Social Identities
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713445719

From man to men to missing links
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Online publication date: 09 December 2009

To cite this Article Seth, Vanita(2009) 'From man to men to missing links', Social Identities, 15: 6, 831 — 849
To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/13504630903372546
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630903372546

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Has racial thinking always existed? Have human populations always organized and delineated difference through racial categories? This paper argues that race and racism are the products of nineteenth century European thought wherein radically new conceptions of time permitted new ways of articulating and classifying difference. It was possible for race to become the organizing principle around which to delineate human variation at that moment when the singularity of human time was shattered into multiple temporalities. It is when man’s origin comes to be pluralized (the origins of men) that the modern category of race is born and the modern prejudice of racism finds expression.

Keywords: race; racism; Darwin; Darwinism; polygenesis; monogenesis; ethnology

Introduction

Since the 1960s scholars have addressed themselves to the history of racial theory. Thomas Gosset’s (1963) Race: The History of An Idea in America represents a classic text-book example of an earlier scholarship. With a first chapter that begins by asserting the universality and transhistoricity of racism – the Romans, Aztecs, Chinese and Egyptians are all evoked as examples – Gosset then proceeds to discuss nineteenth-century racial theories as they emerged in Britain and as they came to inform American race relations until the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Tzetvan Todorov’s (1994) On Human Diversity is not dissimilar from this 1960s literature, though its emphasis is on European thinkers and movements. Indeed, despite having been published some thirty years later, Todorov’s work echoes that of Gosset in so far as he too understands racial prejudice to be a universal and transhistorical phenomena (1994, p. 91). I say ‘despite’ because the more recent scholarship in this field has tended away from presupposing the universality of race as an organizing sign available to all societies at all times. In other words, more recent scholarship has sought to question whether discrimination on the basis of racial difference has always, already existed.

More specifically, the thesis most commonly expounded today is one that argues that differentiating on the basis of race is a very modern means of conceptualizing difference and, thus, that racism is a very modern form of prejudice. The classicist, Frank Snowden (1970), has argued that while the ancients were indeed aware of physical differences – reflected in both their art and literature – no moral or intellectual inferences came from such recognition. In a similar vein, Robin

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ISSN 1350-4630 print/ISSN 1363-0296 online
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DOI: 10.1080/13504630903372546
http://www.informaworld.com
Blackburn (1998), among others (Phillips, 1996, pp. 87–88; Temperley, 1996), has pointed to the fact that while modern slavery was to come to be intricately connected with, and defended on the grounds of race and racial inferiority, slavery in the Classical world was largely colour blind.

Following from such works, Ivan Hannaford begins his encyclopaedic text on European political theory by insisting on the necessity of distinguishing between xenophobia and racism. While the former can be traced as far back as the Ancient Greeks (as well as the Chinese, Aztecs etc) the latter speaks to a normative emphasis on racialized bodies that did not figure in classic renditions distinguishing the citizen of the *polis* from the barbarian (Hannaford, 1996). Tracing the etymology of the concept ‘race’, Hannaford points to the fact that the very word does not enter European languages until as late as the thirteenth century and even then, for some three hundred years following its appearance, its meaning was largely limited to ‘the swift course or current of a river or a trial of speed’ (1996, p. 5). By the late Middle Ages ‘race’ came to be evoked in reference to lineage or bloodline – particularly prevalent among noble and royal families. Thus, according to Hannaford, it was only in the late eighteenth century, that ‘race’ came to acquire its modern definitional form. That is, it came to be associated with ‘ethnic groups’ and was increasingly privileged as a signifier of difference predicated on physical appearance and skin colour (1996, pp. 5–6).

Like Hannaford, Kenan Malik identifies the eighteenth century as the age when race as a form of nomenclature, and racism as an assertion of white superiority, first came to emerge. It is Malik’s contention that the same Age that asserted the rights of man, of freedom and universal equality, had then to defend and legitimate the very absence of such rights among colonial subjects (1996, p. 42). By articulating a thesis that attributed an innate inferiority to much of humanity (all those who were deemed to be racially distinct) the Enlightenment effectively neutralized the principle of *a priori* rights to all those of non-European descent. Malik’s thesis is not dissimilar to that of Nicholas Hudson’s except that for Hudson the emergence of racial categories constituted not the underbelly of Enlightenment universalism but the face of an emerging national parochialism and nationalism (1996, pp. 247–364).

It is in Michael Adas’s (1989) *Machines as the Measure of Men* that we notice a deviation from the works thus far considered. Adas argues that recent scholarship on the subject of racial theory in the nineteenth century has overstated its significance as a measure of difference. While Gosset and Todorov both argued that scientific discourse gave modern legitimacy to an age old prejudice, Adas also emphasizes the role of science, not as a tool for refashioning racial theories, but as the very source in which race differentiation first found enunciation. Adas’s contention is that prior to the nineteenth century, efforts to legitimate and justify colonial subjugation involved reference to morality – that non-European peoples were morally inferior. It is in the nineteenth century that a new discourse of legitimization takes form – one that promoted the superiority of the civilizing West through reference to science and technology. The emphasis on racist discourse therefore, Adas argues, has been misleading, for racial categories were not significant in themselves. Rather, they validated the superiority of European knowledges. Thus, while Adas acknowledges the fact that racism loomed large in the nineteenth century, it did so under the auspices of science (biological narratives that posited racial bodies) and technology (the varying instruments that measured such bodies).
For all their differences (and with the exception of Gosset and Todorov), all these works identify race as a peculiarly modern classification, one that traces its origins only so far as the late eighteenth century. Indeed, so pervasive has this conclusion become, that we find even conservative scholars such as Dinesh D’Souza (1995, pp. 517–539), insisting that racism is an invention of the West born out of nineteenth-century colonialism. (That D’Souza then proceeds to defend western civilization by evoking an evolutionary history is an irony that appears to have eluded him.)

