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REVIEW

Race, Racism and (Pedagogical) Rupture

Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Race and Racism: An Introduction*, Lanham: AltaMira/Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

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While race has certainly been an issue in the U.S. for several centuries, most of U.S. history has been filled with a majority of American citizens avoiding this conversation or even living in denial of its importance. On the one hand, persons in the U.S. must confront the oppressive history of explicit racism that has been employed throughout U.S. history. On the other hand, there is a need to understand and grapple with the history of the idea of race and its employment in various disciplines and its systematic role in the structure of society. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobbans's Race and Racism: An Introduction takes to task both of these projects in a succinctly informative way and offers practical responses of challenging both explicit and implicit forms of racism.

The recent election of President Barak Obama in the United States has invigorated a public conversation regarding race. While race has certainly been an issue in the U.S. for several centuries, most of U.S. history has been filled with a majority of American citizens avoiding this conversation or even living in denial of its importance. This trend seems no longer possible for many. It would appear, however, that despite Obama's election, the U.S. is not fully coming to terms with its racist past, nor is it attempting to challenge the societal structures that allow for the continual racial oppression against many of its citizens. As a philosopher, I often incorporate discussions of the historical power-structures of racial oppression into my writing. As an instructor, I have seen race become a crucial theme throughout most of my courses. While reading Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban's *Race and Racism*, I became struck by how it is insightful, and, at the same time, how oversimplistic it is. Nevertheless, for those teaching an introductory course

and wishing to integrate the theme of race or for those who are unfamiliar with Race Theory, I recommend the text as a first stepping-stone.

Fluehr-Lobban, writing as an anthropologist, focuses her first three chapters on the pseudo-science behind race. As she defines racial categories, she wisely distinguishes between race, geography, religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, which are often conflated in public discourse. While each of these aids in the construction of identity, none of them fully accounts for the term race. The author succinctly presents the history of the idea of race, the theories expounded by Linnaeus and Blumenbach, and the construction of racial categories in the U.S. She also, reminiscent of Foucault, writes, 'As an ideology, racism belongs to the realm of cultural construction and power-politics, even as it is rooted in an erroneous biological foundation and a false belief that the determination of behavior can be reduced to physical, genetic attributes of race' (4). While this presentation is much appreciated, it ignores many significant contributors to the idea of race, such as Bernier, Voltaire, Kant, Herder, and Hegel. On the one hand, Fluehr-Lobban accounts for the actual sources of racial ideology. On the other, she neglects the complexity of how the idea of race developed. Ideas are rarely cut-and-dried and may need further nuance in order to accurately explicate their implications and horizons. We must be clear on how identity has been historically and socially constructed in order to come to grips with the ever-nagging quandary of race.

When a group of persons are asked about the origins of racial divergence, a vague plethora of inadequate responses arise. Fluehr-Lobban has discerned this inadequacy well and has provided an account of how human evolution, natural selection, and race are interrelated. While her descriptions of polygenesis, monogenesis, and polycentrism are well-described, her account of human evolution smacks of early twentieth-century evolutionary theory rather than contemporary theory. One need only look to Merleau-Ponty's lectures on nature to see how complicated this can be. What I take from the second chapter to be the most beneficial for me as an instructor is Fluehr-Lobban's mapping of various phenotypes. Since race is most identified according to phenotypic characteristics, her descriptions are informative, albeit lacking in any involved connection with societal values associated with racial categories.

Fluehr-Lobban briefly accounts for the rhetorical descriptions of savages, barbarians, and the civilized. Each one of these, according to the author, has been historically attached to a particular group or groups of persons. This attachment and consequent inequality happens to fall along racial lines in order to intimately associate the progression of civilization with European superiority. Tracing the influence of Gobineau, Fluehr-Lobban describes the manner in which "the three great races" became classified according to science. No longer did human difference remain in the realm of rhetoric; it now had

scientific backing. 150 years after Gobineau wrote his *Essay on the Inequality of Races*, many persons still adhere to his three-way division of human difference; e.g., Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* divides human difference along these three lines. Concluding with remarks on race classification in the U.S., the author claims that many 'may believe that America has always employed a system of racial classification' and that 'it has, since Negroes and Indians were differentiated and segregated from whites starting in colonial times' (96). At the same time, what is remarkable is the amount of inconsistency in racial classification. This inconsistency, no doubt, is a productive force for the continuation of the misunderstanding of race and racial oppression.

