

Why are 'they' not like 'us'?

Stephen Jay Gould

Racial Theories. By Michael Banton. Cambridge University Press:1987. Pp.181. Hbk £22.50, \$44.50; pbk £6.95, \$12.95.

DEATH and taxes, the old quip proclaims, are life's only inevitabilities. W.H. Auden retained death, dropped taxes and added love in listing his pair of the only subjects worth a writer's attention. To this select list of human ineluctables, I propose that we add race. We are unavoidably fascinated by variation, and cannot help wondering how or whether our behaviours and abilities relate to physical differences among us.

This fascination with differences has persisted through all the vicissitudes and revolutions of Western culture. Othello and Jesse Jackson both face the same problem of acceptability, though all terms and interpretations have altered during the centuries separating the Doge's Venice and Reagan's America. Banton's book treats these changing contexts as a taxonomy of theories about race from the scientific revolution of Newton's age to our own.

Racial Theories contains five chapters, one for each category of Banton's taxonomy: race as lineage, type, subspecies, status and class. All theories attempt to answer the same question: why are 'they' not like 'us', but the terms of resolution could not be more different, or more deeply embedded in changing social contexts and changing scientific knowledge. The lineage theory argued: "because they belong to a different genealogical group that acquired disparate characters". The type theory retorted: "because they were made differently *ab initio*". The subspecies theory proclaimed: "because they have differentiated by evolution from a common point of origin". Status and class are more modern entries from the social sciences into a domain that had been debated largely in biological terms.

The fascination of this book and subject lies in the complexities and studied ambiguities of Banton's taxonomy. How do these five theories relate; how can they be usefully subdivided and contrasted? Taxonomies are mirrors of thought, theories about the organization of knowledge. They are not just pigeon holes or book-keepers' devices for ordering the objective facts of nature. If we can develop a coherent taxonomy of attitudes towards race, we will take the most important of all steps towards understanding.

Banton's taxonomy has no single and obvious structure. It may be viewed and organized in many ways — as intended, I think, by Banton who wants to show us that taxonomies are human constructions,

not inevitable logics, or facts of nature. We might view the sequence of five as a simple series of steps in growth of sophistication of knowledge — from pre-evolutionary views of biology (lineage and type) to Darwin's biological world (subspecies) to a modern recognition that social forces must be given their due, if not their dominance (status and class).

But this cannot be entirely right because Banton's sequence of five is not sequential in time. His five theories include two synchronic pairs — contrasting views that

suggests, for example, that status vs class embodies a large set of disparate divisions in disciplinary style (micro vs macro), philosophical predisposition (Kant vs Hegel) and personal politics (liberalism of the comfortable academic variety vs radicalism).

I enjoyed this basic feature of the book's organization. It taught me something about the uses of taxonomic ordering. It made me think about the subtle interactions of our ordering minds and nature's patterns. It provided an active metacommentary upon an important aspect of scientific history.

But *Racial Theories* also contains a debilitating flaw. It is so full of errors (in the biological sections, where I claim competence to judge) that one simply loses confidence. Too many great ideas pass by too quickly, often in single paragraphs based entirely on secondary

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Racial collage — "If we can develop a coherent taxonomy of attitudes towards race, we will take the most important of all steps towards understanding".

actively (and contentiously) competed. Lineage and type do not replace each other. They are Banton's terms for the classical debate between monogeny (descent of all races from a single Adam and Eve, with differentiation according to lineage), and polygeny (creation of races as separate species, or types) — the greatest argument of pre-Darwinian anthropology. Similarly, status and class represent a division now actively debated in the social sciences.

Perhaps, then, we should view the five theories as synchronic, with a primary division between three biological and two social views. But this won't work either, for some sense of progress surely lies embedded in Banton's sequence. The creationist concept of type is truly superseded by the evolutionary view of subspecies, while status and class dilute the crude biological determinism of nineteenth-century racism. Moreover, when synchronism does prevail, the basis for distinction is multifaceted. Banton

sources, themselves constructed from cardboard accounts in the heroic mode of steady progress in objective knowledge. I do realize that most of these errors, in themselves, are trivial, but you must excuse the parochiality of an American who blanches upon being told that Thomas Jefferson was his country's second president (he was third) — just as Englishmen would rightly laugh with derision if I wrote that Henry VI had eight wives, or that Edward VIII was Victoria's rotund son.