The brief review of the literature I have provided is by no means exhaustive but it is sufficient to indicate that, despite the myriad of differences among these authors, what appears not to be in question is that nineteenth-century Europe relied upon (if not constructed) race as a category of delineation in order to legitimate the colonial subjugation of much of the non-western world. Further, many of the authors (though not all) recognize that the production of racial categories as a means of conceptualizing difference was a feature of modern European colonialism and thus, by implication, that racial science had eclipsed other, earlier modes of representation be that citizen/barbarian, civilized/savage, Christian/heathen or rational/irrational.

The contribution that this present work seeks to make consists of reformulating the question that has traditionally concerned academic scholarship on race history. Contemporary scholarship has focused on the questions of when and why racism came to dominate European discourse. For the most part, the literature of the last twenty years has identified racial thinking with modernity and has then proceeded to illustrate the point through reference to the advocates of race-doctrines as well as their opponents. In this vein, particular figures are offered up as primary villains, others as nascent racists and still others as the historically misconstrued. Thus, Hannaford, Todorov and Malik all construct a narrative of Proper Names evoking such figures as Buffon, Voltaire, Blumenbach, Morgan, Spencer, Lamarck and of course, Darwin, and Le Bon. Collectively, the works of these personalities are said to account for the predominance of racial thinking in European representations of its colonial subjects. In other words, what all these works offer is a sign-posted history, building blocks if you like, to the establishment and proliferation of racial theory. While all the authors thus far cited offer compelling critiques and excellent overviews of the personalities that loomed large within eighteenth and nineteenth-century race debates, what is left largely un-interrogated is the concept itself: race. The question that has tended to be neglected – the question that concerns the present work – is simply: What made race (and not simply racism) possible? In other words, how was it that normative differentiation predicated on physique (skin colour, hair, facial features, sexual organs) come to be one of the modes of representing and classifying humanity – a way of seeing that remains pervasive even today?

Some scholars have sought to address this question. George Stocking (1987), Michael Adas (1989) and David Goldberg (1993) recognize the significance of biology (for Stocking it represents the mainstay of nineteenth-century anthropology, for Adas, the ascendancy of science, while for Goldberg its significance lies in classification) and certainly, it is through biological discourse that the body came to constitute a site of, and source for, discerning and delineating not only difference according to race, but criminality, perversion, gender construction and pathology in all its variations. In the context of the racialized body however, there is another source of explanation.
It is the contention of this paper that if biological science made it possible to speak of races, the initial inspiration for realizing such possibilities relied upon, indeed presupposed, a revolution in the nineteenth-century conceptualization of time. In so saying, I am not simply repeating the oft-recognized significance attributed to nineteenth-century scepticism of biblical history – a scepticism that questioned the scriptural claim that the world was created only six thousand years ago. Rather, it is my contention that it was possible for race to become the organizing principle around which to delineate human variation only at that moment when the singularity of human time was shattered into multiple temporalities. It is when man’s origin comes to be pluralized (the origins of men) that the modern category of race is born and the modern prejudice of racism finds expression. Full appreciation of this argument however, necessitates a narrative that takes, as its point of departure, a time long preceding the 1800s. Indeed we need first to reflect upon the beginning of the world – at least as it was understood within the Christian calendar. I’m quoting from Genesis . . .

Once upon a time

23 AND the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

24 AND God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so,

25 AND God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

26 AND God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

31 AND God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.
And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

(Genesis)

God created the natural world and God created Man. Of nature, the story begins and ends at the moment of inception. From the day of its creation to the end of the world, nature in all its variation would exist within an eternal cycle of birth and death, decline and renewal. Nature would forever remain as God intended.

The story of Man is a story of a very different kind. In that vast expanse of time that measures the beginning and the end, man’s teleological history is a history, a narrative of constant and continual change. The Old and New Testaments chart the
history of man – his history from sin to redemption, from the First Day of Creation to the Last Day of Judgement. It is thus, not the constancy of nature, but the temporal terrain of humanity that fills the contents of the Bible. To speak of humanity is to evoke the passages of time.

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With Creation, God gave order and meaning to the world. Or at least, that was the foundation of Renaissance epistemology – hence the constant search for signs, hence the symmetry of similitude (Foucault, 1973, pp. 17–45).

It is in the seventeenth century that such logic begins to unravel. The sign is de-canonized, and with it God’s place is usurped: it is no longer divinity, but human reason that renders the world knowable, meaning commensurable and order possible. And yet, in the face of such sacrilege, in the midst of such epistemological turmoil, what was left unquestioned, remained unchallenged, indeed what was preserved was the presumption that Man and nature bore a very different relationship to time.

Indeed, it is this very distinction that informed the premise of seventeenth and eighteenth-century knowledge. Natural philosophy – the study of inorganic matter – was at its very core a search for the eternal laws that governed the material world. Newton’s Laws of Gravity only confirmed that a Divine Artisan had constructed a clockwork universe (Daston, 1988, pp. 149–172). Embedded in the study of natural philosophy was the certainty that independent of history, place or peoples, independent that is, of the inconstancy of variables, there existed a constancy in the world of non-organic matter – an eternal, measurable fixity.

Natural history was less temperate. To study organic matter was to engage with the world of life and death, a world of ceaseless and constant flux. And yet, even of living nature, laws, eternal laws, could still be discerned.

If nature is at once breathless in its transformations, ceaseless in its cycle of decay and regeneration, it is also, through the medium of classification, fixed in its order and eternal in its identity. While the individual beast may mature and die, the individual flower bloom and then wither, the categories they inhabit possess a fixity that transcends the ravages of time. A cat, in other words, is still a cat – the birth, life and death of its individual being does not detract from the certainty, the constancy of its form. Eternity is integral, is built into the system – extinction and evolution were principles unknown to the seventeenth and eighteenth-century natural historian. Even Buffon, who is often represented as a figure who escaped the epistemological restraints of his time (Roger, 1997) went only so far as to argue that the natural world was capable of both degeneration and perfection – that entire species would disappear was not a possibility he entertained; that variation could create new forms of life was a possibility he could not imagine.