In her fourth chapter on racism/antiracism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fluehr-Lobban compares two important influences on Race Theory: Gobineau and Firmin. 'The works of Gobineau and Firmin,' according to the author, 'are divergent on every point regarding the unity of equality of all members of the human species ... The radical differences between the two might suggest that they belonged to different eras, but the truth is that in every era racist and liberal or antiracist writers have existed side by side' (116). For Gobineau, the Aryan race is the superior one from which all civilizations are established. Being derived from Aryan people groups, Gobineau's ten civilizations exclude any positive influence made by Negroes, who, in Gobineau's opinion, are lacking any cultural, ethical, or political consciousness. While Gobineau may be the 'father of racism,' Firmin argues for a racial classification rooted in equality. He strongly challenges both Gobineau and Broca, whose racist physical anthropology was grounded in phrenology. Furthermore, Firmin emphasizes the environmental influences on human biology and may, in fact, be the first one to reduce skin color to melanin, which is today taken as biological fact. He also stresses the effects of global interbreeding of human persons, from which no such category of 'the racially pure' can be deduced. With the rise of eugenics, the twentieth century witnessed an assortment of (failed) attempts to establish a dominant racial group and/or to limit the promulgation of particular 'inferior' groups.

While describing the development of social Darwinism and the eugenics movement *a la* Galton, Fluehr-Lobban sheds light on the American eugenics movement. She claims that this movement had two goals: 'to restrict the immigration of non-Nordics and to have every state enact laws for the compulsory sterilization of people of "bad heredity"' (119.) It may strike some, particularly my students, as shocking to read about the extent of this movement in the U.S., whereby the majority of states adopted such programs. The author also, as a contrast, describes the antiracist anthropology of Boas, who heavily criticized eugenics. 'The father of American anthropology' emphasized the influence of heredity and the environment on racial, phenotypic characteristics. Perhaps Boas is the first one to give a rigorous, post-Mendelian, scientific account for the role of inheritance. While he stood in contrast to many of his racist contemporaries, Boas

remained faithful to the biological concept of race and the division of humankind into 'the three great races.' Fluehr-Lobban finishes the chapter by concisely mentioning the influence of antiracist Montagu and racist Coon on mid-twentieth century anthropological accounts of race. She thinks it is quite notable 'how unsuccessful anthropologists and biologists have been in eliminating the race concept, now more than fifty years after Montagu's call and the generally positive response from anthropologists' (133). In fact, the idea of race is still used in accounting for differences in human intelligence, which is the focus of Chapter Five.

The sixth chapter is devoted solely to the discourse on whiteness and white privilege: 'Whiteness in America is normative' (168). While being socially constructed like the other racial categories, whiteness is unique in that it holds a privileged status. Most would agree that whites can live throughout a typical day while easily ignoring their own racial characteristics. However, non-white bodies are continually written upon and marked as deviations from the norm. The second half of the chapter focuses on Fluehr-Lobban's own experiences with her students and their discussions regarding race, particularly discussions involving antiracist methods that whites might employ in order to alleviate racial oppression. As someone who teaches on race, I have found that white privilege has been one of the most difficult topics for the students to accept.

In the last two chapters, Fluehr-Lobban illuminates the wide-ranging perspectives on race relations on an international scale. More specifically, she emphasizes the role that race has played in Haiti, Brazil, the Cape Verde Islands, South Africa, Egypt, and Sudan. She also cites the oft used example of Jewish persons, who may be considered either 'Caucasian' or 'Semitic.' Likewise, the author diagnoses the failure of grouping all Asian peoples under the same race.

The author, by looking at these perspectives, offers solutions for racial reconstruction and transformation. She writes, 'At the dawn of the twenty-first century, America is ripe for racial reconstruction' (247). Perhaps the international community is ripe for this as well. The first step at reconstruction is to acknowledge the history of racial oppression and the current systemic and systematic racism that occurs in societies all around the world. Second, the naïve attempts at color-blindness must be dismantled due to their own blindness of accepting the identities constructed by race. Racial categories have had effects on personal identity. The glossing over of these effects denies the experiential aspects of race and ignores human difference. Third, white privilege must be transformed in order to foster an egalitarian perspective of racial identity and equality. This transformation also includes the deconstruction of certain binaries, such as the black-white binary. Fourth, one must be willing to engage in both dialogue and practices that aid in the affirmative

transformation of explicit and implicit racism into an acceptance of human persons as equals.

Fluehr-Lobban has written a broadly construed introduction to the subject matter that is filled with genealogical accounts of the idea of race, narratives illustrating the embodiment of race, examples of cultural practices that have aid in the development of both racism and antiracism, and positive solutions for moving forward in the twenty-first century. While I personally found nothing new or groundbreaking in this text, I will seriously consider incorporating all or parts of *Race and Racism* into the classroom.

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