



Race and racism

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Racism is premised on the idea that humanity could and should be divided into distinct biological groups or 'races', and that different races stand in a ranked and hierarchical relation to one another. Racism understands human races to be separate and clear-cut clusters of people, based on biological criteria that are fixed and relevant for their behavior. While humans do vary biologically, their variation does not fall into such clusters that correspond to racial categories. Speaking of human races thus ignores the contemporary science of human variation, whilst intimately mixing the study of human biology with hierarchy, stigma and prejudice.

As a worldview, racism was historically pervasive in the academy and in anthropology, a discipline that emerged in the context of colonialism, colonial discovery, and the exploration of human diversity. While the concept of race was in many respects foundational to the development and practice of anthropology it is now contested. As we will discover in this entry, the concepts and definitions of race, and their applicability, have changed greatly over time. Drawing on ethnographic material from various social and political contexts, and attempts at theorising race and racism, this entry will discuss important ways in which anthropologists have shaped both concepts in the past and in the present. Their work contributes to the important insight that race is not biologically but socially constituted. 'Race is the child of racism, not the father' (Coates 2015, 7).

Introduction

There are no biological races in humans. This is the conclusion of [scientific](#) bodies such as the American Anthropological Association (AAA) as well as the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA; formerly the American Association of Biological Anthropologists, or AABA). As the 2019 AABA statement makes clear, 'no group of people is biologically homogeneous', and human populations are 'not biologically discrete, truly isolated or fixed'.¹ The 1998 AAA Statement identifies 'race' as 'an ideology about human differences', and states that physical variations in the human species have problematic non-biological meanings culturally and politically ascribed onto them.² These anthropological associations are not alone in rejecting the biological nature of racial groups, with genetic, psychological, and other scientific associations also publishing concordant statements.³

Yet, one need only look at news items about police violence towards African-Americans in the US; [ethnic](#) minority mortality rates during the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) in the UK; xenophobic violence against African migrants in South Africa; or the on-going hardening of borders of Europe to prevent the resettlement of migrants and refugees from African and Asian countries (de Genova 2018), to understand why race and

racism remain such important topics in our time.

Knowledge about race and racism is produced in the interstices between popular and scientific ideas (Reardon 2005). Anthropology is one of the social sciences that has a contradictory disciplinary heritage (Mullings 2005, 669). 'Anthropology's early professionalization as a science was associated closely with the elaboration of typologies and techniques for classifying and operationalizing the discrete "races of man"' (Harrison 1995, 50). Historically, the discipline has been involved in and complicit with white supremacy, racism, and [colonialism](#) (Beliso-De Jesús, Pierre and Rana 2023; Asad 1973). We may even regard the concept of race as a 'master concept' in anthropology, emerging from the context of colonialism and settler colonialism and continuing right until the emergence of powerful critiques of the concept of race in the twenty-first century. Recent anthropological critiques of race grew out of a long-standing concern relating to the origins and uses of the concept in the era of so-called 'scientific racism'. Scientific racism tried to prove the existence of distinct human races by seemingly scientific means, building on biological concepts of race that had been in existence since the sixteenth century. It reached its heyday from the late 18th century, and was disproven in the early 20th century.⁴

The ideas which underpinned scientific racism were anything but scientific. They flowed from the very racism they were evoked to support. Its lingering effects are still with us, and its central tenets of hierarchical biological difference between human groups have made a disturbing return in recent years (Saini 2019). Concern with scientific racism, and against race as a fixed socio-biological category, was spurred by some anthropologists gradually adopting explicitly anti-racist positions, in line with insights from biological and socio-cultural studies: all humans are now seen as belonging to one and the same human race, thus being endowed with the same inherent value, and the same [right](#) to life and dignity. This perspective is broadly recognised as socially and biologically accurate by much (but not all) of the academy and a smaller portion of the broader public. It took long and protracted struggles to undo racist understandings of human groups. The term 'racism' was coined in the late nineteenth century, but only adopted in the twentieth century (see below). It provided a starting point for what would mature into a critique of the concept of race both in anthropology and beyond.

