

**RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION** **SCIENCE AND HEALTH** **IMMIGRATION**

# Scientific Racism Isn't 'Back'—It Never Went Away

*In the age of Trump, believers of the once-popular tenets of scientific racism are feeling emboldened.*

By Edward Burmila

APRIL 6, 2018



Students protest a speech by author Charles Murray, who co-wrote a book discussing racial differences in intelligence, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on October 11, 2017. (AP Photo / Hunter Dyke)

Judging by the headlines, pseudo-scientific racism is making a comeback. Nineties-relic Charles Murray (*The Bell Curve*) is popping up on campuses and in conservative media outlets, much to the delight of those who think his

graphs confer legitimacy to their prejudices. Atheist philosopher and podcaster Sam Harris is extolling Murray's highfalutin version of racist graffiti as "forbidden knowledge." *New York Times'* increasingly off-the-rails op-ed page gave genetics professor David Reich the opportunity to write that "it is simply no longer possible to ignore average genetic differences among 'races.'" And Andrew Sullivan, as ever, is fervently repackaging Gilded Age eugenics for a 21st-century audience.

They and the "intellectual" tradition they represent have allies in high places now. When President Donald Trump told members of Congress in February that the country needed fewer immigrants from "shithole" countries and more from countries "like Norway," I did a double-take. Having studied what's now called "the racialist movement" that stretches from Charles Darwin to the outbreak of World War II, Trump's language was nearly identical to the rhetoric of Nordic superiority during that period.

Trump's no reader; he almost certainly didn't pick up those phrases from a historical text. He simply channeled language that never went away. The narrative that Americans repudiated scientific racism after it was tainted by its associations with Nazi Germany is an alluring but unsupportable myth. Trump said out loud what many Americans have quietly believed for decades. Emboldened by the xenophobic, nationalist, and racist discourse that has found increasing mainstream acceptance in the United States and Europe, true believers and opportunistic hucksters are now emerging to cash in with "race and IQ" clickbait and put an imprimatur of truth onto racism.

**N**ames like Alexis Carrel, Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, and Ernst Rüdin mean little today. But a century ago, they were in the top tier of public intellectuals—the Neil deGrasse Tysons and Carl Sagans of their age. They stood at the confluence of three popular trends at the turn of the century. One was scientific racism—the attempt to leverage reason and the scientific method to “prove” the inherent superiority of the white, northern European race (a conclusion that conveniently doubled as the premise). The second was eugenics, which represented the misappropriation of Darwinian evolution to human social outcomes. Third was rising apprehension at the immigration feeding the transition of the United States from an agrarian backwater to an industrial colossus.

Darwin’s theory of evolution was never intended by its author to explain outcomes in complex human societies. Yet it was inevitable as his ideas took the world by storm that they would be misinterpreted, intentionally or otherwise. The subtitle of *On the Origin of Species*—“Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life”—was tantalizing to people who very badly wanted to see “favoured races” in the shifting world order of the era.

It was Darwin’s half-cousin Francis Galton, who coined the term “eugenics,” and his theories of biological determinism that bridged Darwinian natural selection and human beings. Soon Herbert Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” became the zeitgeist of the era, and the logic of Social Darwinism took second place only to capitalism as the American civic religion. The moral imperative for the weak to perish and the strong to survive was applied to the economy, international relations, politics, social classes, and

the hard sciences. Just as America would rise above and crush the weaker nations of Old Europe, so too would the races settle into a natural order in which the dominant ethnicity of the elite class (Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and northern European) would prove with finality its superiority over the lesser peoples (everyone else).

For self-styled scientists, reactionary writers, and various con men who could recognize the moment, a synthesized narrative that could appeal to both high- and lowbrow audiences was available: Foreign hordes were overwhelming America; science proved certain races are superior; and the immigrants were mostly inferiors who would “weaken the stock” of the American race.

The racist and anti-immigration movements achieved their great victory with the passage of the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively ended the era of mass European immigration. But the eugenics movement was just getting started. It surged in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s—Adam Cohen details its suffusion into American law in his 2016 book *Imbeciles*—and attracted weighty supporters like Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, John Maynard Keynes, Helen Keller, Margaret Sanger, Woodrow Wilson, and others.

The American eugenics movement was a major influence on Nazi Germany’s eugenic and racial ideology. Hitler and his regime were willing to turn its most extreme tenets into state policy, which delighted scientific racists who wondered why the United States was not more aggressive. In 1934, Joseph DeJarnette, the superintendent of Virginia’s

Western State Hospital, told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, with a mixture of envy and admiration, “The Germans are beating us at our own game.”

