



READING: From Race to Racism

Jesus Colon believed that racism kept him from making the choice he would have liked to make. It has also played an important role in the choices other people have made. Yet scientists say that race is a meaningless idea. Can a meaningless idea affect the way people act? Sociologists say it can. They remind us that what things objectively are is often less significant to human beings than what things mean in everyday life.

Until the mid-1800s, the word *race* had a number of meanings. Sometimes it referred to a whole species—as in “the human race.” Sometimes it meant a nation—as in “the French race.” And sometimes it referred to a family—“the last of his or her race.” These usages all imply kinship and suggest that shared characteristics are passed from one generation to the next. Scientists who studied the concept defined the word in similar ways in the 1800s. They used the term *race* to refer to those who share a genetic heritage.

Some scientists were so certain that race explained human behavior that they distorted facts to bolster their arguments or made claims they could not substantiate. As a result, they strengthened prejudices and gave new life to myths and misinformation. Among these scientists was an American named Samuel Morton. In the early 1800s, he decided that skull size was linked to intelligence and race. He therefore insisted that his research “proved” that the “white race” was more intelligent than any other. He was not sure if blacks were a separate race or species, but he did insist that they were different from and inferior to whites. He also maintained that each race is intrinsically different from others and incapable of being changed.

Many Americans liked Morton's conclusions so well that they did not question his research or his assumptions even though they were surrounded by people of “mixed races.” One of the few to challenge Morton’s findings was Frederick Douglass, a former slave and an abolitionist. After reading Morton’s book, he described the scientist as one “blinded by prejudice.” And Douglass warned, “It is the province of prejudice to blind; and scientific writers, not less than others, write to please, as well as to instruct, and even unconsciously to themselves, (sometimes,) sacrifice what is true to what is popular.”

Few white Americans paid attention to Douglass’ remarks. They preferred to believe they belonged to a “superior race.” Europeans were also intrigued with the idea. A French anthropologist, Paul Broca, later built upon Morton’s theories. Broca believed that only “compatible” races would produce “racially healthy” children. He therefore warned against “race mixing.” That idea had powerful effects when governments began to apply it to everyday life.

Racists also thought they found support for their arguments in the work of Charles Darwin, a British biologist. In 1859, he explained how species of plants and animals physically change, or evolve, over time. Darwin’s work suggested that each competes for space and nourishment and that only those with a selective advantage survive. A number of social scientists tried to apply Darwin’s ideas to humans. Referring to Darwin’s work but using phrases like “the survival of the fittest,” they popularized a doctrine known as *Social Darwinism*.

Social Darwinists saw their ideas at work everywhere in the world. The “fit” were at the top of the social and economic pyramid and the “unfit” at the bottom, they reasoned, because competition rewards “the strong.” They argued that if the laws of natural selection were allowed to function freely, everyone would find his or her rightful place in the world. Increasingly that place was based on “race.”

In every country, people interpreted Social Darwinism a little differently. In the United States, it affected the way African Americans and Indians were treated. In Europe, it applied mainly to Jews. In 1879, Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist, was among those who attacked Jews not as followers of a particular religion but as members of a separate, evil, and inferior race. In the past, Jews were targets because of their religious

beliefs. Then, or so the reasoning went, they could end discrimination by becoming Christians. But conversion cannot alter one's race. Racists turned the "Jewish problem" into a permanent one. Marr coined the word *antisemitism* to describe the new opposition to Jews. It meant, and still means, hatred of Jews.

**This reading is excerpted from [A Study Guide to Schindler's List](#) (Facing History and Ourselves, Brookline, MA) p. 23.*

CONNECTIONS...Questions for Classroom Discussion

- Write a working definition of the word *race*. Explain what the word means to you. Then add the meanings described in this reading. Next create a working definition of the word *racism*. Keep in mind that the ending *ism* refers to a doctrine or principle. Can you be a racist if you do not believe in the concept of race? Expand your definitions as you continue reading.
- Why do you think we have no difficulty in telling individuals apart in *our* group, while *they* all look alike—even though there are more genetic variations among *us* than there are between *us* and *them*?

*(Facing History recently created a Teacher's Guide for the PBS series, **Matters of Race**, which reconsiders the architecture of race, its role in our democracy and its relationship to power in the U.S. For more information, [.\)](#)*

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