

Race: Fact or Myth? by christopher bowers

In Critical White Studies they talk about race as being much more a social reality than a biological reality. "Race" as a concept is not seen, even scientifically, as a biological reality. There are biological differences, obviously, but those are less than 5% of our genetic make-up. However, we attach certain meanings to those minute differences and that meaning becomes more powerful than the reality of biology (that 5%). This means that two white people could have less in common genetically than a European-American and an African-American.

Race, as a concept, comes out of a political/social context, particularly in this country. People could be defined not by their biology but by a political definition of race. The whiter you were, the more likely you were to be offered citizenship, the more property you could have, acceptance... and often your race was determined by the amount of property you had (Mexicans were considered white on the west coast because they owned property). Still today, race manifests much more as a social reality.

This is not to invalidate body memory and racial pride. However, that scientifically this would be attributed more to an environmental experience manifesting through the body, not specifically to race. For example, Jewish people (of many races) may also have pride and genetic memory as a result of oppression. Identity politics is still necessary.

What is quite left out this discussion is culture. Cultural differences are huge, but still not strictly biological. This makes them none the less valid. The whole idea of race as a biological myth is intended to confront the long history this country has of oppressing people through a huge process of "othering" which often took the form of scientific inquiry (ie, Eugenics) or making the case that people are less due to INHERENT differences, that actually are not inherent, but perceived.

A Little White Lie: "I'm not racist, I'm colorblind" by Christopher Bowers

In white, liberal culture people often think of themselves as "colorblind", seeing only humans, not their race. It seems reasonable enough. We want to be humanists and believe that we see people for who they are inside, for what we have in common with them. It is important to ask, is what we feel inside really a commonality or could that also be as different as the color of our skin?

A true humanist sees the beauty of difference as well as commonality and yet still isn't satisfied. A true humanist tries also to understand the distinct struggles with which every human lives. We are humans and as such we live in societies. To be "colorblind" is to neglect a fundamental part of humanism: of the many realities we exist in, the most compelling, consuming, and dire reality, is our social reality. It is the reality that will determine our fate. While race is not a biological reality, it is a social one. Not seeing color is to not see reality; it is to not see adversity. Colorblindness is a fantasy world in which we don't truly know one another. It would seem then that to not see someone's struggles (struggles often related to race) is to not see them at all. How would white people feel if their markers of individuality and community, be it artistic expression, intellectual prowess, gender or sexual orientation were glossed over as inconsequential? What if these important factors were swept under the carpet in the name of overcoming prejudice? It is a hard irony indeed. Some might argue here that it is those markers that we have in common. This is true. It is also true that those markers are themselves marked by race and the social reality of inequality and history.

To be colorblind is to be simply blind. It is to collaborate with the inhumane practices of assuming that all humans have the same experience, whether they are black, white, gay or straight, male or female. So the consequences of colorblindness must also be dealt with. Colorblindness implies also that since we are all the same, we have all had equal opportunity. This implication has led to enormous power differentials economically and politically that persist to this day.

It is doubtful that we can achieve a genuine equality without dealing honestly with our social reality. The social reality is that we are a diverse human family and that race affects every aspect of our lives. White people often have a hard time seeing this. It is as if they are blind.

Flipping the Script by Christopher Bowers

We often don't want to ask what social dysfunction might say about the perpetrators. Yet, if we do not, we may not understand how oppressive and hierarchical belief systems begin. For example, last year we heard many ask "What does hurricane Katrina mean for black people?", an important question to be sure. However, as anti-racist activist Tim Wise points out, another important question is what does hurricane Katrina mean for white people? For black people it may have meant the devastation of their communities and for most white people in the area it meant their continued insulation and entitlement to safety and wealth, despite mother nature. Granted some white people were also devastated by the hurricane, most of them found it easier to relocate, get trailers, and to get their lives back on track. Why don't we ask more about why that is?

In the process of understanding social identity we must understand that aspects of race and gender are formed not in a vacuum but in contrast to its so-called opposite. Therefore, white is defined, and has been historically, as everything that black isn't. Men also are defined against women. However, it is often the privileged group who is doing the defining. In fact, it is a part of privilege to define the world around you and to have that definition be considered reality. So with the privilege of definition, dominant groups can create a reality in which they are not culpable, a reality in which the problems of society, are the problems of certain sectors of society. For example, let's look at sexual violence and rape. It is most often defined as a problem for women. But, what if we flip the script and ask not how many women are raped, but how many men have raped? If the stats are correct, at least 1 in 3 women have been raped and about 95% of the rapes are committed by men. Therefore, taking into consideration that some men violate multiple women, approximately 1 in every 5-10 men are rapists. How many men do you know? How many men do you work with, go to school with, party with? Likewise, homophobia is seen as a problem for gay people. This, despite the facts that the most deadliest hate crimes against the queer community were committed by self-identified straight men. So whose problem is this? Furthermore, by this scape-goating logic, racism is a problem for black people and white people then, as always, are off the hook. This despite the fact that it is white people who harbor most of the wealth and power, and white people who are most often discriminatory and abusive to people of color.

This understanding of power and privilege is not intended to shame or demonize men, heterosexual people, or white people. Instead, this understanding gives us an opportunity to take responsibility if we find ourselves in a dominant social group. It is an opportunity to realize that reality may be different than we had been brought up to think, that we have a part in the ills of society and that in fact, we truly have the power to stop oppression in its tracks. To be an ally isn't just to say "how can I help you with your problems". To be an ally, to be a human, is to say "This is my problem too".