Race does not reflect biological reality

Humans vary biologically and that variation is important in understanding the human experience. However, that variation is not distributed in clusters that correspond to racial categories based on phenotype (e.g. Black, white, Asian, etc.) or continental regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, etc.) (Lewis et al. 2022). In the context of human variation, it is often assumed that specific physical differences attest to specific racial, biological, or evolved group differences between racial categories of people, but they do not. In spite of over 300 years of trying to classify humans into mostly distinct biological units, human genetic, morphological and physiological variation does not correspond to racial categories such as Black, white,

Caucasian or Asian. Instead most evolutionary scientists today think of human group variation in terms of existing populations, i.e. groups of people who either live in the same place or [share](#) other connections such as eating similar food or having [children](#) together. Human blood groups, body sizes, immune systems and skin colour simply do not map onto racial categories (Fuentes 2022, 74-91). The vast majority of genetic variation does not even occur across human populations but within them, as different parts of the human genome have different ancestral [histories](#). In fact, there is nearly twice as much genetic variation among human populations in Africa as among all populations elsewhere (Fuentes 2022, 74-91).

This has not stopped humans in the past from trying to impose hierarchical social orders based on assumed biological differences. For example, in the era of segregation in the US, the 'one-drop rule' meant that a person known to have one ancestor who was Black was, for the purposes of the law, considered to be Black. Under the racist regime of apartheid in South Africa (1948-1990), the authorities introduced laws which imposed a system of racial classification on the South African population in the form of the 1950 Population Registration Act. Under this and other South African apartheid laws, 'coloureds' were classified as an intermediate racial category, and deprived of many basic rights as [citizens](#). In the context of the Population Registration Act, South African citizens whose racial classification was unclear to the authorities were subjected to the so-called 'pencil test'. The pencil test involved running a pencil through a person's hair to determine that person's racial classification. If the hair was straight, and the pencil dropped out of the person's hair, the person would be classified as 'white'; if the person had curly, coily or kinky hair, the person would be classified as 'coloured' or in some cases as 'native' (i.e. Black). Long after the demise of apartheid, such apartheid categories of racial difference remain socially and materially salient.

The category of being 'native', also holds negative connotations in Europe. An [ethnographic](#) study of a small and mixed coastal community in Northern Norway in the late 1940s found that public identity markers of the Sami ethnic group carried with them a significant social stigma. Locals of Sami background avoided such markers by avoiding use of Sami language and attire in public, and making derogatory remarks about nomadic Sami as 'primitive', especially when in the presence of non-Sami Norwegians. Being Sami was associatively linked to 'uncleanliness', and some locals of Sami background even referred to Samis as forming part of 'an inferior race' (Eidheim 1966; Eidheim 1969). Even today, Norwegian Samis remain targets of discrimination. These few historical examples of which there are countless others testify to the persistence of official and popular beliefs about the existence of biological race.

But race has real social and material consequences

Race is not biologically real, but its social and material consequences surely are (Hartigan 2013, 188). Racist systems, processes, and structures create the linkages between non-biological racialised groups and specific social, political, economic, and health-related outcomes. For example, statistics pertaining to the

COVID-19 pandemic in the US found that whilst average life expectancies had fallen by two years in the population at large as a result of the pandemic, that figure rose to seven years for Native Americans and Alaskan Americans.¹⁴ The social and material realities of racism can create specific biological consequences connected to racial categories, such as the reality that Black American women are three times more likely to die during childbirth than white American women.¹⁵

Ethnographic studies from Brazil also point to the important effects of racism and discrimination on Black Brazilians. One early 1990s study of a small town in Rio's coffee-growing interior, shows that racial inequality was upheld as the town's inhabitants embraced aesthetic features that pointed to European ancestry, denigrated physical traits that point to African ancestry and wilfully forgot the non-white parts of their family histories (Twine 1998). Here racism endured, in part because commonsense definitions of it focused on direct human interactions. They excluded more complex and covert forms of racism, such as institutional racism or racist media imagery. As a result, Black Brazilians were routinely the subject of racist jokes, remained underpaid and were excluded from privileged social, educational and occupational spaces (Twine 1998).