Thus, the study of natural philosophy and natural history, while distinguished as two separate bodies of knowledge, nevertheless shared a common premise – that the non-human world was grounded in, and governed by, a set of laws the very nature of which were constant in form and thus resistant to time.
Again, and in contrast, it is the human world that stands alone—resisting, defying, distinguishing itself from the eternal certainty of the natural world; the world of inorganic matter and non-human beings. Against natural philosophy and natural history stood the study of man—humanitas. Integral to this body of knowledge was the principal of time. To study man was to study the chronology of change.

While seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers may have sought to assert the existence of natural laws that pertained to human moral and behavioural conduct, the prospect was, even for these pre-modern and Enlightenment authors, inherently flawed. If Thomas Hobbes (1980[1651]) listed a string of natural laws pertaining to the state of nature, the ultimate purpose of such an exercise was to suggest that no eternal laws existed—that law, language, meaning, order were the artifice of man embodied in the sovereign. If John Locke (1970[1690]) adamantly maintained that natural laws did indeed exist, this did not diminish his anxiety that men were apt to ignore its prescripts—thus the necessity of political society. If Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1984[1755]) was to defend the natural goodness of man, such goodness had escaped the recognition of his predecessors precisely because history had wrought havoc on the human condition. And finally if Carolus Linnaeus sought to extend his classificatory system to incorporate human society, physical differences, not to mention variables in geography, moral and intellectual aptitude and the existence of monsters and wild men, all worked to escape his categories and frustrate his classificatory schema (cited in Jahoda, 1999, pp. 40–41).

That which defined Humanitas, that which distinguished it from nature, was the principle of change. Thus the study of the human world eluded fixed truth and precise measurement. Or at least, the world of seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophy offered no consensus—thus why the history-less peoples of the Americas and the temporal expanse of China were both sites available for philosophical speculation and inverted social criticism.

Given the demarcation, in the Classical period, between the study of the natural and the human world, we can only regard it as an oxymoron when upon entering the nineteenth century, we confront a brand of knowledge identified as the human or social sciences or, as Comte (1911, pp. 153–156) would have it, 'sociology'.

The paradox inherent in such a coupling lies in the temporal distinction that had so long separated the natural from the human sphere. Whether we evoke the Christian tale of Origins or the seventeenth and eighteenth-century division between nature and the study of philosophy and history, the foundational premise was the same: that human time was distinct from the cyclical temporality of nature. So how then could ‘science’, the study of laws eternal, be attached to ‘human’—the study of the relative and temporal?

It is the argument of this paper that the same century that constructed this paradox also neutralized it. It did so, moreover, through the medium of race. Race: a (constructed) category of delineation predicated on the physiological differences that were said, in the nineteenth century, to demarcate humanity. To speak of race was not only to evoke a new object of knowledge—the (racialized) body—but to presuppose a revolution in European conceptions of time. It is to the charting of this history—the history of nineteenth-century time and the knowledges it made possible—that I now turn.
From one to many: The revolution in time

Hegel followed the logic of most of his contemporaries when he argued that the distinction between man and nature was a distinction between human history and the ceaseless cyclical eternity of natural time. Within this logic however, Hegel was content to exclude from his History (1956[1818], pp. 61–62) those periods and peoples antecedent to records. He did so, however, conscious of the fact that such efforts at charting man’s prehistory were nevertheless being pursued by many of his contemporaries. It was philology, in the nineteenth century that was making such history possible.

From his identification of Sanskrit’s linguistic affinity with Latin and Greek, William Jones (1746–1794) proceeded to offer philological legitimacy to biblical Scriptures – the Tower of Babel, the Flood, Noah and his sons Japeth, Ham and Shem, the migration from the Hebrew centre to the continents of the world – the whole mosaic pantheon, in other words, was revived through the history of language. Through language would be revealed the common ancestry of man, the unity of his origins and thus the negligible significance of his diversity (Trautmann, 1997, pp. 170–172).

When Jones wrote of his findings and elaborated upon their significance, his conclusions were met with enthusiasm and rapture by Europe’s reading public. The linguistic affinity, the translations, the mosaic history – were all topics for animated discussion in the salons of Paris, the universities of Germany and the circles of colonial officialdom within Britain and India. William Jones’s work, in other words, had a receptive audience (Halbfass, 1990, p. 70; Schwab, 1984, p. 53). James Cowles Prichard was not so fortunate.

James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848), a figure history has generally ignored due to a debate it has largely forgotten, sought to defend the biblically derived thesis that man – all men – could trace their lineage back to a single ancestry – that of Adam and Eve. To evoke the Bible however, was no longer an authority in itself. If man’s prehistory was aligned to biblical history, such a conclusion could only be verified through the science of language – the philological studies that Jones’s work had fostered.

The significance of Prichard’s (1848) work lies not in the originality of his thought, but for the contrary reason that it represented perhaps the last defense of a centuries-old thesis – that to study man was to evoke time: historical change as opposed to the cyclical eternity of nature. In his Anniversary Address to the Ethnological Society of London, Prichard proceeded to distinguish the natural sciences from ethnology on the basis of the presence and absence of history. Ethnology, he argued:

is distinct from natural history in as much as the object of its investigations is not what is but what has been. Natural History is an account of the phenomena which Nature at present displays. It relates to processes ever going on, and to effects repeated and to be repeated so long as the powers of Nature . . . remain unchanged. Ethnology refers to the Past. It traces the history of human families from the most remote times that are within reach of investigation. (Prichard, 1848, p. 302)

If Prichard began his paper privileging history in his distinction between the natural sciences and ethnology, he concluded his Anniversary Address by asserting that in the field of ethnological research, it was history that was the most reliable
source of evidence. Having acknowledged the benefits derived from the ‘branches of natural history and science’ such as ‘anatomy, physiology, zoology and physical geography’, all of ‘which furnish aids in the promotion of ethnology’ (p. 304), Prichard nevertheless maintained that ‘the only certainty that can be obtained in the formation of groups and families of nations must be found mainly on historical proofs’. Obtaining these ‘proofs’ was essential, Prichard continued, for we cannot assume ‘diversity of origins on the mere ground of physical difference’, but rather:

