

“Race - Human” Article

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WRITTEN BY

[Peter Wade](#)

[See All Contributors](#)

Professor, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. Author of *Race, Nature and Culture: An Anthropological Approach* and *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*.

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Race, the idea that the [human species](#) is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences. Genetic studies in the late 20th century refuted the existence of biogenetically distinct races, and scholars now argue that “races” are cultural interventions reflecting specific attitudes and beliefs that were imposed on different populations in the wake of western [European](#) conquests beginning in the 15th century.

The many meanings of “race”

The modern meaning of the term *race* with reference to humans began to emerge in the 17th century. Since then it has had a variety of meanings in the languages of the Western world. What most definitions have in common is an attempt to categorize peoples primarily by their physical differences. In the [United States](#), for example, the term *race* generally refers to a group of people who have in common some visible physical traits, such as skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and eye formation. Such distinctive features are associated with large, geographically separated populations, and these continental [aggregates](#) are also designated as races, as the “African race,” the “European race,” and the “Asian race.” Many people think of race as reflective of any visible physical (phenotypic) variations among human groups, regardless of the cultural [context](#) and even in the absence of fixed racial categories.

The term *race* has also been applied to [linguistic groups](#) (the “Arab race” or the “Latin race”), to [religious groups](#) (the “Jewish race”), and even to political, national, or [ethnic groups](#) with few or no physical traits that distinguish them from their neighbours (the “Irish race,” the “French race,” the “Spanish race,” the “Slavic race,” the “Chinese race”, etc.).

For much of the 20th century, scientists in the Western world attempted to identify, describe, and classify human races and to document their differences and the relationships between them. Some scientists used the term *race* for [subspecies](#), subdivisions of the human species which were presumed sufficiently different biologically that they might later evolve into separate species.

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At no point, from the first [rudimentary](#) attempts at classifying human populations in the 17th and 18th centuries to the present day, have scientists agreed on the number of races of humankind, the features to be used in the identification of races, or the meaning of *race* itself. Experts have suggested a range of different races varying from 3 to more than 60, based on what they have considered distinctive differences in physical characteristics alone (these include hair type, head shape, skin colour, height, and so on). The lack of [concurrence](#) on the meaning and identification of races continued into the 21st century, and contemporary scientists are no closer to agreement than their forebears. Thus, *race* has never in the [history](#) of its use had a precise meaning.

Although most people continue to think of races as physically distinct populations, scientific advances in the 20th century demonstrated that human physical variations do not fit a “racial” model. Instead, human physical variations tend to overlap. There are no genes that can identify distinct groups that accord with the conventional race categories. In fact, [DNA](#) analyses have proved that all humans have much more in common, genetically, than they have differences. The genetic difference between any two humans is less than 1 percent. Moreover, geographically widely separated populations vary from one another in only about 6 to 8 percent of their genes. Because of the overlapping of traits that bear no relationship to one another (such as skin colour and hair texture) and the inability of scientists to cluster peoples into discrete racial packages, modern researchers have concluded that the concept of race has no biological validity.

Many scholars in other [disciplines](#) now accept this relatively new scientific understanding of [biological diversity](#) in the human species. Moreover, they have long understood that the concept of race as relating solely to phenotypic traits [encompasses](#) neither the [social reality](#) of race nor the phenomenon of “[racism](#).” Prompted by advances in other fields, particularly [anthropology](#) and history, scholars began to examine race as a social and cultural, rather than biological, phenomenon and have determined that race is a social invention of relatively recent origin. It derives its most [salient](#) characteristics from the social consequences of its classificatory use. The idea of “race” began to evolve in the late 17th century, after the beginning of [European](#)

[exploration](#) and [colonization](#), as a folk [ideology](#) about human differences associated with the different populations—Europeans, Amerindians, and Africans—brought together in the New World. In the 19th century, after the abolition of [slavery](#), the [ideology](#) fully emerged as a new mechanism of social division and stratification.



Race

Quick Facts

key people

- [Franz Boas](#)
- [Sir Edward Burnett Tylor](#)
- [Kwame Anthony Appiah](#)
- [Roland B. Dixon](#)
- [Ashley Montagu](#)
- [James Cowles Prichard](#)
- [Winthrop Donaldson Jordan](#)

related topics

- [Racism](#)
- [Brown babies](#)
- [Homo sapiens sapiens](#)
- [Human being](#)
- [Pardo](#)
- [Mestizo](#)
- [Social differentiation by race](#)
- [Mulatto](#)

“Race” as a mechanism of social division

[North America](#)

Racial classifications appeared in North [America](#), and in many other parts of the world, as a form of social division [predicated](#) on what were thought to be natural differences between [human](#) groups. Analysis of the folk beliefs, social policies, and practices of North Americans about race from the 18th to the 20th century reveals the development of a unique and

fundamental [ideology](#) about human differences. This [ideology](#) or “[racial worldview](#)” is a systematic, institutionalized set of beliefs and attitudes that includes the following components:

1. All the world’s peoples can be divided into biologically separate, discrete, and [exclusive](#) populations called races. A person can belong to only one race.
2. Phenotypic features, or visible physical differences, are markers or symbols of race identity and status. Because an individual may belong to a racial category and not have any or all of the associated physical features, racial scientists early in the 20th century invented an invisible internal element, “racial essence,” to explain such [anomalies](#).
3. Each race has distinct qualities of temperament, [morality](#), [disposition](#), and [intellectual](#) ability. Consequently, in the popular imagination each race has distinct [behavioral traits](#) that are linked to its [phenotype](#).
4. Races are unequal. They can, and should, be ranked on a gradient of inferiority and superiority. As the 19th-century biologist [Louis Agassiz](#) observed, since races exist, we must “settle the relative rank among [them].”
5. The behavioral and physical attributes of each race are inherited and innate—therefore fixed, permanent, and unalterable.
6. Distinct races should be [segregated](#) and allowed to develop their own institutions, [communities](#), and lifestyles, separate from those of other races.