Other errors are central and more serious, showing that Banton does not grasp many of the biological concepts he discusses. He writes, for example (p. 83), that sexual behaviour in the Malagasy mouse lemur shows "that at the very root of primate evolution there was an extremely loose kind of relationship between the sexes". But a modern species at the 'bottom' of a conventional primate list is not an ancestor — and the lemurs, as a large group of varied species, display

an enormous range of sexual behaviour, with no single version ranking as indubitably ancestral for all primates. Moreover, for a man so interested in taxonomy, Banton might learn the basic Linnaean rules. He writes, for example, that calling the herring gull by a trinomial, *Larus argentatus argentatus*, denotes a decision not to designate subspecies. "The species name is repeated to show that it is not divided at the subspecific level" (p. 4). Exactly the opposite is true. Repetition of the trivial name expresses a decision to divide the species into subspecies: the repeated trivial name only indicates that this particular subspecies has been designated as the 'type' or namebearer for the species.

Social context and advancing knowledge have fuelled all the transitions and backings and forthings among Banton's theories. What will happen in the future as genetic evidence indicates an astonishing similarity among 'races' (a product of the probable origin of *Homo sapiens* as a branching event in Africa less than 250,000 years ago, a geological yesterday) — while social divisions of first and third world continue to deepen, thus weakening the very bonds that biological knowledge is now illuminating. □

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THE MANAGEMENT OF AIDS PATIENTS

Edited by DAVID MILLER,
JONATHAN WEBER and JOHN GREEN

The Management of AIDS Patients is the first comprehensive guide to the practical clinical management of patients with AIDS or HTLV III infections. The book avoids the sensational aspects of the disease, offering solid advice and information for all people involved in patient care.

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T.C. Whitmore

The Tropical Rain Forest: A First Encounter. By Marius Jacobs. Translated and edited by Remke Kruk *et al.* Springer-Verlag: 1988. Pp. 295. Pbk DM64, \$39.95, £24.

Complete fugues could be composed from the leaves of *Shorea*, varying in size, thickness, venation and hairs; with countermelodies of fruits and stipules; a single fermenta for a particularly large flower; and a tremolo for an aberrant calyx. And from time to time the recurrent melody of the flowers' exquisite scent.

Shorea is a big genus of giant rain-forest timber trees. As a series of word-pictures which conjure up the majesty of tropical rain forests and the awe they inspire, Jacobs's book, from which the above quotation is taken, has few modern equals. It is written in the great tradition of nineteenth-century accounts of exploration and tropical natural history, quoting some of their more purple passages and adding some memorable new ones. It is further enhanced by the numerous magnificent illustrations, some original, many borrowed. The book was first published in 1981, in Dutch. The author died in 1983 while still translating and enlarging it. Colleagues have completed the task and added some new material.

Tropical rain forests, as everyone now knows, have been and are being hit hard. Modern machinery, rising populations, insatiable overseas markets for cheap (because undervalued) timber, the chance for politicians and businesses to become rich, all contribute. Jacobs was appalled by what he saw happening, and his book is a sustained, finely written polemic against destruction for short-term gain in the name of development. It contains some well-aimed barbs against the lack of vision of all who condone or engage in such 'development', and is by far the most eloquent and fully argued such book. The chapters on how biological knowledge has developed and is built up, and on the information we have on the New World rain forests, make excellent introductions to their subjects. That on Africa is less adequate (for example White's vegetation map and commentary are scarcely mentioned). The emphasis throughout is on the Eastern tropics with which Jacobs was best acquainted.

As its subtitle tells, the book is a 'first encounter', and as such truly conveys the flavour of the forests. But it is not successful as an ecological text. Part of the problem is that only 20 of the 400 references cited are more recent than 1981, so several newer developments are left out. Our understanding of forest mineral nutrition



From *The Tropical Rain Forest*

Ghost forest — where roads are constructed with inadequate drainage, local flooding kills trees (Manaus, Brazil).

is now totally different from the old-fashioned classic view expressed by Jacobs and his translators. For example, the soil below those virgin white-sand (kerangas) forests so far studied is not nutrient poor. The treatment of both macro- and micro-evolution and of pollination biology is heavily biased to the views of a few authors, and does not fairly reflect modern thinking on these important motors of species richness.

The other difficulty, I think, is that the painstaking, reductionist, nuts-and-bolts approach to rain-forest science which has taken us so far in recent years is not compatible with the lyrical style favoured by Jacobs. It should be possible to convey the excitement of science at the same time as conveying its details, but the book which does that for all the world's rain forests has not yet been written.

I foresee endless problems for students who read within this book simplistic glosses on biological complexity, or do not notice the many errors; for example, Kramer's gaps were $1-3 \times 10^3 \text{ m}^2$ not 10^2 in^2 (p.91) or $1-3 \times 10^2 \text{ m}^2$ (p.215). Despite these blemishes this is an outstanding 'first encounter' with tropical rain forests, and a compelling plea — a *cri de coeur* — for the conservation of large tracts of them. □

T.C. Whitmore is at the Oxford Forestry Institute, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3RB, UK. His own book, *Tropical Rain Forests of the Far East*, 2nd edn, has just been published in paperback by Oxford University Press.