While insisting on biological racial difference is not scientifically defensible, refuting the idea of biological race can also have negative consequences. In large parts of [Latin America](#), the idea of *mestizaje*, or of people being biologically and culturally mixed, often serves attempts to whiten the population or to facilitate nation building (Hodge-Freeman 2015, 11-13). However, it is also part of more recent efforts to stop focusing on biological differences and to remedy centuries of racism and discrimination as part of [democratic](#) nation building (Wade 2017). Yet this emphasis on 'mixture' has its limits. It continues to provide a space within which Blackness, Indigeneity, and whiteness can implicitly be hierarchically valued. Insisting on people's sameness may even blend into opposition to affirmative action policies. In Brazil for example, the insistence that race is not a primarily biological category has led some activists on the political left and right to argue against policies that explicitly recognised racial groups in society so as to give them special rights (Wade 2017, 129). This undermines efforts of those Black and Indigenous activists who are actively fighting to be recognized as racially and culturally distinct. The myth of a Brazilian 'racial democracy' thereby undercuts affirmative action policies, with the argument being that if race does not exist in Brazil, racial quotas should not either. It equally obscures the important processes of racialisation, which routinely lead to gendered racism and racialised sexism in the country (Caldwell 2007, 8).

Histories of race, histories of racism

'The history of race and racism is a major component in the development of modern anthropology' (Sussman 2014, 9). Anthropologists now generally contend that racism is epistemologically prior to race, or that 'racism made race' (Graves, Jr. and Goodman 2021, 5). This can be a bit confusing, because the term

'racism' is in fact a much more recent addition to the lexicon than 'race'.

As a designator for biological ideas about human difference, the term 'race' emerged in the period of 1730-1790 in Europe (Bancel, David and Thomas 2019), whereas the first recorded instance of the term 'racism' in a Western language appears to be that of the French anarchist Charles Malato in his *Philosophie de l'anarchie* (1888), and in English that of the US military commander Richard Henry Pratt in *Proceedings of the Mohonk conference* (1902). Arguably the most central scholarly contribution to popularising the term came in the form of the exiled German Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's posthumously published monograph *Rassismus* (1938).¹¹ It was not until 1942 that the term 'racism' appeared in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* for the first time.

A first clear-cut example of racism in Europe that [historians](#) tend to point to is the discrimination faced by [Muslim](#) and Jewish converts to Catholicism—*moriscos* and *conversos*—during the Catholic *Reconquista* of the Muslim-controlled *al-Andalus* area of the Iberian Peninsula from the twelfth century onwards (Bethencourt 2013). These converts to Catholicism and their patrilineal descendants were for centuries denied full civil rights with reference to their alleged lack of 'purity of blood' ('*limpieza de sangre*'). We may distinguish between biology as a [science](#) which assesses the organic dynamics of bodies, and biology as popular ideas about the body. Biology as a contemporary science did not exist in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the Catholic *Reconquista*. And yet, the idea of an essential link between blood and descent appears to be already present, although there was no underlying concept of biological race involved: *raza* or 'race' in Spanish referred at the time to 'noble birth', rather than biological race.

The biological conceptions of race, in which skin colour and other phenotypical markers of human difference are made salient and prominent, are a product of the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment science enabled race to 'become biological' (Graves, Jr. and Goodman 2021, 21). For example, botanist Carl Linnaeus' classified humans into 'five varieties' in the tenth edition of his *Systema naturae* from 1758 (Marks 2017; Blunt 2002). Immanuel Kant's philosophical anthropology linked skin colour to human character and intellect, describing humans of paler skin as superior to humans of darker skin (Mills 2017). 'Skin colour is the primary criterion by which people have been classified into groups in the Western scientific tradition' (Jablonski 2021, 437), but skin colour was only one of the criteria: physical markers such as hair texture, head size, bodily shape, eye colour and shape, and the size of one's lips, nose, and sexual organs have at various times also been seen as marking race. What is rarely appreciated is 'the extent to which current thought and research remain influenced by colour-based race concepts' (Jablonski 2021, 437).

