers, which illuminates much about this scientific nexus that had previously only been viewed from the other side of the transatlantic. Whilst the author rightly notes both the importance of *Mankind Quarterly* and indeed its receipt of monies from the segregationists in the United States, the bond, both financially and editorially was even stronger and deeper than is indicated here. Apartheid South Africa provided a similar impetus to use science to support, reinforce and ultimately to justify pre-existing racial social structures though the impact of the latter is not as fully explored, from the conservative side at least, as is the connection with the segregationist South.

One of the themes underpinning Schaffer's work is the complex interaction between popular attitudes, racial science and government policy. This he charts from 1905, reconstructing the debate, scientific and otherwise, that surrounded the 1919 Aliens Amendment Act. This was informed by a widespread belief that the entry of foreigners would damage the racial fibre of the nation, a fear heightened by the Bolshevik revolution. Both the parliamentary debates and indeed science itself 'mirrored growing social concerns about racial difference and the need for British racial preservation' (p. 10). Such a dynamic coloured the passing of most other government legislation aiming to limit immigration which was similarly suffused with racial stereotypes and particularly the preponderance of ideas that racial intermixing could jeopardise white British racial stock. Turning to consider post-war Commonwealth immigration Schaffer shows that the parameters of the debate in which legislation was framed had hardly shifted in half a century save for an understanding that certain things were best left unsaid if one was to avoid controversy. Indeed the premises of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act owed more to eugenic thinking than it did to the now prevalent social science though its framers would have been loath to admit it.

While Schaffer does not disagree that by and large conservative racial biology has been in 'retreat' for much of the 20th century his nuanced study reveals that the nature of this retreat was 'slow, uncertain and divisive' (p. 170). As Schaffer notes 'race will remain an influential idea for some time to come, entrenched in our social psyche' and that 'because scientists function within this discursive terrain it seems probable that, in one guise or another, race will remain with them as long as it remains with us' (p. 171). There is every indication that it will.

It would have been interesting to follow Schaffer's train of thought on the subject for another few decades beyond 1962 when his monograph ostensibly draws to a close. In particular it would have been interesting to read his treatment of the interaction of science and society during the heated debates over race and intelligence that had been brewing since the late 1960s, in part a backlash to the marginalisation of these ideas in the immediate post-war period, and which came to the fore during the controversy that accompanied the publication of Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's book, *The Bell Curve*.[\(5\)](#)

Another point of interest, to this reviewer at least, would have been an examination, in the broader context, of how British scientists have responded to debates about race and immigration as they have shifted further, though not exclusively, from the scientific to the cultural sphere, something which is briefly touched upon in the epilogue. Neither comment is meant as a criticism. The parameters of Schaffer's book are clearly defined and extremely well argued. If such musings by this reviewer reveal anything it is simply the significant potential for further study highlighted by Schaffer's work.

Schaffer's meticulously researched, balanced and thought-provoking intellectual history of the relationship between science and society is one that makes a raft of important observations on the interaction between scholarship, politics, society and governmental policy with regards to 'race' and scientific thinking on race. It is very warmly recommended and deserves a wide readership.

Notes

1. William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research* (Urbana, IL, 1994); *The Funding of Scientific Racism: Wickliffe Draper and the Pioneer Fund* (Urbana, IL, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John P. Jackson, *Science for Segregation: Race, Law, and the Case Against Brown Vs Board of Education* (New York, NY, 2005). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool, 2002); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge, 1992); and Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London, 1982).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Julian S. Huxley and A. C. Haddon; with a chapter on Europe overseas by A. M. Carr Saunders, *We Europeans* (London, 1935).[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York, NY, 1994). [Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login> [2]

oxford journals

<http://shm.oxfordjournals.org/content/22/2/410.full> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/742>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3719>

[2]

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_world_history/v021/21.4.kim

[3] <http://shm.oxfordjournals.org/content/22/2/410.full?keytype=ref&ijkey=4DSvoxWeFkDXyz8>