[w]e must begin by establishing the historical fact of relationship or consanguinity between tribes or people, before we venture to refer them to one race, or to assert their diversity of origin. (p. 329)

Prichard endeavoured to strip language naked and reveal in all its transparency, the ‘truth’ of human origins and human unity. It was possible to do so through appeal to the ‘science’ of language – linguistic affinities, grammatical structures and the commonality of words and their tonal constitution (for example, monosyllabic languages). ‘The discoveries of Glossology’, Prichard informs us:

have enabled us to trace alliances between nations scattered over distant regions of the earth, of whose relation to each other we never should have had an idea without such evidence. (p. 304)

Languages then, or more specifically, ‘the analytical comparison of languages’ (p. 315) was the ‘auxiliary of history’ (p. 316). Consequently, Prichard argued, ‘the conclusion that is forced upon us’ (p. 321) when confronted with familial affinities between a diverse group of languages (as, for example, in the case of the Indo-European linguistic family), is that at some point in the pre-historical past there occurred ‘a gradual deviation of the common language into a multitude of diverging dialects’ leading to the necessary conclusion:

that the nations themselves descended from an original people … the varieties of complexion and other physical characters discovered among them are the effects of variation from an originally common type. (p. 321)

And what of these ‘variations’? Of physical difference, especially that of colour, Prichard, like his eighteenth century predecessors, appealed to environmental factors. Simply, dark complexions were the generational consequence of excessively hot climates as found in Africa, Asia and parts of the New World (cited in Trautmann, 1997, pp. 170–172). Prichard’s conclusion was aligned with the most notable scientists of the day. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1707–88), for example, famous for his skull collections, was also a defender of single origins – like Prichard, environment and degeneration from an ideal type (western European) were the causal explanations offered for human variation (cited in Hannaford, 1996, pp. 213–205).

In this brief description of Prichard’s thesis can be identified the key reasons for the intellectual (and often personal) animosity levelled against him by adherents of the polygenesis school of thought. Polygenists disagreed with Prichard’s work on all fronts – his defense of monogenesis (single origins), his environmental explanation for physiological differences and his emphasis on language and history as the source for, and site of, the study of humanity. In contrast, the polygenetic thesis rested on the perceived fixity of the physical body – the body constituted a text translatable through its various anatomical parts.
In recent years a number of scholars have revisited the debate between the monogenists and polygenists and have recognized the centrality of Prichard’s work within it. However, the narration of this debate by intellectual historians has usually taken the form of distinguishing between two contending disciplines – that of the history (via philology and ethnology) of man and that of an ahistorical racial science grounded in statistical measurements. Representing the debate in these terms is not unreasonable. After all, it was precisely the ahistorical innateness of the racialized body that lent authority to the polygenist thesis. In their famous publication, *Types of Mankind* (1854), Nott and Gliddon, quoted with approval the definition of ethnology as provided by the editor of *London Ethnology*, Luke Burke, ‘as a science which investigates the mental and physical differences of mankind’ (p. 49). Against the traditional view of ethnology as the history of man, Burke’s definition, they argued, allowed for a ‘far more comprehensive grasp – to include the whole mental and physical history of the various Types of Mankind, as well as their social relations and adaptations’, thereby making ethnology of relevance to ‘the philanthropist, the naturalist and the statesman’ (p. 45).

It was not historical or climatic explanations to which Nott and Gliddon appealed in order to account for physical and cultural differences, but the innate fixity invested in the racialized body. It was precisely because the body was perceived as ‘natural’ and thus ahistorical – outside the influences and variables of time – that it was accorded the privilege of ‘evidence’ in establishing the mental and moral attributes of diverse races. Indeed, heralded as proof of the fixity of races (and hence, by inference, their separate origins), the evidence that polygenists proffered pointed to the fact that ancient Egyptian paintings revealed the blackness of Africans as far back as three thousand years thereby discrediting the temporality of climatic explanations as articulated by their opponents. ‘The races, as far as history carries us, are now the same as they were in the earliest antiquity’ (Crawfurd, 1861, p. 358).

Having established, at least within their own circles, that separate races had always existed, the polygenists fore-grounded race as the defining feature that distinguished the different ‘nations’ of men. From this hypothetical *a priori*, racial classification became the obsession of many an ethnologist. One such figure, John Crawfurd (an ethnologist, polygenist and prolific writer), defended the need for classifying racial differences on the basis of complexion, hair, eyes, face, stature, skeleton, skull, brain and intellectual capacity. In so proceeding, not only were the different races of men systematically classified, but from these classificatory lists could be extracted the intellectual and moral capacities (and limitations) of the various racial groupings. The results of such scientific investigation, Crawfurd argued, invariably revealed ‘a very wide disparity’ between racial types (1861, p. 365).9

Crawfurd’s checklist of physical attributes not only spoke to a philosophical conception of the body as essentially ‘natural’ and ahistorical, but one that was inherently racial. Within the polygenesis polemic, race was no longer represented as a feature of God’s will or as a consequence of environmental conditions, diet or customs, but rather, as an irreversible, biologically fixed and scientifically measurable expression of human diversity – that diversity itself being analogous to differences between species. The reference to nature, however, is curious, for we find Nott and Giddon appealing, by way of example, to the immutability of fauna and flora in order to prove the fixity of race – humans do not change ‘type’ (1854, pp. 66–67, 69). In other words, while proceeding to dismantle the Christian edifice of man’s singular
Creation, polygenists continued to adhere to a traditional conception of nature – nature as constant, invariable, unchanging.

While Nott and Gliddon lamented the fact that the specificity of the natural sciences could never be reproduced for the purposes of ethnology (human diversity being far more resistant to classification than plants and animals, due to the existence of both infinite variations and similarities within and between races), the construction of the racialized body and the consequent privileging of its essentialist nature contributed to its transformation as an object of scientific investigation; a reservoir of ‘evidence’ for the innate differences between the peoples of Europe and those of the colonies (p. 364). This evidence, which could be derived from statistical measurements and the precision of mathematical methodologies, inspired, in its turn, the various techniques of craniometry, anthropometry and phrenology; introduced a phenomenal dictionary of adjectives, such as Dolichocephalic and Brachycephalic; and was the mother of an array of inventions (for the purposes of improving statistical accuracy) including the craniometer, stereograph and occipital crochet.