European [colonialism](#) was also integral to the development of racism, as European conquest sought to legitimate itself by recourse to arguments about human difference in an age of European discovery of other parts of the world. Given that anthropology emerged as a science intimately linked to European colonialism

(Asad 1975, Trouillot 2003; Gupta and Stoolman 2022), it is hardly surprising that early anthropology would play a central role in the development and elaboration of ideas about human difference and otherness intrinsic to European colonialism that created 'biological' (but actually social) conceptions of race. These 'biological' understandings of human difference have adapted to highly variegated historical, social, and political contexts, and have adopted different forms. It is in reference to this that cultural theorist Stuart Hall referred to race as a 'floating' or 'sliding signifier' (2017) or a concept with no fixed categories or meanings. Hall's is not an argument for the timelessness and universalism of all forms of racism but rather for the malleability of race concepts underpinning racism. According to him, race works like a language. The meaning of racial categories is not primarily defined by what they refer to. Instead, their meaning depends on other meaning making concepts. People's different histories, experiences and modes of living determine which racial categories they may find convincing. For Hall, the study of how racial categories are made and remade is thus not primarily about human and scientific progress, but it is driven by socio-cultural ruptures and continuities.

For example, racial regimes of colonialism and settler colonialism varied according to time, context, and targets: the racism faced by African-Americans and Indigenous American Indians in the US differed from others in form and character. The transatlantic slave trade resulted in a racialisation whereby African-Americans were seen as property and sources of [labour](#), while settler colonialism resulted in Indigenous Americans being viewed as obstacles to extraction and control of resources (Mamdani 2020). Simply subsuming them under the same umbrella of racism risks under-emphasizing the specific forms of violence that people in different times and places have had to endure.

Scientific racism

By the nineteenth century the idea that there were innate human differences attributable to assumed races was considered as established [scientific](#) knowledge, as well as simple common sense in large parts of the world (Saini 2019). Linnaeus, who laid the foundations for scientific racism, included humans among the [animal](#) species and divided them into different varieties based on skin colour as well as real and assumed behaviour (Kenyon-Hyatt 2021). Linnaeus' contemporary, the eighteenth century biologist Comte de Buffon believed that an original white 'Caucasian' race had degraded into other races due to environmental factors such as difficult climates and poor diets. Though he admitted that humans were one single species and any classification of humans was bound to be arbitrary, he still held the view that there was a biological racial hierarchy. The biologist Johan Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) divided humans into ultimately five hierarchically structured races, based on people's anatomy as well as their linguistic and psychological features (Bethencourt 2013; Gates, Jr. and Curran 2022). Race thinking in scientific racism cut across the divisions between 'monogenism', which posited a single origin of humanity, and 'polygenism', which held that human races had different origins. Historians have documented how the

tenets of Western scientific racism were exported to other parts of the world and applied to local circumstances by local elites (see Skidmore 1993 for Brazil, Zia-Ebrahimi 2016 for Persia/Iran and Weaver 2022 for India).

Scientific racism also provided license and legitimization for eugenics (el-Haj 2007), the belief that human 'stock' could and should be 'perfected' by means of restricting the right to [reproduce](#) for certain categories of humans. Such reproductive restrictions were usually imposed on racialised others, the poor and people with mental or physical [disabilities](#). Eugenics counted on widespread support from white academic, social, political, and media elites in both Europe and the US (Rutherford 2022). The eugenicist idea that humans could and should be 'perfected' was intrinsically linked to a racial hierarchy in which the supposed 'white race' was placed on top. 'Miscegenation' between supposedly different races of humans was declared either undesirable or outlawed. Moreover, the right to biological reproduction of people or groups of people of all colours was limited. In places like South Africa under apartheid, the US South in the era of segregation, and in Nazi Germany, sexual [relations](#), co-habitation, and marriage between individuals deemed to belong to different 'races' was prohibited by state law. The obsession with 'interracial' sex, and the casting of hypersexualised Black and brown men, in particular, as sexual threats against white women, has been and remains an ever-recurrent facet of racist thought from slavery and [colonialism](#) to the present (Stoler 2010).

Arguments for eugenics often came wrapped in arguments about the supposed 'superiority' of the 'white' and 'Nordic race', and physical anthropologists provided data in the form of cranial and other physical measurements meant to lend credence to these ideas (Kyllingstad 2012). Given these ideas about alleged racial superiority of the 'white' and 'Nordic race', it should not be any surprise that the eugenicists' calls for restricting the right to reproduce often also entailed calls to restrict 'non-white immigration' and interracial sexual relations in the name of 'preserving racial purity' both in the US and in Europe. There was in fact an extensive trans- and inter-continental traffic of racist ideas about the 'white' race and/or 'Nordic' and/or 'Aryan' racial superiority with the US white supremacist and eugenicist movement (Whitman 2017).

