

The Race Against Race

By LES LEOPOLD

Many of us hoped this historical Democratic presidential race featuring a black man and a white woman would begin burying the race card in American politics. We were stupid—Bill Clinton's subtle slurs in South Carolina, Geraldine Ferraro's novel twist on affirmative action, and now Rev. Jeremiah Wright's right brain, left brain difference theories ... In America race is never far away.

But what is race?

I was drawn to this question while researching a biography of the late Tony Mazzocchi (1926-2002), a fiery radical labor leader who grew up in Brooklyn during the 1930s. His parents arrived in America at a time when southern Italians, as well as Jews, were considered separate races. In fact both were "scientifically" classified with traits lowlier than those of the "Negro race." But within a few decades Italians and Jews became white, while blacks retained their racial status. Why?

It's hard to get a grip on what we mean by race because the word conjures up a cacophony of images and emotions. For some it describes a distinct and separate culture. But for far too many, including Rev. Wright, it also signifies biology—the notion that by birth, there is something fundamentally different that distinguishes African-Americans from "white" people—something basic and discernable grounded in nature, more primal than culture or ethnicity.

This thread of biology also runs through Webster's definitions of race-words like "breeding", "stock", "species", and "physical traits"—all suggesting a separate category of humans. More than a few Americans still believe that because of biology we are not meant to mix and mate.

Yet, every "scientific" effort to define African-American/Black/Negro, (or Asian or Hispanic or Native American), as distinct biological entities has failed miserably. And there have been many, many efforts to measure and classify and investigate all the nooks and crannies of our physiology and psychology. For decades, the dominant Anglo culture wanted to prove that those with darker pigmentation or Asiatic features were inferior and therefore should be ruled and subjugated by Western Europeans. The eugenics movement in the early 20th century centered in the United States constructed an elaborate hierarchy that not only classified African-Americans as a distinct race, but also "proved" that Native Americans, Jews, southern Italians, Poles, Asians, and other poorer immigrant groups comprised inferior "races." Elaborate ladders were created that lined up these races, one rung upon the other, leading right up to their "natural" rulers—Anglo-

Saxons.

The Nazis borrowed this "science" to put one more rung at the very top of the racial ladder for their "Aryan" race—another concoction. This was supposed to be the ultimate master race, with the right to rule, and even eliminate inferior races, especially the Jewish "race". Notwithstanding their vicious propaganda depicting hooked-nosed Jews and the like, even the Nazis failed clearly to define Jewish people as a separate biological species. In their infamous 1935 Nuremberg decrees which erased all civil rights for Jews, the Nazis created enormous confusion within their own ranks as they wrestled with who was a full Jew. In the end they were forced to conflate biology (whether your parents or grandparents were Jews) with voluntary actions (whether you joined a Jewish community or married a Jew).

After the Holocaust thoroughly discredited eugenics, the notion that Jews were a distinct race passed from mainstream culture. Today, no serious journalist or politician would dare refer to the "Jewish race."

Yet still we freely and respectably apply race to African-Americans. Our Jim Crow legal legacy with its obsession with blood is largely to blame. The "one drop rule" often was used to define who was black. Our courts also referred to the "traceable amount rule"—one proven African American ancestor would do the trick. Today this indeed is a trick since the modern scientific consensus based on DNA evidence demonstrates that "all modern humans stem from a single group of Homo sapiens who emigrated from Africa 2,000 generations ago..." (*Science Daily*, May 5, 2007.) By Jim Crow's "one drop/traceable amount" rule, we're all black.

Progressives also have absorbed some of this culture. When we say, (and no doubt sincerely believe), that "all races are equal" we reinforce the idea of *biological* difference—that in nature there really are different races that need to be viewed as equal. But by holding to the biological metaphor, we make possible the notion that maybe the races are not really equal in *all* respects—and that gets us *The Bell Curve*, faster runners, natural rhythm, and right/left brains.

But, race is and always will be a social construction built upon convenient superficial physical characteristics to discriminate against a group that the dominant society has defined as "other."

Nature doesn't create races, we do.

Ending the haphazard use of the word "race" is no panacea. It will not end racism or shield Sen. Obama from bigotry that still clings to our culture. Nor do we need word policemen to tell us how to write and talk. But, it wouldn't hurt for all of us to examine more carefully what we mean by race before we fling it around so cavalierly. Perhaps by doing so, we can contribute to this presidential race by reinforcing the obvious: there is only one race—our fractious and deeply flawed human race.

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