



Response to 'Philosophical Aspects of the "AAA Statement on 'Race' "'

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In 'Philosophical Aspects of the "AAA Statement on 'Race' "', philosopher Naomi Zack uses conceptual analysis to explore connections between several key assertions articulated in the American Anthropological Association's 1998 statement on race. She is particularly concerned with some of the inconsistencies or logical flaws in several of the statement's assertions regarding the nonexistence of biological race, statistical facts about populations, and cultural beliefs about race.

Using the AAA's statement and articles in the *Anthropology Newsletter* that discussed it, she points out a number of rhetorical inconsistencies in the attempts by anthropologists to challenge common-sense racial taxonomies while recognizing and embracing the fact that human variation is real and that variation occurs, empirically, in predictable and patterned ways. At the heart of the article is an argument that can be summed up as 'don't throw the baby out with the bath water' or, in other words, anthropologists' arguments about race would be more clear, strong, and persuasive if they explicitly worked against the tendency to conflate population and genealogical variation with common-sense notions of race.

Although she explains that the statement is a work of theory, she reminds readers that it is also 'meant to present the facts about race "to the public" in a way that will increase social justice' (p. 447). And it is the dual role of this statement, reporting on research and educating the public, that she argues fuels some of the inconsistencies in the statement and anthropologists' work on race, racism, and social categories more generally.

Zack's motivation for her baby and bath water argument stems from the fact that 'there is truth on the side of population statistics and truth on the side of the nonexistence of essentialist racial typologies'. Yet, the motivation for the AAA's statement was not simply to unearth the 'truth' about racial inequality – members of the AAA have been doing that for three-quarters of a century. The motivation was, once again, to demonstrate that race is a product of social history, not natural history, and that race has more to do with folklore, sociology, and ideology than taxonomy, biology, and genetics.

Zack lays out her argument with a close reading of the AAA statement and its subsequent discussion in the *Newsletter*. To illustrate her argument, she unpacks anthropological discussions about Kennewick Man and essentialism in medical science to conclude that both scientists and the public should be ‘trusted’ with the so-called truth about human variation, and she trusts that neither will fall into the race pit.

OF UNICORNS AND PAPER MONEY

Although Zack makes compelling arguments for anthropologists to think more logically and rigorously about how they report to the public about race, the reader should be cognizant that the way she articulates the understanding of race used within the AAA’s document emphasizes only a tangential aspect of the complicated and variegated modality called race in the US. According to Zack, ‘The lack of empirical referents for the construct of racial taxonomy (i.e. for “race”) precludes the existence of more specific aspects of such a taxonomy and of the interaction of elements of such a taxonomy with things that do exist. This is simply a matter of logic’ (p. 447). This is her way of saying that scientists can use taxonomies that index or organize human variation without articulating the same 19th-century taxonomies that mirror contemporary social categories of race. What she does not explain fully, however, is whether or not this taxonomy would, or even could, be arranged in a way that (a) does not reflect contemporary spurious racial categories or (b) reflect hierarchy in any way. As a heuristic device, she points out, correctly, some of the logical flaws in the AAA Statement by outlining six logical truths about race.

Her ‘logical truths’, however, center on human biological racial taxonomy or biological aspects of race, which are important but ultimately marginal aspects of race in the US. The AAA statement is clear that ‘historical research has shown that the idea of “race” has always carried more meanings than mere physical differences; indeed, physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them’. Although the statement mentions genes, phenotypes, and human variation, the focus of the document is on race as a worldview or an ideology that describes and inscribes unequal access to resources, jobs, and the rights of citizenship.

Race, racism, and democracy in the United States do not follow some simple logic; the use of these terms is messy and frankly illogical – political yes, logical no. Zack offers a didactic story about a unicorn and ecology to help the reader understand the logical truths about race, but I would like to offer an analogy to help the reader understand the illogical facts about race. Like unicorns, paper money does not exist as ‘real’ currency. Economists tell us that paper money in the US has no empirical value, since it is not backed by gold or silver. Yet everyone knows that with these putatively valueless bills, one can eat at a restaurant, stay at a hotel, buy a hot-dog, or pay for a new pair of shoes. Even though a 20 dollar bill has no empirical value, it is valued and can buy stuff. The reason of course that paper money has exchange value is because people believe it has value, and with governmental support it has become institutionalized as currency. Anthropologists are like economists in this analogy. We tell people that racial categories have no value as biological referents, but people believe that race refers to biology or nature, and with governmental support it has become institutionalized as a way to structure society – subtly shifting inequality away from the social and grounding it in the natural. This is, of course, not a perfect analogy, but it gets to my point that race is about

hegemony not biology and brings me to my major criticism of Zack's provocative and informative piece.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

On the one hand, there is an eerie subtext that Naomi Zack articulates. She assumes that truth and logic will liberate the American people and set them free from the shackles of ignorance that surround ideas of race. On the other hand, she appears to suggest that anthropologists should stick to the facts and should not get bogged down in the political and historical aspects of race. As her title suggests, she wants anthropologists to privilege the 'philosophical aspects' of race. Yet, it has been the historical and political aspects, not the philosophical aspects, that have bedeviled scientists and dogged US democracy for generations.