These are the beliefs that wax and wane but never entirely disappear from the core of the American version of race differences. From its inception, racial ideology accorded inferior [social status](#) to people of African or Native American ancestry. This ideology was institutionalized in law and social practice, and social mechanisms were developed for enforcing the status differences.

[South Africa](#)

Although race categories and racial ideology are both arbitrary and subjective, race was a convenient way to organize people within structures of presumed permanent inequality. South Africa’s policy of [apartheid](#) exhibited the same basic racial ideology as the North American system but differed in two respects: the systematic state classification of races and the creation of an intermediate “racial” category; the [Coloured](#) category, for historical reasons, was made distinct and defined as those who were neither blacks (called Bantus or natives), most of whom retained their own traditional [cultures](#), nor whites (Europeans), who brought different cultural forms to South Africa. The relative exclusiveness of South Africa’s race categories was compromised by an institutionalized mechanism for changing one’s race, the Race Classification Board established by the Population Registration Act of 1950. This body, unique to South Africa, [adjudicated](#) questionable classifications and reassigned racial identities to individuals.

The difference between racism and ethnocentrism

Although they are easily and often confused, race and [racism](#) must be distinguished from [ethnicity](#) and ethnocentrism. While extreme ethnocentrism may take the same offensive form and may have the same dire consequences as extreme racism, there are significant differences between the two concepts. [Ethnicity](#), which relates to culturally [contingent](#) features, characterizes all human groups. It refers to a sense of identity and membership in a group that shares common language, cultural traits (values, beliefs, religion, food habits, customs, etc.), and a sense of a common [history](#). All humans are members of some cultural (ethnic) group, sometimes more than one. Most such groups feel—to varying degrees of intensity—that their way of life, their foods, dress, habits, beliefs, values, and so forth, are superior to those of other groups.

The most significant quality of [ethnicity](#) is the fact that it is unrelated to [biology](#) and can be flexible and transformable. People everywhere can change or [enhance](#) their ethnicity by learning about or [assimilating](#) into another [culture](#). American society well illustrates these facts, consisting as it does of groups of people from hundreds of different world cultures who have acquired some aspects of American culture and now participate in a common sense of ethnic identity with other Americans.

Ethnic identity is acquired, and ethnic features are learned forms of behaviour. Race, on the other hand, is a form of identity that is perceived as innate and unalterable. Ethnicity may be [transient](#) and even superficial. Race is thought to be profound and grounded in biological realities. Ethnocentrism is based in a belief in the superiority of one's own culture over others, and it too may be transient and superficial. Racism is the belief in and promotion of the racial worldview described above. Ethnocentrism holds skin colour and other physical features to be irrelevant as long as one is a member of the same culture, or becomes so. The racial worldview holds that, regardless of behaviour or cultural similarities, a member of an inferior race (who is usually perceived to be so by means of physical features) can never be accepted. Race is an invented, fictional form of identity; ethnicity is based on the reality of cultural similarities and differences and the interests that they represent. That race is a social invention can be demonstrated by an examination of the history of the idea of race as experienced in the English colonies.



The history of the idea of race

Race as a categorizing term referring to human beings was first used in the [English](#) language in the late 16th century. Until the 18th century it had a generalized meaning similar to other classifying terms such as *type*, *sort*, or *kind*. Occasional literature of Shakespeare's time referred to a "race of saints" or "a race of bishops." By the 18th century, race was widely used for sorting and ranking the peoples in the English colonies—Europeans who saw themselves as free people, Amerindians who had been conquered, and [Africans](#) who were being brought in as slave labour—and this usage continues today.

The peoples conquered and enslaved were physically different from western and northern Europeans, but such differences were not the sole cause for the construction of racial categories. The English had a long history of separating themselves from others and treating foreigners, such as the Irish, as alien "others." By the 17th century their policies and practices in Ireland had led to an image of the Irish as "savages" who were incapable of being civilized. Proposals to conquer the Irish, take over their lands, and use them as [forced labour](#) failed largely because of Irish resistance. It was then that many Englishmen turned to the idea of colonizing the New World. Their attitudes toward the Irish set precedents for how they were to treat the New World Indians and, later, Africans.

The problem of labour in the New World

One of the greatest problems faced by settlers in the New World, particularly in the [southern colonies](#), was the shortage of labour. Within a few decades after the settlement of Jamestown, planters had established indentured servitude as the main form of labour. Under this system, young men (and some women) worked for masters, to whom they were indebted for their transportation, normally for a period of four to seven years. They were paid no wages, received only minimal upkeep, and often were treated brutally.

By the mid-17th century a wealthy few had encumbered virtually all lands not under Indian control and were attempting to work these lands using indentured servants. The working poor and those eventually freed from servitude had little on which to survive, and their dissatisfaction with the inequities of colonial society led to riots and numerous threats of revolt. After 1619 this group of poor servants included many Africans and their descendants, some of whom had experience in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, where slave labour was widely used.