Though European colonialists legitimated any number of atrocities and violence inflicted on colonised peoples by recourse to ideas central to scientific racism—such as the transatlantic slave trade, genocide, and the forced removal of children from their families and communities—broader European and Euro-American popular recognition of how lethal and dehumanising these ideas actually were was catalysed by Nazi extermination policies. These views culminated in the Holocaust against - among others - Jews, Roma, [queer](#), and disabled peoples from 1942 to 1945. The central role of some German anthropologists in this horror is well documented (Schafft 2003).

The Boasian turn

By the turn of the twentieth century, the ideas of scientific racism were dominant among liberal Western elites. They were also dominant and widely taken for granted among anthropologists—and not least in physical anthropology. Work by the Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin (1885) directly countered and challenged 19th century racial typologies and their associated racism. He insisted on focusing on people's [moral](#) and intellectual dimensions, rather than their physical attributes, leading him to argue for the essential equality of humans. His work did not make a global impact during his time or over coming decades, in part due to the racist biases of the academy. However, it did foreshadow later arguments about the social construction of race (Fleuhr-Lobban 2000). Anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) and his successors received the most attention in challenging the ideas about biological race so central to scientific racism. Influenced by and in dialogue with sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), Boas and his students took on key elements in the push against racial essentialism and the racism it supported (but not without issues: see Baker 2021 and below).

Physical anthropology in Boas' time was wedded to the idea that one could derive conclusions about the mental and intellectual capacities of purportedly different races through determining physical attributes such as head size and shape. It was Boas' 1912 monograph *Changes in bodily form of descendants of immigrants* that demonstrated that, contrary to dominant claims at the time, the lived human environment was a significant factor in the development of physical attributes among humans (Baker 2004; Gravlee, Bernard and Leonard 2003). The book showed that the physical aspects of European immigrants to the United States changed more drastically than expected, and more the longer their parents had been to the United States. Boas and his successors conducted this study in the context of struggles against eugenics and white supremacist movements in Europe and the US in the 1920s and 1930s, and not the least German Nazism (King 2019). Central in the new anthropological conceptualisation of what was and should be the focus in the study of human difference and variety was the concept of culture. Cultural differences were increasingly seen as being more important than biological differences. More specifically, the 'Boasian turn' in anthropology disrupted the ideology that biology underlay culture. Previously presumed biological traits and cultural phenomena were no longer causally linked (Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997, 525), and one could no longer proclaim that 'group X does this because of biological trait Y'.

Whereas Boas had hedged his bets, and retained the concept of race itself, his radical student Ashley Montagu (1905-1999) launched a full attack on the concept in anthropology (for a related, if somewhat more demure, anti-racism in mainstream physical anthropology, see Washburn 1963). For Montagu, race was a myth, and ought to be replaced by the concept of 'ethnic group'. The ethnic group was not intended to merely 'substitute' for race; it entailed adopting an entirely new viewpoint (Montagu 1962, 926). Montagu, who during World War II published the seminal monograph *Man's most dangerous myth: The fallacy of race* (1942), would later become the main author of UNESCO's 1950 Statement on Race, in which

race was declared to be a non-scientific concept (Brattain 2012). The Statement foregrounded humanity's common ancestry and genetic similarities across populations to argue that racism was nothing but an inherently aggressive ideology and a misguided feeling. Montagu believed that the concept of race was so intertwined with racism that one could not do away with the latter without first doing away with the former (Yudell 2014).

Though they have in time become part of the anthropological common sense, it often seems forgotten, even within anthropology itself, how radical Montagu's ideas about race and racism were at the time. The years that followed the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race also revealed that Montagu's radical anti-racist stance as a drafter of the statement had uneven support among the cross-disciplinary group of [scientists](#) involved in UNESCO: it would be followed by more anodyne UNESCO statements on race in 1951, 1967 and 1978 (Hazard, Jr. 2012). Another anthropologist involved in the 1950 UNESCO Statement, and critical of the concept of race, was Claude Lévi-Strauss (Rouse 2019). But in anthropology, Montagu, building on Firmin, Boas, Washburn, and the work of many others, won out, and the lingering effects of his contribution can also be found in the various institutional statements on race and racism today.