It is not surprising then, that Nott and Gliddon should have proclaimed that science, having entered all other fields, should now be making incursions into the final frontier – that of human origin:

Scientific truth exemplified in the annals of Astronomy, Geology, Chronology, geographical distribution of animals etc. has literally fought its way inch by inch through false theology. The last ground between science and dogmatism, in the primitive origin of races, has now commenced. It required no prophetic eye to see that science must gain and finally triumph. (p. 60)

Thus, it is not unreasonable to argue that the debate between the monogenists and polygenists was a clash between history (as representative of change) and science (as representative of invariability). And yet, such an interpretation fails to recognize the core element of polygenist theory: that different races correspond to separate origins; that human time is as multiple as racial types.

While much has been made of anthropometry and phrenology – the collection of skulls, the weighing of brains, the measurement of nasal passages, forefingers and heads, the production of a conceptual language, the endless collation of data and the invention of measuring instruments – what has often been ignored in the history books on racial science is the contribution of polygenesis to the nineteenth-century reconceptualization of time.

It was precisely through their reliance on the supposedly ahistorical innateness of the racialized body (after all fixity allowed for measurability), that the eighteenth-century distinction between human and natural time came to unravel. To make clear the radical nature of this shift, consider the monogenist emphasis on environmental and geographical factors for explaining human differences. For the monogenists, ascertaining the differences between men had first to begin with asserting their commonality – classification had as its point of departure the unifying category of Man; the successor of Adam and Eve. From these shared origins, men could then be sub-classified. What is interesting to note is that François Bernier (1625–1688), Linnaeus (1707–1778) and Count Buffon (1707–1788) – all adherents of monogenesis – produced independent classificatory schemes that, despite the wide variations in each composition, nevertheless privileged geography over race (Hannaford, 1996, pp. 203–204). This is not surprising given that for each of these Enlightenment thinkers
skin colour and physiology more generally, were unreliable and unstable variants — they were malleable to climate, geography and food. The fact of man’s temporal singularity meant that similarity was presupposed — it was the environment that was the source of human deviation and the effects it produced could, through generations, be reversed if individuals were transplanted elsewhere. Buffon, for example, was certain that:

If one transported Negroes to a northern province, their descendants in the eighth, tenth, or twelfth generation would be much less black than their ancestors, and perhaps as white as the original peoples of the cold climate where they would live. (quoted in Roger, 1997, p. 179)

Environmental explanations, as we have seen, were precisely what polygenetic theory derided. Human physique was not the product of climate or customs, but origins — separate origins. The very dilemma that confronted eighteenth-century naturalists — how to reconcile human variation given the fact of human unity — ceased to be a problem once part of the equation was factored out. In denying the possibility of a unity of origins, identity was no longer the point of departure — difference was.

The significance of the polygenetic thesis lay in the fact that having denied monism, polygenists were staging a temporal coup — one that located different races within different temporalities. Nature, for the adherents of polygenetic theory, continued to retain its temporal singularity, one that was distinct from human times, but the very fixity of nature was extended to that which was ‘natural’ in man — his physiology. Yet, while nature continued to exist within a singular time scale, when speaking of the races of men, it was a plurality of time that was evoked. In other words, the different races of men each had their own, separate origin from where they proceeded to develop separately. Thus races are irrevocably distinct (intellectually, morally, physically); thus the singularity of Man as the mantle of eighteenth-century taxonomy bows to the multiplicity of Races as the rubric of nineteenth-century classification.

It is at this point that race as a modern category of difference, and racism as a modern form of discrimination, comes to be born. It is only when time is detached from its biblical bearings that it is possible for a discourse on race to emerge. If different races were born of different origins, then the temporal unity enabled by the bible could no longer be sustained. Implicit in the polygenist thesis is that different human origins correspond to different temporalities. Prior to such a revolution in time, difference was accorded the malleability of climate and environmental factors. Differences in skin colour may have been recognized, but the source of this malady, (as non-whiteness was often, but not always, construed), was open to as much conjecture as there were classifications of Man. Modern racial theorizing relied upon a reconceptualization of time — one that made it possible to speak of Man in the plural.13

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If the defenders of polygenesis heralded a revolution in nineteenth-century conceptions of time, it is not with them that this revolution concluded. Prichard died in 1848 and consequently did not live to hear one of his harshest critics, Josiah Clarke Nott, eventually admit to the unity of the species with the publication of
Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (cited in Haller, 1970). I will be returning to Darwin shortly, for the moment however, it is important to note that while defending a separate origins theory, advocates of polygenesis retained a fairly traditional view of nature, one that was not too different from that of Prichard. Flora and fauna, as Nott and Gliddon pointed out, were immutable—nature had always remained constant. And yet, if the polygenesis advocates were evoking a multi-faceted conception of (racialized) human time, the temporal predictability of nature was coming under review in very different scientific quarters.

In 1818 Georges Cuvier proposed, on the basis of fossil remains, that animals that had once roamed the surface of the earth were now extinct. In other words, the findings of Cuvier, later elaborated upon by Sir Charles Lyell and Darwin, seemed to offer a fundamental challenge to the premise that nature, at least, had been constant and unchanged since Creation. If polygenetic theory defended multiple origins and thus different temporalities for the different races of man, the discovery of fossil remains appeared to be refuting the reassuring singularity of natural time and unity of origins. Not all living beings that inhabited the world in the present had done so in the past and similarly, life that had once flourished, had long since suffered extinction.