Ironically, anthropologists have routinely privileged the philosophical and scientific aspects of race. During the past century there has been a constant din emanating from anthropological circles, hammering out the empirical truth about race and human capacity. Anthropology has a venerable history of using the truth about race to advance racial justice. One need only evoke the names of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, Gene Weltfish, or Otto Klineberg to secure anthropology's place in the landscape of US intellectuals who have crusaded for truth, justice, and the so-called American way. Most students of intellectual history inexorably link *this* history to that of Franz Boas' work as a public intellectual. And, one can pinpoint the time and place where Boas made a commitment to enlightenment notions about truth.

Boas made this commitment during his first arctic expedition between August 1883 and August 1884. Although the 25-year-old German scientist initially went to Baffin Island in the hope of better understanding people's 'dependence on the knowledge of the land' (quoted in Liss, 1996: 175), he learned, instead, valuable lessons about understanding people very different from himself.

In Mid-December Boas, his servant, and 'his Eskimo' became lost in the perpetual darkness of the arctic winter. They were forced to keep sledding for twenty-six hours through ice, soft snow, and temperatures that dropped below -46°C . Eventually, they secured shelter to rest and recuperate from being 'half frozen and half starved,' and the following day, Boas penciled in his letter diary: I often ask myself what advantages our 'good society' possesses over that of the 'savages' and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them . . . We have no right to blame them for their forms and superstitions which may seem ridiculous to us. We 'highly educated people' are much worse, relatively speaking . . . I believe, if this trip has for me (as a thinking person) a valuable influence, it lies in the strengthening of the viewpoint of the relativity of all *cultivation* [*bildung*] and that the evil as well as the value of a person lies in the cultivation of the heart [*herzensbildung*], which I find or do not find here just as much as amongst us, and that all service, therefor, which a man can perform for humanity must serve to promote *truth*. (Cole, 1983: 33)

Accompanied only by a family servant, Boas was forced to depend on various Inuit groups for everything from directions and food to shelter and companionship. It was a

difficult year filled with tremendous hardships that included frequent bouts with disease, mistrust, pestilence, and danger. Boas successfully searched for areas not yet surveyed and found unique ethnographic objects, but the long winter and the lonely treks across perilous terrain forced him to search his soul to find a direction for his life as a scientist and a citizen. In a particularly revealing entry in his letter-diary logged for his future wife Marie Krackowizer, he explained the type of service to which he planned to commit the balance of his life, and why he wanted to leave the anti-Semitism and rising nationalism of Otto von Bismarck's Germany.

I do *not* want a German professorship because I know I would be restricted to my science and to teaching, for which I have little inclination. I should much prefer to live in America in order to be able to further those ideas for which I live . . . What I want to live and die for, is equal rights for all, equal possibilities to learn and work for poor and rich alike! Don't you believe that to have done even the smallest bit for this is more than all science taken together? I do not think I would be allowed to do this in Germany. (Cole, 1983: 37)

Indeed, Franz Boas committed the balance of his life to the pursuit of empirical truth, as it related to race, language, and culture. Although engaged in many politicized initiatives, Boas held onto Enlightenment inspired ideas about truth and the role of the scholar in its pursuit. Anthropologists in the US proudly continue the work Boas began over a century ago, in part by continuing to issue official statements on race.

The dawn of the new century basically coincides with the centennial of the American Anthropological Association founded in 1902, and it is a good time to reflect upon the legacy of the organization and the discipline. Although there are many good and ill contributions anthropology and its US organizational structure have made in the past century, the most significant has been articulating and subsequently shoring up scholarly critiques of biological racial categories. Although significant, the scholarly critique of ideas about biological categories of race has not successfully curbed the political force of 'scientific' ideas of racial inferiority, which is evidenced by the overwhelming response to *The Bell Curve*.

W.E.B. Du Bois, like Boas, began his career full of optimism. As DuBois recalled:

I was going to study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the American Negro and his plight, and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization which I could . . . The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation. (Du Bois, 1996: 591, 596)

After about a decade and a half, however, Du Bois came to an understanding that the American people were not willing to listen to the truth about race because of their vested political and economic interests. He turned away from the academic arena and dived into the political arena to advance his commitments. Reflecting upon this transition, Du Bois explained that 'my career as a scientist was to be swallowed up in my role as master of propaganda. This was not wholly to my liking. I was no natural leader of men

. . . Nevertheless, having put my hand to the plow, I had to go on' (Du Bois, 1996: 622).

In this latest iteration of the 'AAA Statement on "Race"', the authors try to engage the public's folklore about race and racism and at the same time report the latest scientific researches into biological categories of race. As Naomi Zack explains, 'it is a work of theory because it interprets past empirical research and, if accepted, would influence future research. At the same time, the Statement is meant to present the facts about race "to the public" in a way that will increase social justice' (p. 447). The key phrase here is 'at the same time'. The authors understood, perhaps all too well, that this document had to do double duty – political and academic.

Although many intellectuals never separate theory from praxis, writing one document that tackles integral elements of American ideology while reporting the empirical findings of science cannot have logical consistency. Rarely do ideology and folklore flow logically out of science and empirical truth, although many would like to believe, as Boas did, that the truth will set one free. I am glad that the authors of the 1998 AAA statement on race followed W.E.B. Du Bois' more pragmatic and less romantic approach of tackling the political and ideological aspects of race, which is much more messy than sticking to the philosophical aspects of race or its so-called logical truth.

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