The social position of Africans in the early colonies has been a source of considerable debate. Some scholars have argued that they were separated from European servants and treated differently from the beginning. Later historians, however, have shown that there was no such uniformity in the treatment of Africans. Records indicate that many Africans and their

descendants were set free after their periods of servitude. They were able to purchase land and even bought servants and slaves of their own. Some African men became wealthy tradesmen, craftsmen, or farmers, and their skills were widely recognized. They voted, appeared in courts, engaged in business and commercial dealings, and exercised all the [civil rights](#) of other free men. Some free Africans intermarried, and their children suffered little or no special [discrimination](#). Other Africans were poor and lived with other poor men and women; blacks and whites worked together, drank together, ate together, played together, and frequently ran away together. Moreover, the poor of all colours protested together against the policies of the government (at least 25 percent of the rebels in [Bacon's Rebellion](#) [1676] were blacks, both servants and freedmen). The social position of Africans and their descendants for the first six or seven decades of colonial [history](#) seems to have been open and fluid and not initially overcast with an [ideology](#) of inequality or inferiority.

Toward the end of the 17th century, labour from [England](#) began to diminish, and the colonies were faced with two major dilemmas. One was how to maintain control over the restless poor and the freedmen who seemed intent on the violent overthrow of the colony's leaders. There had been several incidents that threatened the leadership of the fragile colonies. The aforementioned rebellion led by [Nathaniel Bacon](#) in Virginia was a high point in the caustic relations between the planters and leaders of the colony and the impoverished workers. Although that rebellion failed, discontent continued to be expressed in riots, destruction of property, and other forms of social violence.

The second dilemma was how to obtain a controllable [labour force](#) as cheaply as possible. Tobacco was the chief source of wealth, and its production was labour-intensive. The colonial leaders found a solution to both problems: by the 1690s they had divided the restless poor into categories reflecting their origins, homogenizing all Europeans into a "white" category and instituting a system of permanent [slavery](#) for Africans, the most [vulnerable](#) members of the [population](#).

The [enslavement](#) and racialization of Africans

Between 1660 and 1690, leaders of the [Virginia](#) colony began to pass laws and establish practices that provided or sanctioned differential treatment for freed servants whose origins were in [Europe](#). They conscripted poor whites, with whom they had never had interests in common, into the category of free men and made land, tools, animals, and other resources available to them. African Americans and Africans, mulattoes, and [American Indians](#), regardless of their cultural similarities or differences, were forced into categories separate from whites. Historical records show that the Virginia Assembly went to great extremes not only to purposely separate Europeans from Indians and Africans but to promote [contempt](#) on the part of whites against blacks. Recognizing the vulnerability of African labour, colonial leaders passed laws that increasingly bound Africans and their children permanently as servants and, eventually, as slaves. White servants had the protection of English laws, and their mistreatment was criticized abroad. Africans, however, had no such recourse. By 1723 even free African Americans,

descendants of several generations then of free people, were prohibited from voting and exercising their civil rights. Colonial leaders thus began using the physical differences among the population to structure an inegalitarian society. In the island colonies of [Barbados and Jamaica](#), the numbers of [Irish](#) and Indian slaves had also declined, and planters turned increasingly to Africans. Southern planters, who were in regular communication with these island [communities](#), brought in large numbers of Africans during the 18th century and systematically developed their slave practices and laws. [Christianity](#) provided an early rationalization for permanent enslavement: Africans were heathens and slaves in their own lands; under English slavery, their souls would be saved.

The underlying reality was that their labour was needed to produce wealth for the colonies and for England's upper classes. During the early decades of the 17th century, many Englishmen considered the Africans to be civilized. Unlike the Indians, whom they called "savages" and who were largely nomadic hunter-gatherers, the English knew the Africans in the colonies as sophisticated cultivators who understood how to grow foods and other crops in tropical soils. In this they surpassed the Irish who had been enslaved on plantations in the Caribbean; with no tradition of agriculture in tropical habitats, the Irish failed as producers of necessary goods. Some Africans were skilled metalworkers, knowledgeable about smelting, blacksmithing, and toolmaking. Many others were skilled in woodworking, weaving, pottery production, rope making, leatherwork, brick making, thatching, and other crafts.

Two additional factors made Africans more desirable as slaves: Africans were immune to Old World diseases, which caused Indians to sicken and die, and, most important, Africans had nowhere to run, unlike the Indians, who could escape from slavery into their own familiar territory. The Irish, who were also in an alien land, were perceived as unruly and violent. When they escaped, they often joined their fellow Catholics, the Spanish and the French, in [conspiracies](#) against the English.

Thus, Africans became the preferred slaves, not because of their physical differences, although such differences became increasingly important, but because they had the knowledge and skills that made it possible to put them to work immediately to develop the colonies. They were not Christian, they were vulnerable, with no legal or [moral](#) opposition to their enslavement, and, once transported to the New World, they had few options. Moreover, the supply of Africans increased as the costs of transporting them fell, and English merchants became directly involved in the [slave trade](#).

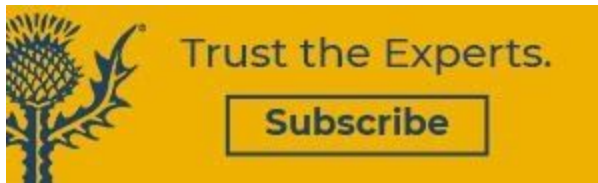
Human rights versus property rights

[Chattel](#) slavery was not established without its critics. From the beginning, many Englishmen condemned the presence of slavery in English territories. They argued that theirs was a society of free men and of democratic institutions and that it was committed to the preservation of human rights, [justice](#), and equality. For several hundred years, trends in English [culture](#) had

been toward the expansion of human rights and the recognition of [individual liberty](#). Slavery, many argued, was [antithetical](#) to a free society and subversive of Christian values.

Throughout the 18th century, however, another powerful value in English culture, the sanctity of property and property rights, came to dominate colonial concerns. When faced with growing antislavery arguments, planters in the southern colonies and Caribbean islands, where slavery was bringing great wealth, turned to the argument that slaves were property and that the rights of slave owners to their property were by law unquestionable and inviolable. The laws and court decisions reflected the belief that the property rights of slave owners should take [precedence](#) over the human rights of slaves.