Yet, if Cuvier was to publicly acknowledge that living beings could indeed, and had in fact, been driven to extinction (a premise Lamarck rejected (cited in Bowler, 1984, p. 81)) he firmly opposed the principle of mutation (a premise Lamarck avidly defended (cited in Gould, 2002, pp. 491–492; Osborne, 1994, pp. 64–65)). In defending the mutability of species (Lamarck’s famous transformism predicated on acquired hereditary characteristics), the theoretical hypothesis that species had actually changed type further destabilized the premise that nature was always as it is. Not only, it appeared, had some living beings (both flora and fauna) become extinct (Cuvier), but new beings had emerged (Lamarck). In spite of Lamarck’s misfortune in making an enemy of Cuvier, Darwin for one, was very familiar with the naturalists work and if he was to deviate from Lamarck’s progressivist evolution, the mutability of species nevertheless remained the foundation stone for natural selection.

**Of mice and men ... and everything else**

Through Charles Darwin it is possible to bring my history of time to its conclusion—separate races, history, nature, fossils, extinction, species mutation ... Darwin offers the linkages. For, the temporal revolution conceived in the nineteenth century found its conclusion in the *Origin of the Species*. The paradox that would emerge in the early nineteenth century—that of the ‘human sciences’—would cease to be a paradox by the final decades of 1800s.

Polygenists had sought to naturalize human history by transforming time itself into a shattered mirror of distorted temporal images—a myriad of separate origins that reflected the racial faces of man. Others, in the natural sciences, had sought to historicize nature only to arrive at a similar result: nature itself no longer offered a single reflection of time but rather, its multiple histories stared back from the past through the medium of fossils and the evidence of mutability. In other words, the polygenetic defense of multiple human temporalities was paralleled with a changing conception of time within the natural sciences.
Consequently, in the years preceding the publication of Darwin’s *magnum opus*, the long standing premise that man and nature inhabited two distinct realms, (one constantly changing, the other governed by eternal laws) was a truth that had already begun to unravel. The belief in man’s common origins and nature’s divine loyalty had been displaced by the revelation that time not only stretched further than the Bible could possibly allow, but that nature, and not just humanity, had undergone radical and irrevocable change; that races were conceived at different times from a myriad of origins; and that both man and nature existed and developed within multiple temporalities. For all this however, nature and man were yet to be reconciled. A concluding step in the nineteenth-century revolutionizing of time had still to take place.

The Darwinian revolution, it could be argued, was a revolution in the traditional sense of the word – a 360 degree turn back to a defense of common origins charted over a singular time line. Such a conclusion however, would not only ignore the absence of a Creator in Darwinian evolution,17 but far more significantly for my purposes, it would fail to recognize that Darwin’s *Origin* would envelop man and nature into a singular history – a history of life. The dichotomy between human temporality and nature’s eternal laws, gave way to a history of life, and it was life that could trace its genealogy back to a singular origin.

In the eighteenth century, natural history was concerned with the study of living beings – their classification, their ‘regenerative’ processes and the possibilities of domestication and of artificial breeding. This latter fact made it possible to render the chain of being temporal – thus permitting degeneration and perfection within a species. Yet, we should not interpret such temporization as a precursor or nascent form of evolution. To recognize, particularly in domestic animals and agricultural crops, a lesser or more perfect form did not negate the assumptions of living nature – it simply permitted movement within a pre-existing scale (Foucault, 1973, pp. 263–279; Lovejoy, 1964, pp. 242–287). Whatever slight variations nature displayed found eternal rest through the permanency of classification. Man, on the other hand, continued to exist within the constant flux of time. The human subject consistently destabilized the very classifications that sought to subsume him.

When life however, becomes the object of knowledge, the subject of historical concern, then the *a priori* of living beings can be *a priori* no longer. Similarly, classification can no longer reflect the permanency of nature’s forms but rather, must rely on the genealogies of nature’s past. Finally, what was once the preserve of man – the flexing muscle of time – is now extended to all living matter. From his pedestal as the bearer of God’s image, and the author of his own history, man is subduced within a history that no longer presupposes, nor privileges him, a history within which he is only a recent arrival; a late intruder.

Darwin was, of course, not the first to propose an evolutionist schema. Lamarck extended the non-fixity of the species to include man, suggested the possibility of man’s evolution from animal origins, and derived both hypotheses on a progressive evolutionary grid predicated on acquired hereditary characteristics. Lamarck’s work, was in turn, enormously influential on what are now described as the Social Darwinist writings of Herbert Spencer.18 Yet, it was Darwin’s thesis that embodied, in a single theory, an explanation for species variability, extinction and the unity of human origins. Natural selection was the key to Darwinian evolution.

It is from the vantage point of natural selection that ‘[l]ight will be thrown on the origin of man and his history’ (Darwin, 1979[1859], p. 458). The radicalness of
offering a singular time line upon which man was plotted alongside plants, animals, oceanic creatures – life – was not lost on Darwin. In the early pages of his *Descent of Man*, Darwin articulated what was to be the main preoccupation underlying much of the work – a defense of man’s relationship (his biological, historical singularity) with the natural world (Darwin, 1905[1871], chs 1–4). Darwin rendered the human condition, both in its physiological and historical form, as an outgrowth of the history of nature. Nature, be it the external environment, or the human physic, was itself located in history while history in turn, was the supple production of natural evolution.

The significance of natural selection lay in its classificatory possibilities: it offered an evolutionary schema predicated on genealogy – a family history premised upon a continuity that extended from the natural world to the origins of man and (as we shall see), from the ‘savage’ to the European subject:

> The rules for classifying will no doubt become simpler when we have a definite object in view. We possess no pedigrees or armorial bearings; and we have to discover and trace the many diverging lines of descent in our natural genealogies. (Darwin, 1979[1858], p. 456)

Natural classification then, having been dismissed by Buffon as an arbitrary cataloguing of nature arrived at by tedious observation rather than a higher reasoning and general rules (cited in Roger, 1997, pp. 85–86), was, under Darwin, transformed into a system of ordering that claimed to be both premised upon, and reflective of, the history of nature itself. That is, to use Darwin’s words, ‘our classification will come to be, so far as they can be made so, genealogies’ (Darwin, 1979[1859], p. 456). Classification would no longer be separated from studies in the history of nature, but rather, the order of things natural will come to reflect the inter-related histories of every given species.

