

Go Deeper: Race Timeline

EXPLORE RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIAL POLICY

Throughout history, social ideas have influenced research and discoveries related to race. Science emerged in the late 18th century and helped rationalize social inequalities and justify discriminatory policies and laws.

1776	Birth of "Caucasian"	Johann Blumenbach, one of many classifiers in the 18th century, lays out the scientific template for contemporary race categories in <i>On the Natural Varieties of Mankind</i> . Blumenbach strongly opposes slavery and believes in the potential equality of all people. Nevertheless, he maps a hierarchical pyramid of five human types, placing "Caucasians" at the top because he believes a skull found in the Caucasus Mountains is the "most beautiful form of the skull, from which...the others diverge." This model is widely embraced, and Blumenbach inadvertently paves the way for scientific claims about white superiority.
1781	Jefferson suggests innate Black inferiority	With <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> , Jefferson becomes the first prominent American to suggest innate Black inferiority: "I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that blacks ...are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind." Published in the U.S. after the American Revolution, his writings help rationalize slavery in a nation otherwise dedicated to liberty and equality, calling on emerging science to provide proof. As historian Barbara Fields and others note, the idea of Black inferiority makes it possible to deny Africans the equal rights that others take for granted.
1839	skulls measured to "prove" racial hierarchy	Samuel Morton, the first famous American scientist, possesses the largest skull collection in the world. He claims to measure brain capacity through skull size, but makes systematic errors in favor of his assumptions, concluding: "[Their larger skulls gives Caucasians] decided and unquestioned superiority over all the nations of the earth." Morton's findings are later seized upon and popularized by pro-slavery scientists like Josiah Nott and Louis Agassiz. In just 60-70 years, Jefferson's tentative suggestion of racial difference becomes scientific "fact": "Nations and races, like individuals, have each an especial destiny: some are born to rule, and others to be ruled....No two distinctly-marked races can dwell together on equal terms." -Josiah Nott (1854)
1859	Evolution shapes debate	When Darwin uncovers the mechanism for evolution, it dramatically alters public debate. "Racial" differences, previously explained by some as the result of separate, divine origins, are now seen as the result of historical change and divergence over time. Evolution provides a new paradigm for comparing group "progress" but it also introduces the image of competition and possible extinction. Herbert Spencer captures the public's excitement and anxiety when he coins the phrase "survival of the fittest" in applying Darwin's ideas to the social realm. Advocates of Spencer's "social darwinism" view the hierarchy of races as the product of "nature," not specific institutions and policies. Consequently, social reform or improvement is pointless.
1883	Birth of eugenics	Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, coins the term eugenics, meaning "good genes," to emphasize heredity as the cause of all human behavioral and cultural differences. Eugenicians advocate selective breeding to engineer the "ideal" society. Their writings find a receptive audience among white intellectuals in the early 20th century and profoundly influence many aspects of American life, including immigration policy, anti-miscegenation laws, involuntary sterilization, and schooling. Although the American eugenics movement collapses by World War II, its effect on institutions and social policy is longlasting, finding its fruition in Nazi Germany.

1904	Race on parade at world's fair	St. Louis, MO stages a World's Fair to showcase American achievements and celebrate the 100th anniversary of Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase. Nearly 20 million visitors attend. The fair reflects the culmination of 19th-century racial ideas in science, politics, and culture. Across from the technology exhibits are groups of indigenous peoples from around the world displayed in their "natural" habitats - a "living illustration" of man's hierarchical development on the earth. By the mid-19th century, race is invoked to explain everything: individual character, the cause of criminality, and the natural superiority of "higher" races.
1911	Universal Races Congress held	A thousand people from 50 nations convene at the University of London to counter the work of the budding eugenics movement. Among the prominent scientists and scholars in attendance are Americans W.E.B. DuBois and anthropologist Franz Boas. Lead organizer Gustav Spiller sums up the group's findings as follows: "We are then under the necessity of concluding that an impartial investigator would be inclined to look upon the various important peoples of the world as, to all intents and purposes, essentially equal in intellect, enterprise, morality and physique." However, their work falls on deaf ears and has little impact.
1950	UNESCO issues statement on race	Only when claims of inherent racial inferiority are taken to a horrifying extreme by the Nazis is race science finally discredited. After the Holocaust, the United Nations issues an official statement declaring that "race" has no scientific basis and calling for an end to racial thinking in scientific and political thought. The statement's principal author is Ashley Montagu, a student of Franz Boas. Although important, this shift in scientific thinking has little impact on social policy and ingrained public attitudes about race.
1962	Sickle cell proven not "racial"	In the 1960s, several key scientific discoveries pave the way for a new understanding of human variation. Among them is the work of Frank Livingstone and A.C. Allison, who unlock the origins of sickle cell, often considered a "racial" disease afflicting Africans. Their research shows that the sickling gene is linked to protection from malaria, not skin color, and the trait is found in areas where malaria was once common, such as the Mediterranean, Arabia, India, and central and western (but not southern) Africa. Livingstone and many others also show that most traits vary independently from one another and don't come packaged together into what we think of as races.
1972	Human diversity is mapped	In the early 1970s, geneticist Richard Lewontin decides to find out just how much genetic variation falls within, versus between, the groups we call races. He discovers that 85% of all human variation can be found within any local population; about 94% within any continent. This means local groups are much more diverse than they appear, and our species as a whole is much more similar than we appear. Lewontin's work, confirmed over and over again by others, remains an important milestone in our understanding of race and biology today.