Historians [concur](#) that the emphasis on the slave as property was a requisite for dehumanizing the Africans. Says the historian Philip D. Morgan, “The only effective way to justify slavery was to exclude its victims from the [community](#) of man.” Attitudes and beliefs about all Africans began to harden as slavery became more deeply entrenched in the colonies. A focus on the physical differences of Africans expanded as new justifications for slavery were needed, especially during the Revolutionary War period, when the rallying cry of freedom from oppression seemed particularly hypocritical. Many learned men on both sides of the Atlantic disputed the moral rightness of slavery. Opponents argued that a society of free men working for wages would be better producers of goods and services. But pro-slavery forces, which included some of the wealthiest men in [America](#) and England, soon posed what they came to believe was an unassailable argument for keeping blacks enslaved: the idea of black inferiority.



Building the myth of black inferiority

A number of 18th-century political and [intellectual](#) leaders began publicly to assert that Africans were naturally inferior and that they were indeed best suited for [slavery](#). A few [intellectuals](#) revived an older image of all living things, the *scala naturae* (Latin: “scale of nature”), or [Great Chain of Being](#), to demonstrate that nature or God had made men unequal. This ancient hierarchical paradigm—encompassing all living creatures, starting with the simplest organisms and reaching to humans, angels, and ultimately to God—became for the advocates of slavery a perfect reflection of the realities of inequality that they had created. The physical differences of blacks and Indians became the symbols or markers of their status. It was during these times

that the term *race* became widely used to denote the ranking and inequality of these peoples—in other words, their placement on the Chain of Being.



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[In sports, as elsewhere in society, there is a tendency to explain differences in performance in terms of some alleged physical differences...](#)

Beginning in the late 18th century, differences between the races became magnified and exaggerated in the public mind. Hundreds of battles with Indians had pushed these populations westward to the frontiers or [relegated](#) them increasingly to reservation lands. A widely accepted [stereotype](#) had grown that the Indian race was weak and would [succumb](#) to the advances of white civilization so that these native peoples would no longer be much of a problem. Their deaths from disease and warfare were seen as a testament to the inevitable [demise](#) of the Indian.

Racial [stereotyping](#) of Africans was magnified by the [Haitian rebellion of 1791](#). This heightened the American fear of [slave revolts](#) and retaliation, causing greater restrictions and ever harsher and more degrading treatment. Grotesque descriptions of the low-status races, blacks and Indians, were widely publicized, and they helped foster fear and loathing. This negative

stereotyping of low-status racial populations was ever present in the public [consciousness](#), and it affected relations among all people.

By the mid-19th century, race in the popular mind had taken on a meaning equivalent to species-level distinctions, at least for differences between blacks and whites. The [ideology](#) of separateness that this proclaimed difference implied was soon transformed into social policy. Although legal slavery in the [United States](#) ended in 1865 with the passage of the [Thirteenth Amendment](#) to the Constitution, the [ideology](#) of race continued as a new and major form of social differentiation in both American and British society. The [black codes](#) of the 1860s and the [Jim Crow laws](#) of the 1890s were passed in the United States to [legitimate](#) the social philosophy of [racism](#). More laws were enacted to prevent intermarriage and intermating, and the segregation of public facilities was established by law, especially in the South. The [country's](#) low-paying, dirty, and demeaning jobs were relegated to “the Negro,” as he was seen fit for only such tasks. [Supreme Court](#) decisions, such as the [Dred Scott case](#) of 1857, made clear that Negroes were not and could not be citizens of the United States. They were to be excluded from the social [community](#) of whites but not from the production of their wealth. The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which permitted “separate but equal” facilities, guaranteed that the racial worldview, with its elements of separateness and exaggerated difference, would continue to flourish.

[Immigration](#) and the racial worldview

In the 1860s, when [Chinese](#) labourers immigrated to the United States to build the [Central Pacific Railroad](#), a new [population](#) with both physical and cultural differences had to be accommodated within the racial worldview. While industrial employers were eager to get this new and cheap labour, the ordinary white public was stirred to anger by the presence of this “yellow peril.” Political party caucuses, labour unions, and other organizations railed against the immigration of yet another “inferior race.” Newspapers condemned the policies of employers, and even church leaders decried the entrance of these aliens into what was seen as a land for whites only. So hostile was the opposition that in 1882 Congress finally passed the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#).

The large migrations from southern and eastern [Europe](#) that started in the 1880s required the reassessments of other new people and their incorporation into the racial ranking system. Old-stock Americans (English, Dutch, German, Scandinavian) were horrified at the onslaught of large numbers of people speaking Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Russian, and other foreign languages. They held that such “races” could not be [assimilated](#) into “Anglo-Saxon” [culture](#), and policies and practices had to be put into place to separate them from the mainstream.