It is these inter-related histories, this genealogy that natural selection made possible, wherein lay the significance of Darwin’s historical revolution. It articulated a defense, without reference to the Bible, for the unity of life and thus, man’s common origins. It was a history, moreover, that resisted the progressivism of Lamarck’s evolution. At least in his *Origin*, Darwin was to reject progressive transformism (that species, in their own life times, can transmute to higher, more noble forms).19 Darwin’s emphasis on adaptability did not correspond to an abstract concept of superiority, rather adaptability ensured that ‘superiority’ was relative to the environment – those survived who were best adapted to a changing eco-system.20

Given the singularity of Darwin’s history – one that reunited man (and repositioned nature) on a unified temporal scale, and further, given Darwin’s reluctance to interpret natural selection and evolution in terms reminiscent with the Victorian faith in progress, one would be forgiven for assuming that Darwin’s thesis would represent a challenge to the racial science polygenists had popularized. As we know, the consequences of Darwin’s thesis were not so benign. Having resolved the early nineteenth-century paradox of the human sciences through a temporal revolution that concluded with Darwin’s *Origin*, the task of post-Darwinian anthropology, psychology and biology was to study and catalogue the varieties of racial types within a temporal schema; within a graduated, progressively oriented taxonomy.

Whether Darwin was a Social Darwinist or not is a debate that continues to engage Darwinian scholars (Hawkins, 1997, pp. 3–20; Jones, 1980; Young, 1985, pp. 609–638).
What is not controversial is the fact that Darwin himself was heavily influenced by the anthropology of his time. It is for this very reason that *Descent of Man* (1871) has been criticized as a largely unoriginal work reiterating many of the social Darwinist theories that were in their turn, further elaborated upon, expanded and legitimated with the theoretical possibilities natural selection opened up (Durant, 1985, p. 293; Jones, 1980, p. 19; Richardson, 1984, pp. 396–397). Among those theoretical possibilities was the means to account for gradational evolution.

The Darwinian time-line that reconciled man and nature into a shared genealogy, dismantled, in its turn, the parallel temporalities that the polygenists and early nineteenth century naturalists had formulated. Those parallel lines however, were reconfigured into perpendicular strips that cut across a single history. Thus, in its broadest terms, human history was now gradationally positioned from the ‘inferior’ to the ‘superior’ type: ape, savage, barbarian, European all represented modes of progress within a unified history.

Fossil records, which had earlier splintered natural history into multiple temporalities, could now be rendered as evidence not only for extinction, but for the evolution of life. Within this context, the search for the ‘missing link’ was a search guided by the principle that if the ‘savage’ was man in his first awakening, then his ancestor may be the link between ape and ‘savage’.

The rest of the story is all too familiar and does not require much by way of elaboration.

Darwinian evolution (as elaborated in *Descent of Man*) was predicated on a progressive scale of civilization in which the ‘savages’ (most commonly the Feugians of South America, but also Australian Aborigines, African Hottentots, etc) resided on the lowest twigs of the evolutionary bush as it spread its foliage towards the outer limbs of European civilization. On first setting eyes on the Feugians, for example, Darwin recounted his immediate impression as one of ‘astonishment’ for the reflection at once rushed into my mind / such were our ancestors’ (Darwin, 1905[1871], p. 796).

Consequently, Darwin’s genealogy of man was not simply tracing his descent from some ape-like progenitor but rather, evolution in its positivist incarnation allowed the European subject to trace his ancestors back to the ‘savages’ who, in their own turn, represented the closest living fossils of man’s early forays on earth. In one passage of *Descent*, Darwin wrote ‘we are chiefly concerned with primeval times and our only means of forming a judgement on this subject is to study the habits of existing semi-civilized and savage nations’ (1905[1871], p. 174). Similarly, in another of numerous such passages, Darwin went further, reprimanding his readers for being embarrassed at their monkey origins when there existed far greater depravity, immorality and indecency among savage nations: ‘For my own part’, Darwin maintained, ‘I would as soon be descended from that heroic monkey . . .’ (1905[1871], p. 796).

**Conclusion**

It has been the argument of this paper that for race to be enunciated required first and foremost a reconceptualization of time. The biblically-sanctioned premise, that Man and Beast are separate creations, inhabit two distinct temporalities, gave way in the nineteenth century to the paradox of the human sciences. To assert man’s
common unity was to explain away the differences, the diversity of human cultures and physiological forms. Once this fundamental proposition was denied, once the polygenists defended the theory of multiple human times, race as an irreversible, timeless category of differentiation was born. With it was modern racism. But the revolution in time did not end there. Through the discovery of fossils, both extinction and transmutability seemed to parallel the conclusions of the polygenists – not only man, but nature itself, was the product of a myriad of histories – the belief in its singular constancy and eternal laws was beginning to unravel.

With Darwin, nature and man were enveloped into a single historical time. The different races of men were no longer born of separate origins, but rather constituted distinct stages within a common evolutionary history. Separate origins had bowed to gradational development. And yet, if today it is Darwinian evolution that occupies the privileged space of the status quo (polygenetic theory having been long forgotten), we must remind ourselves that the nineteenth-century revolution in time was indebted as much to ethnology as natural science. Their mutual contribution in divorcing knowledge from the Scriptures, permitted the possibility of man’s divisibility, it created the conceptual space for polygenetic theory to be articulated and race-based evolution to be defended. The legacy of this nineteenth-century revolution in time lies in the ubiquitous lingering of the very category it helped to produce, that of race. If ‘contemporary biology’ as Todorov argues, ‘no longer uses the concept of race’ (1994, p. 92) the fact remains that up to the present day, in the common place-ness of our everyday lives – the act of seeing, of trying not to see, of ordering and conceptualizing our world, race continues to be one of the organizing principles through which we recognize and articulate difference.