The critique of Boasian racial liberalism

Changes brought by the Boasian turn were incomplete. In the eyes of its detractors, the dominant Boasian 'racial liberalism' in anthropology in the post-World War II era turned out to be quite compatible with the continued exclusion and marginalisation of Black, Indigenous, and other racialised scholars (Baker 2021). The idea of racial liberalism foregrounds that liberalism has been racialised, as liberal theory long restricted full personhood to white men, and its insistence on liberal [values](#) trivialises white supremacy (Rana 2020). Liberalism has historically tended to describe white supremacist and racist imaginaries about state and nation as pertaining to the political fringes (Shoshan 2015). This is an analytical and conceptual move which often exceptionalises racism and reinforces notions of 'white innocence' (Wekker 2015).

Radical critiques of Boasian racial liberalism starting in the 1960s, inspired by the nascent field of Black studies (Anderson 2019; de Jesús, Pierre and Rana 2023). They took aim at what they declared to be the fiction that anthropology itself and the societies it studies had become 'post-racial' by declaring race to be a social construct and adopting a 'no race' position. Boasian racial liberalism would also at times appear to efface the central role that transatlantic slavery played in the formulation of [anti-Black racism](#) (Harrison 1995, 52), and to have reduced racism to a matter of individual attitudes rather than social structures and systemic practice. Critiques of Boasian racial liberalism have also taken aim at the notion that replacing the concept of race with the concept of [ethnicity](#)—as popularised by the works of Montagu (1942) and anthropologist Fredrik W. Barth (1969)—would do away with racism. For turning ethnicity into the 'master principle of classification', in the words of its critics, 'euphemized, if not denied race' by not specifying the conditions under which racism emerges and persists (Harrison 1995, 48).

The radical critique of Boasian racial liberalism also took on board the empirically registrable fact that far-right and racist movements had shifted from a discourse highlighting immigrants and minorities' physical and phenotypical features to a discourse about the culture and religion of 'racial others'. They had done so in a very elaborate and conscious attempt at evading the very accusations of racism that often blocked their popular appeal. Diagnosed as 'cultural racism' by Frantz Fanon (1967), this was not so much a 'new racism' (Balibar 1991), as a return to the very origins of European racism by making culture and religion the central markers of exclusion of 'others' (Stolcke 1995). Peter Wade makes the important point that 'race has always been seen as a natural-cultural assemblage in which "nature" and "culture" are always shaping each other and the differences between them are not always clear' (Wade 2015, 53).

What this return to cultural racism translated into in practice was the racist and discriminatory treatment of [Muslim](#) and/or Black populations throughout Western societies in particular, a form of racism often described as 'Islamophobia' (Bangstad 2022). Islamophobia is by no means limited to the West. The new forms of racism represented a 'racism without races' or a supposedly 'colour-blind racism' (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Omi and Winant 1986). By the 1990s, it had arguably become a dominant form of racism in Europe and the US. Regardless of the elaboration and differentiation of the concept of culture in anthropology, out in the real world, 'culture' would, over the course of the 1990s, assume some of the very same essentialised properties as the concept of race once had. The new 'culture talk' was exemplified in the political construction of the category of 'Muslim' which followed in the wake of al-Qaida's terrorist attack on the US on September 11, 2001 (Mamdani 2002; Abu-Lughod 2002).

Noteworthy in this context of racism against Muslims was also the ubiquity of racist stereotyping of Muslim males as existential sexual threats against women and women's rights worldwide (Abu-Lughod 2015). That racist trope travelled fast and far and has been present in, for example, the anti-Muslim hate speech and rhetoric of [Buddhist](#) nationalists in Myanmar as well as among Hindutva nationalists in India in recent years. Darren Byler has also noted that the production of Uyghur Muslim men, in particular, as 'subhuman under the sign of terror' is characteristic of both state authorities and settler [colonial](#) discourse in Xinjiang, China (2022, 9). Arjun Appadurai identified a 'fear of small numbers' (2006) as a central element of global racisms: with the rise, mainstreaming, and circulation of far-right and racist ideas about white 'replacement' or 'extinction' in various societies such as Europe, the US, India, and South Africa. Those fears have long since become global.