Despite much opposition, these European groups soon lost their inferior race status, and within a few generations their descendants not only were assimilated into the “white” category but had also incorporated the white racial worldview. More than half the ancestors of late 20th-century American whites immigrated to the United States during the period 1880–1930. The “white”

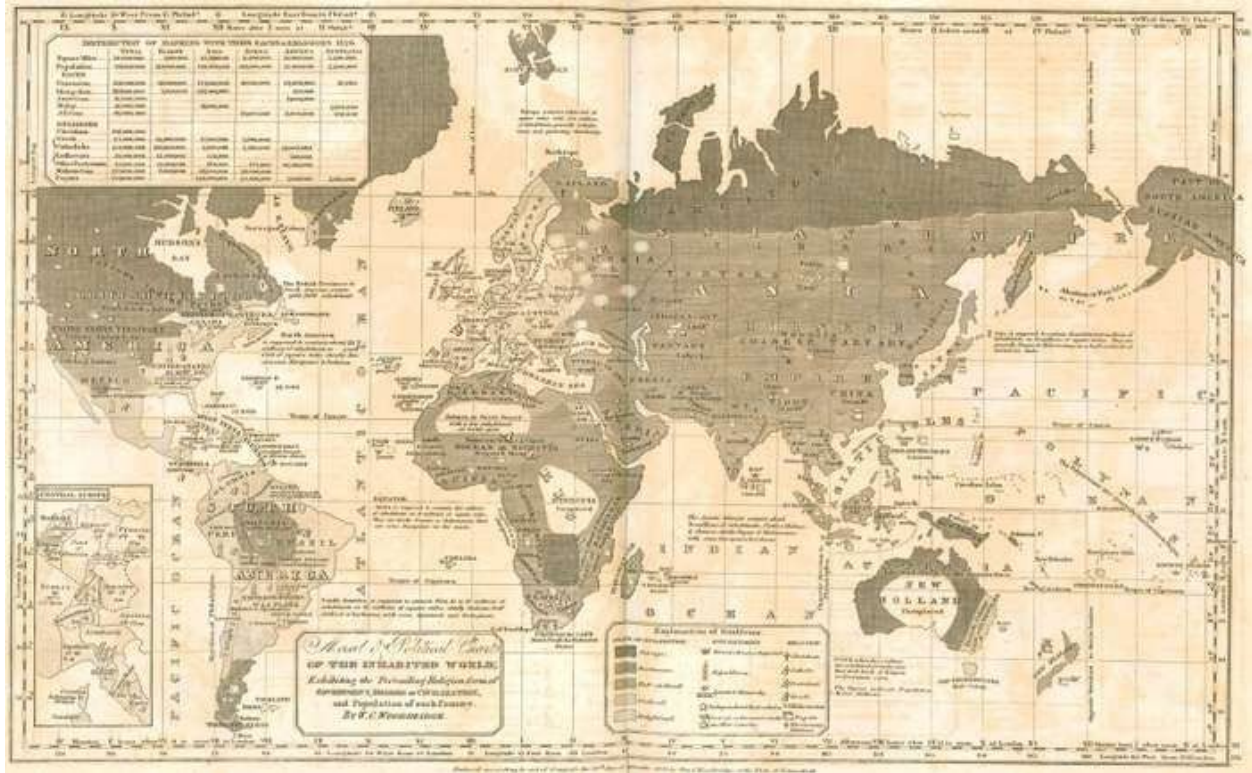
racial category was constructed flexibly enough to enclose even those who could not claim an Anglo-Saxon background.

During the 19th century the idea and ideology of race were diffused throughout the [European colonial](#) systems, reinforced by the fact that the peoples conquered and colonized by western European powers were also physically different. Such conquests buttressed the idea of European racial superiority. The racial worldview, with its tenets regarding the limited capacities of inferior races, was employed to justify the extermination of peoples, including the [Tasmanians](#), most of the [Maori](#), and many [indigenous Australians](#). It was an essential ingredient in the colonial policies and practices of the [British](#) in India and [Southeast Asia](#) and, later, in Africa. Numerous British writers of the 19th century, such as [Rudyard Kipling](#), openly declared that the British were a superior race destined to rule the world.

Legitimizing the [racial worldview](#)

Enlightenment philosophers and systematists

The development of the idea and ideology of race coincided with the rise of science in American and [European cultures](#). Much of the inspiration for the growth of science has been credited to the period known as the [Enlightenment](#) that spanned most of the 18th century. Many early Enlightenment writers believed in the power of education and fostered very liberal ideals about the potentiality of all peoples, even “savages,” for [human](#) progress. Yet, later in the century, some of the earliest assertions about the natural inferiority of Africans were published. Major proponents of the ideology of race inequality were the German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#), the French philosopher [Voltaire](#), the Scottish philosopher and historian [David Hume](#), and the influential American political philosopher [Thomas Jefferson](#). These writers expressed negative opinions about Africans and other “primitives” based on purely subjective impressions or materials gained from secondary sources, such as travelers, missionaries, and explorers. These philosophers expressed the common attitudes of this period; most also had investments in the [slave trade](#) or slavery.



William C. Woodbridge: *Modern Atlas* (1835)Map designating “savage,” “barbarous,” and “enlightened” regions of the world, from William C. Woodbridge's *Modern Atlas* (1835).The Newberry Library, Gift of Louise St. John Westervelt ([A Britannica Publishing Partner](#))

During the same period, influenced by taxonomic activities of botanists and biologists that had begun in the 17th century, other European scholars and scientists were involved in the serious work of identifying the different kinds of human groups increasingly discovered around the world. The work of the naturalists and systematists brought attention to the significance of classifying all peoples into “natural” groupings, as had been done with flora and fauna. Eighteenth-century naturalists had greater information and knowledge about the world’s peoples than their predecessors, and a number of scholars attempted to organize all this material into some logical scheme. Although many learned men were involved in this enterprise, it was the classifications developed by the Swedish botanist [Carolus Linnaeus](#) and the German physiologist [Johann Friedrich Blumenbach](#) that provided the models and terms for modern racial classifications.



Scientific classifications of race

In publications issued from 1735 to 1759, [Linnaeus](#) classified all the then-known animal forms. He included humans with the primates and established the use of both genus and [species](#) terms for identification of all animals. For the [human](#) species, he introduced the still-current scientific name *Homo sapiens*. He listed four major subdivisions of this species, *H. americanus*, [H. africanus](#), *H. europaeus*, and *H. asiaticus*. Such was the nature of knowledge at the time that Linnaeus also included the categories *H. monstrosus* (which included many exotic peoples) and *H. ferus* (“wild man”), an indication that some of his categories were based on tall tales and travelers’ [myths](#).