But it is not with reference to the present that I wish to end this paper. Rather, it seems fitting that having evoked the authority of Genesis in the beginning of this paper, I should turn to nineteenth century anthropology for any concluding remarks. A. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900), anthropologist, archaeologist, museum curator and devout follower of Spencer’s brand of Darwinism (Keuren, 1989, pp. 270–288), pronounced, in 1875, on a new religion:

[We] may combat the assertion that the science of culture is historical whilst nature on the other hand, as dealt with by the physical sciences, is incapable of progress. However valid this objection might have appeared ... the principles of variation and natural selection have established a bond of union between the physical and culture sciences which can never be broken. History is but another term for evolution. (Pitt-Rivers, 1875, p. 24)

Notes
1. There are some opposing voices however. Isaac (2004) has argued that a ‘proto-racism’ existed in antiquity while a similar case has been made for the existence of racial thinking during the Middle Ages. See Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (2001) which has a special issue on race and the medieval.
2. As Ann Stoler (1996) argues, Michel Foucault, in his rare references to the construction of race, sought to trace back modern racism to this earlier form. Stoler paraphrases Foucault when she writes, ‘Racial discourse consolidates not because of Europe’s imperial adventures in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but because of internal conquests and invasions within the borders of Europe itself. Racism is not based on the confrontation of alien races, but on the bifurcation within Europe’s social fabric’ (p. 60). One of the earliest forms of this ‘bifurcation’ was the evocation of ‘race’ as a
bloodline marker between the governing nobility and the lower classes during the Middle Ages. Also see Foucault (2003).

3. Many scholars have highlighted the fact that challenging biblical history not only had religious significance, but ethnological implications. Among these works, two in particular are of direct relevance, Stocking (1987, pp. 41–45, 69–73) and Trautmann (1991, pp. 379–397).


5. ‘The changes that take place in Nature — how infinitely manifold soever they may be — exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle ... in the case of man [we see] an altogether different destiny from that of merely natural objects — in which we find always one and the same stable character, to which all change reverts: — namely, a real capacity for change, and that for the better — an impulse of perfectibility’ (Hegel, 1956[1818], p. 54).

6. The New World was still somewhat of a mystery, however. Some writers, such as Buffon, had already hypothesized that the indigenous Americans had migrated thousands of years ago from Asia (cited in Gerbi, 1973, pp. 14, 27).

7. Both authors capture the mood of rapture among a European audience that was only just being exposed to Sanskrit literature and Jones's work.

8. For example, see Trautmann (1997, ch. 6); For an account on the historical lineage of polygenetic theory see Popkin (1978, pp. 205–239).

9. It should be noted that Crawfurd wrote a great deal on the subject of multiple origins. This same volume includes many other articles by Crawfurd concerning the issue of race.

10. Dolichocephalic was the phrenological term for narrow headed people; Brachicephalic referred to the broad headed.

11. A craniometer is an instrument for measuring skulls; a stereograph (in this context) was used for making projections and drawings of skull shapes and an occipital crochet determined whether the back of an individuals head was more developed than the front.

12. Their classifications were as follows: Bernier (Europe, Africa Proper, Asia Proper, Lapps); Linnaeus (*Homo ferus, Europaeus albus, Americanus rubescus, Asiaticus luridus, Afer niger*); Buffon (Lapp Polar, Tartar, South Asian, European, Ethiopian, American). It is interesting to note that when Blumenbach devised and published his own classificatory list in 1775 it was not too different from that of his predecessors. It is only with the third (revised) edition of his work in 1795 that Blumenbach introduced the term Caucasian. His revised list was: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American and Malay (cited in Hannaford, 1996, pp. 207–208).

13. Following from George Stocking, Robert Young (1995, pp. 46–50) makes the interesting observation that it was precisely the monogenists who resisted the pluralization of the word ‘culture’ for the reason that it implied, in the nineteenth century, an acceptance of separate origins.

14. While Gossett and Popkin both argue that Darwin’s theory ended the monogenesis/polygenesis debate, Stocking emphasizes the fact that Darwin’s defense of unity was not accepted by all and that the polygenesis thesis was still defended in some quarters until the end of the nineteenth century. See Gossett (1963, pp. 66–67); Popkin (1978, p. 228); Stocking (1968, pp. 42–68).

15. For an interesting essay on the importance of fossils in the historicizing of geology see Oldroyd (1979).

16. Georges Cuvier was a figure prominent and powerful not only within the scientific but political echelons of the French establishment. It has been suggested by some authors that Lamarck's death in obscurity, his inability to have his work popularly received, was a testimony to Cuvier's political power and influence (Bowler, 1984, p. 83; Gould, 2002, pp. 170–173). Gould in fact, challenges this view.

17. In a rare polemical assault on religion, Darwin argued, in *Origin*, that, ‘It is so easy to hide our ignorance under such expressions as the “plan of creation”, and “unity of design” &c., and to think that we give explanation when we only restate a fact. Any one whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject my theory’ (Darwin, 1979[1859], p. 453).
18. Indeed, there is much debate as to whether Spencer actually employed Darwinian ideas or was, rather, a Lamarckian. (Bowler, 1984, pp. 278–28; Hawkins, 1997, pp. 87–88).

19. In a letter dated 1844, Darwin wrote: 'I am convinced... that species are not... immutable. Heaven forfend me from Lamarck's nonsense of a “tendency to progression”, “adaptations from the slow willing of animals”, etc. But the conclusions I am led to are not widely different from his, though the means of change are wholly so' (quoted in J.W Burrow, 1979, p. 32); On another occasion Darwin argued: 'After long reflection, I cannot avoid the conviction that no innate tendency to progressive development exists' (quoted in Gould, 1996, p. 137).

20. Thus, for example, Darwin refers to the perfected form of the parasite. (Darwin, 1979[1859], p. 114).

21. Todorov points to the fact that assessing racial difference is far from obvious: ‘We can produce a first map of the ‘races’ if we measure genetic characteristics, a second if we analyze blood composition, a third if we use the skeletal system, a fourth if look at epidermis’ (1994, p. 91).

References