New frontiers in the anthropological study of race and racisms

Anthropology has been taken to task for largely ignoring race and racism as central to its history, practice, and development (Pierre 2013; Jobson 2020). That anthropological scholarship about race and racism has overwhelmingly focused on Western contexts should not blind us to the fact that while racism is not a human universal (i.e., found in all human cultures), it is certainly a global phenomenon (i.e., found in

contemporary human societies in all parts of the world) (Hage 1998; Twine 1998; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2014; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Pierre 2012). Anthropological studies have also demonstrated that many societies that are profoundly multiracial and multicultural—such as in the Caribbean, [Latin America](#), and Africa (Pierre 2012)—have developed and sustained elaborate racial hierarchies premised on the retention of privileges for the ‘least Black parts’ of the population (Wade 2017). Anthropologists have equally documented how racism can even pervade institutions in which there is a formal commitment to equal treatment or the eradication of racism (Rouse 2009; Shange 2019). Inspired by critical whiteness studies, they have also reversed the tendency to study race through the study of people of colour, and explored the intersections between class, gender, and race among white people (Hartigan 2005). In the ‘decolonizing turn’ in anthropology in recent years, critical calls to dismantle past and present structures of white privilege and white supremacy within anthropology (de Jesús, Pierre and Rana 2023) as well as to de-centre white epistemologies have been central (Allen and Jobson 2016; Gupta and Stoolman 2022).

Anthropological theories and analyses do not evolve in isolation from developments in society and politics at large. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has engendered a shift from definitions and analyses of racism premised on seeing it as the articulation of individual attitudes, to definitions and analyses with concepts such as ‘systemic’ and/or ‘structural’ racism. That shift now provides directions and new avenues for future research (see, among others, Gilmore 2022), and is discernible in Laurence Ralph’s study of the use of torture alongside everyday incidents of police violence against Black Americans in Chicago (2020) as well as in Ruha Benjamin’s studies of how [digital](#) technology structures (coders, developers, users) reinforce racial discrimination and biases that create and inform coded inequity or what Benjamin calls the “New Jim Code” (2019). Inspired by work on [science](#) and technology, anthropologists have also taken an interest in how the rise and popularity of modern and privatised DNA testing and the new science of genomics may re-inscribe racial frames and engender racism (M’charek 2005; el-Haj 2007; Fullwiley 2011; Nelson 2016; Abel and Schroeder 2020; Abel 2022). Yet, they have also discussed how the use of genomic analyses can be used to push against racist and [colonial](#) frames, for example by solidifying empowering forms of otherness (Benn-Torres and Torres-Colon 2021).

For what it will be worth, in an uncertain human future under conditions of man-made and intertwined ‘polycrises’ including global [climate change](#) and environmental destruction, increased migration flows coupled with the bordering of the richer parts of the world, global [pandemics](#), and ravaging wars, anthropology seems in recent years to have taken more substantive steps in the direction of anti-racism (Mullings 2005). As anthropology helps us recognise and address racism, we may in turn be in a better position to deal with looming threats to the idea of a shared humanity.

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[1] "AABA statement on race & racism." 2019. American Association of Biological Anthropologists, March 27. <https://bioanth.org/about/position-statements/aapa-statement-race-and-racism-2019/>

[2] "AAA statement on race." 1998. American Anthropological Association, May 17. <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-race/>

[3] See, for example, "American Society of Human Genetics statement regarding concepts of 'good genes' and human genetics." 2020. American Society of Human Genetics, September 24. <https://www.ashg.org/publications-news/ashg-news/statement-regarding-good-genes-human-genetics/#:~:text=Genetics%20demonstrates%20that%20humans%20cannot,ancestry%20have%20no%20scientific%20evidence>

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[7] The authors would like to thank Dr. Tobias Hübinette, Karlstad University, Sweden for information on this.