[Blumenbach](#) divided humankind into five “varieties” and noted that clear lines of distinction could not be drawn between them, as they tended to blend “insensibly” into one another. His five categories included American, Malay, Ethiopian, Mongolian, and Caucasian. (He chose the term Caucasian to represent the Europeans because a skull from the [Caucasus Mountains](#) of Russia was in his opinion the most beautiful.) These terms were still commonly used by many scientists in the early 20th century, and most continue today as major [designations](#) of the world’s peoples.

These classifications not only rendered human groups as part of nature but also gave them concreteness, rigidity, and permanence. Moreover, some descriptions, especially those of Linnaeus, included statements about the temperament and customs of various peoples that had nothing to do with biophysical features but were forms of learned [behaviour](#) that are now known as “culture.” That cultural behaviour and physical characteristics were [conflated](#) by these 18th-century writers reflects both their ethnocentrism and the limited scientific knowledge of the time.

The institutionalizing of race

[Slavery](#) always creates social distance between masters and slaves, and [intellectuals](#) are commonly called upon to affirm and justify such distinctions. As learned men began to write a great deal about the “racial” populations of the New World, Indians and Negroes were increasingly projected as alien. In this way did some Enlightenment thinkers help pro-slavery interests place responsibility for slavery in the “inferior” victims themselves.

Would-be “scientific” writings about the distinctiveness of blacks and Indians commenced late in the 18th century in tandem with exaggerated popular beliefs, and writings of this type continued on into the 20th century. The European world sought to justify not only the institution of slavery but also its increasingly brutal marginalization of all non-European peoples, slave or free. Science became the vehicle through which the delineation of races was confirmed, and

scientists in [Europe](#) and [America](#) provided the arguments and evidence to document the inferiority of non-Europeans.

About the turn of the 19th century, some scholars advanced the idea that the Negro (and perhaps the Indian) was a separate species from “normal” men (white and Christian), an idea that had been introduced and occasionally expressed in the 18th century but that had drawn little attention. This revived notion held that the “inferior races” had been created at a different time than [Adam and Eve](#), who were the progenitors of the white race. Although multiple creations contradicted both the well-known definition of species in terms of reproductively isolated populations and the biblical description of creation, it is clear that in the public mind the transformation from race to species-level difference had already evolved. In the courts, statehouses, assemblies, and churches and throughout American institutions, race became institutionalized as the premier source, and the causal agent, of all human differences.

Transforming “race” into “species”

One of those whose direct experience of African slaves and [assessment](#) of them was given great weight was Edward Long (1734–1813), a former plantation owner and jurist in Jamaica. In a book titled *The History of Jamaica* (1774), Long asserted that “the Negro” was “void of genius” and “incapable” of civilization; indeed, he was so far inferior as to [constitute](#) a separate species of mankind. Long’s work was published as a defense of slavery during a period of rising antislavery [sentiment](#). Its greatest influence came during and after the [American Revolutionary War](#) (1775–83), when some southern Americans started freeing their slaves and moving north. Long’s writings, published in popular magazines, were widely read in the [United States](#) during the last decade of the 18th century.

In 1799 Charles White, a Manchester physician, published the earliest proper “scientific” study of human races. He described each racial category in physical terms, identifying what he thought were differences in the head, feet, arms, complexion, skin colour, hair texture, and susceptibility to disease. White actually measured the body parts of a group of blacks and whites, lending the semblance of hard science to his conclusions. He not only advocated a gradation of the races, but he provided support for the speculation that the Negro, the [American Indian](#), some Asiatic tribes, and Europeans were of different species. His explanation for the presumed savagery of Africans was that they had degenerated from the pure and [idyllic](#) circumstances provided in the [Garden of Eden](#) while Europeans had made advances toward civilization.

Such works as those of Long and White initiated a debate among scholars and scientists that had long-range [implications](#) for European attitudes toward human differences. The issue, as expressed by mid-19th-century scientists, was “the Negro’s place in nature”—that is, whether “the Negro” was human like Europeans or a separate species nearer to the ape.

[Samuel Morton](#), a Philadelphia physician and founder of the field of [craniometry](#), collected skulls from around the world and developed techniques for measuring them. He thought he could identify racial differences between these skulls. After developing techniques for measuring the internal capacity of the skull, he concluded that blacks had smaller brains than whites, with Indian brains intermediate between the two. Because brain size had long been correlated with intelligence in both the popular mind and science, Morton's findings seemed to confirm that blacks were also less intelligent than whites. In publications of 1839 and 1844, he produced his results, identifying the Native Americans as a separate race from Asians and arguing from his Egyptian materials that these ancient peoples were not Negroes. His findings magnified and exaggerated the differences between racial populations, imposing meaning on the differences that led to the conclusion that they were separate species.

Morton soon became the centre of a network of scholars and scientists who advocated multiple creations (polygeny) and thus contradicted the long-established biblical view of one single creation from which all humans descended (monogeny). The most influential of the scientists involved in this debate was [Louis Agassiz](#), who accepted a position at [Harvard University](#) and revolutionized the field of natural science. Agassiz converted from monogenism to polygenism after moving to the United States from Switzerland in 1846. It was then that he saw blacks for the first time. He was also impressed with Morton's work with skulls, and eventually he became the most important advocate of polygenism, conveying it in public lectures and to generations of students, many of whom took leading [intellectual](#) roles in American society.

One result of the mid-19th-century concern with documenting racial distinctions by means of body measurements was the establishment of the "scientific" enterprise of [anthropometry](#). During the [Civil War](#) the U.S. Sanitary Commission and the provost marshal general's office collected data on the physical condition of military conscripts and volunteers in the army, navy, and marines. Using anthropometric techniques, they produced massive tables of quantitative measurements of the body dimensions of tens of thousands of whites, blacks, mulattoes, and Indians. Scientists interpreted the data in a way that strengthened the argument that races were fundamentally distinct and that confirmed that blacks, Indians, and mulattoes were inferior to whites. Anthropometry flourished as a major [scientific method](#) for demonstrating race differences well into the 20th century.

The false assumptions of anthropometry

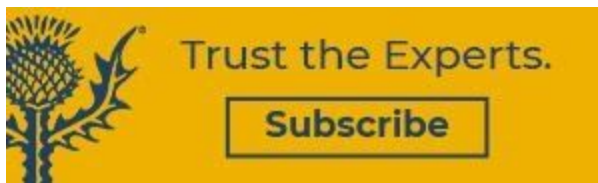
For the first half of the 20th century, scholars continued to debate "the Negro's place in nature." But the debate over multiple or single origins receded after 1859, when the publication of [Charles Darwin](#)'s theory of [evolution](#) led to a more [dynamic](#) understanding of human [diversity](#). Evolution produced a new perspective on the causes of blacks' (supposedly) innate condition; the central problem became whether they evolved before or after whites. By the 1860s black primitiveness was assumed without question. "The Negro," in fact, had become the new savage,

displacing Indians and Irishmen, and the [ideology](#) proclaimed that his savagery was [intrinsic](#) and immutable.

The use of metrical descriptions, while they seemed objective and scientific, fostered typological [conceptions](#) of human group differences. From massive quantitative measurements, experts computed averages, means, and standard deviations from which they developed statistical profiles of each racial [population](#). These profiles were thought to represent the type characteristics of each race expressed in what seemed to be [impeccable](#) scientific language. When statistical profiles of one group were compared with those of others, one could theoretically determine the degree of their racial differences.

The activities of typologists carried a number of false assumptions about the physical characteristics of races. One was that racial characteristics did not change from one generation to another, meaning that averages of measurements such as body height would remain the same in the next generations. Another false assumption was that statistical averages could accurately represent huge populations, when the averaging itself obliterated all the variability within those populations.

Expressed alongside existing myths and popular racial [stereotypes](#), these measurements inevitably strengthened the assumption that some races were “pure” and some not so “pure.” Scholars argued that all the major races were originally pure and that some races represented the historical mixing of two or more races in the past. “Racial types” were conceived as representing populations with certain inherited morphological features that were originally characteristic of the race; every member of a race thus retained such traits. These beliefs attempted to validate the image of races as internally [homogeneous](#) and biologically discrete, having no overlapping features with other races.



The decline of “race” in science

The influence of [Franz Boas](#)

Typological thinking about race, however, was soon contradicted by the works of some early 20th-century anthropologists. [Franz Boas](#), for example, published studies that showed that morphological characteristics varied from generation to generation in the same [population](#), that skeletal material such as the cranium was [malleable](#) and subject to external influences, and that metrical averages in a given population changed in succeeding generations.

Boas and the early [anthropologists](#) trained in the [United States](#) recognized that the popular [conception](#) of race linked, and thus confused, [biology](#) with language and [culture](#). They began to advocate the separation of “race,” as purely a biological phenomenon, from [behaviour](#) and language, denying a relationship between physical traits and the languages and [cultures](#) that people carry.

Though their arguments had little impact on the public at the time, these scholars initiated a new way of thinking about [human](#) differences. The separation of culture and language, which are learned behaviours, from biological traits that are physically inherited became a major tenet of [anthropology](#). As the [discipline](#) grew and spread by means of scholarship and academic training, public understanding and recognition of this fundamental truth increased. Yet the idea of a hereditary basis for [human behaviour](#) remained a stubborn element of both popular and scientific thought.

Mendelian [heredity](#) and the development of blood group systems

In 1900, after the rediscovery of [Gregor Mendel](#)'s experiments dealing with heredity, scientists began to focus greater attention on genes and chromosomes. Their objective was to [ascertain](#) the hereditary basis for numerous physical traits. Once the [ABO blood group system](#) was discovered and was shown to follow the pattern of Mendelian heredity, other systems—the MN system, the Rhesus system, and many others—soon followed. Experts thought that at last they had found genetic features that, because they are inherited and not susceptible to environmental influences, could be used to identify races. By the 1960s and '70s, scientists were writing about racial groups as populations that differed from one another not in absolute features but in the frequencies of expression of genes that all populations share. It was expected that each race, and each population within each race, would have frequencies of certain ascertainable genes that would mark them off from other races.

Information on blood groups was taken from large numbers of populations, but, when scientists tried to show a correlation of blood group patterns with the conventional races, they found none. While populations differed in their blood group patterns, in such features as the frequencies of A, B, and O types, no evidence was found to document race distinctions. As knowledge of human heredity expanded, other genetic markers of difference were sought, but these also failed to neatly separate humanity into races. Most differences are expressed in subtle gradations over wide geographic space, not in abrupt changes from one “race” to another.

Moreover, not all groups within a large “geographic race” share the same patterns of genetic features. The internal variations within races have proved to be greater than those between races. Most importantly, physical, or phenotypic, features assumed to be determined by DNA are inherited independently of one another, further frustrating attempts to describe race differences in genetic terms.

“Race” and intelligence

Anthropometric measurements did not provide any direct data to prove group superiority or inferiority. As various fields of study emerged in the late 19th century, some scholars began to focus on mental traits as a means to examine and describe human differences. [Psychology](#) as a growing field began developing its own programmatic interests in discovering race differences.

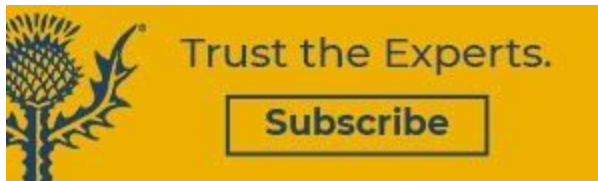
In the 1890s the psychologist [Alfred Binet](#) began testing the mental abilities of French schoolchildren to ascertain how children learned and to help those who had trouble learning. Binet did not call his test an [intelligence test](#), and its purpose was not to divide French schoolchildren into hierarchical groups. But with these tests a new mechanism was born that would provide powerful support to those who held beliefs in racial differences in intelligence.

Psychologists in the United States very quickly adopted Binet’s tests and modified them for American use. More than that, they reinterpreted the results to be clear evidence of innate intelligence. [Lewis Terman](#) and his colleagues at [Stanford University](#) developed the Stanford-Binet IQ (intelligence quotient) test, which set the standard for similar tests produced by other American psychologists.

[IQ tests](#) began to be administered in large numbers during the second decade of the 20th century. The influences of hereditarian beliefs and the power of the racial worldview had conditioned Americans to believe that intelligence was inherited and permanent and that no external influences could affect it. Indeed, heredity was thought to determine a person’s or a people’s place in life and success or failure. Americans came to employ IQ tests more than any other nation. A major reason for this was that the tests tended to confirm the expectations of white Americans; on average, blacks did less well than whites on IQ tests. But the tests also revealed that the disadvantaged people of all races do worse on IQ tests than do the privileged. Such findings were compatible with the beliefs of large numbers of Americans who had come to accept unqualified [biological determinism](#).

Opponents of IQ tests and their interpretations argued that intelligence had not been clearly defined, that experts did not agree on its definition, and that there were many different types of intelligence that cannot be measured. They also called attention to the many discrepancies and contradictions of the tests. One of the first examples of [empirical](#) evidence against the “innate intelligence” arguments was the revelation by psychologist Otto Klineberg in the 1930s that blacks in four northern states did better on average than whites in the four southern states where expenditures on education were lowest. Klineberg’s analysis pointed to a direct

correlation between income and [social class](#) and performance on IQ tests. Further evidence indicated that students with the best [primary education](#) and greater cultural experiences always did better on such tests. Experts thus argued that such tests are culture-bound; that is, they reflect and measure the cultural experiences and knowledge of those who take the tests and their levels of education and training. Few would deny that African Americans and Native Americans have long had a much more restricted experience of American culture and a far inferior education.



Hereditarian ideology and [European](#) constructions of race

Hereditary statuses versus the rise of [individualism](#)

Inheritance as the basis of individual [social position](#) is an ancient tenet of [human history](#), extending to some point after the beginnings of agriculture (about 10,000 bce). Expressions of it are found throughout the world in kinship-based societies where genealogical links determine an individual's status, rights, and obligations. Wills and testaments capture this principle, and [caste](#) systems, such as that of India, reflect the expression of another form of this principle, buttressed by religious beliefs. Arguments for the [divine right of kings](#) and succession laws in European societies mirrored deep values of hereditary status.

But many trends in European cultural history over the 18th and 19th centuries contradicted the idea of social placement by [kinship](#) fiat. Ever since the enclosure movement in [England](#) in the 15th century, the transformation to wage [labour](#), the rise of merchant capitalism, and the entry into public [consciousness](#) of the significance of private property, Europeans have been conditioned to the values of [individualism](#) and of progress through prosperity. Wage labour strengthened ideas of individual freedom and advancement. The philosophy of [autonomous](#) individualism took root in western European societies, beginning first in England, and became the engine of [social mobility](#) in these rapidly changing areas. For their descendants in [America](#), the limitations of hereditary status were [antithetical](#) to the values of individual freedom, at least freedom for those of European [descent](#).

Reflecting and promoting these values were the works of some of the Enlightenment writers and philosophers, including [Voltaire](#), [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), [John Locke](#), and [Montesquieu](#). Their writings had a greater impact on Americans than on their compatriots. Their [advocacy](#) of human freedom and the minimal intrusion of government was uniquely interpreted by Americans.

European societies had long been structured into class divisions that had a strong hereditary basis, but the gulf between those who benefited from overseas trade and the impoverished masses who competed for low-paying jobs or survived without work in the gutters of towns and cities widened dramatically during the age of empire building. In [France](#) the dissatisfaction of the masses erupted periodically, reaching a peak in the [French Revolution of 1789](#), which overthrew the Bourbon monarch and brought [Napoleon I](#) to power.

As early as the turn of the 18th century, some [intellectuals](#) were concerned with these seething class conflicts that occasionally burst forth into violence in France. [Henri de Boulainvilliers](#), a French count whose works were published in the 1720s and '30s, put forth an argument designed to justify the dominance of the aristocratic classes in France. He maintained that the noble classes were originally [Germanic Franks](#) who conquered the inferior Gauls, Romans, and others and established themselves as the ruling class. The Franks derived their superiority from German forebears, who were a proud, freedom-loving people with democratic institutions, pure laws, and monogamous marriage. They were great warriors, [disciplined](#) and courageous, and they ruled by the right of might. According to Boulainvilliers, they carried and preserved their superiority in their blood. With this argument, hereditarian [ideology](#) intruded into the consciousness of France's elite class and synthesized with a growing belief in "race" as the causal explanation for historical events.