Ultimately, the association with Nazism is often said to have led to the repudiation of eugenics and theories of racial superiority at the conclusion of World War II. If true at all, this assertion applied only to scientific and cultural elites.

With time and changing mores, many Americans learned that some ideas about race could no longer be aired in polite company. Recent events, however, call into doubt any assertion that racial pseudoscience ever really went away. Official repudiation is one thing; dissemination throughout a society with major, obvious, and persistent problems with racial inequality is another. We see how readily Americans reject the scientific evidence of things like climate change or vaccination, and it is easy to imagine selective acceptance of scientific research on race being at least as popular, if more private.

As nationalism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, and free-market Social Darwinism are not only normalized but actively cheered in public, people who harbored the once-popular tenets of scientific racism feel emboldened to speak up. Trump, his Republican abettors, the European far right, and race-science peddlers are taking gleeful advantage of shell-shocked media desperately trying to reconcile their fetish for “ideological diversity” with increasingly virulent rhetoric from the right.

It is tempting to frame the current prevalence of racialism—immigration restriction, scientific racism, and eugenics—as a revival. In truth, it never went away. It was in

hibernation as intellectuals, scientists, and political elites rejected the ideas after World War II. Adherents were simply waiting for the right time, the right social and political climate, to emerge from with their long-discredited and bigoted pseudoscience. It is not hard to see why they believe the right time is now.

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# **‘White Voice,’ Blackface, and the Ethics of Representation**

*When is it fair to speak with someone else's voice?*

By Patricia J. Williams

**AUGUST 17, 2018**



Hari Kondabolu and Whoopi Goldberg in *The Problem With Apu*. (TruTV/  
David Scott Holloway via IMDB)

In Boots Riley's new film *Sorry to Bother You*, Cassius, the movie's black protagonist, struggles to make a living as a call-center salesman. An older, more experienced black colleague named Langston comes to his rescue: "Use your white voice," he advises. As K. Austin Collins noted recently in *Vanity Fair*, "The white voice is a fantasy of whiteness, as Langston explains it; even white people don't really live up to it.... It's what success sounds like—with the added implication that when it comes to race, success is not meted out equally."

Indeed: Some years ago, I lost the audition to record the Audible.com version of one of my own books. A talented professional actress won the role of speaking me. She did a fine job, and her delivery was probably much better than mine—although I had to learn to hear myself in her, and to own this rendering of my words. Later, I was told that the reason I failed the audition was that my voice "did not sound black enough."

The rub, in both scenarios, is between the "sound of success" and stereotyped accents of woe; between the plain meaning of a message and the social context that renders its messenger credible, or incredible. Who is empowered to say what about whom? That question is at the heart of many recent debates about the uses of "white voice," "brown voice," "blackface," transgender casting, minstrelsy, mockery, and the complexities of appropriation. The politics of representation are never easy. "Pussy" can be a cat in Britain, a hat in New York, a satirical Riot in Russia, and a vagina in the mind of Donald Trump. It all depends on context, intent, history, time, place, and diction.

Trump impersonated a call-center worker during a 2016 campaign rally. Transliteration is dangerous, but it sounded something like “we yahr frum Indy-yah.” The “joke” was prelude to his expressing disgust at the worker’s not being American by abruptly hanging up the phone. Trump was speaking in a voice he disowned in order to mark racial and ethnic difference as contemptible; that’s why it was hurtful.

By contrast, in *Sorry to Bother You*, identical ideas are heard as not-identical when spoken in a white rather than a black accent. Cassius used a voice that was not “his own” to mock illogical assumptions of racial difference. That made it fair game.

At another rally, Trump delivered a ham-fisted “Asian” accent to ventriloquize Chinese and Japanese businessmen (“We want deal!”). A self-described “Asian guy” then wrote on Twitter that he wasn’t offended because “I mimic southern hicks [in the US] all the tiimmmeeeee.” The self-serving disingenuousness of such a tit-for-tat misses the point: It’s not about political correctness, or freedom of speech, but that “the voice” is a crude reduction designed to diminish anything substantive said by “hicks” and greedy Asian businessmen alike. The implication of this type of speech is that we don’t have to listen to someone who is nothing more than a funny accent.

The deeper ethical dimension of this argument centers on the use of metaphor. Metaphors allow us to give form to a phenomenon by invoking a likeness as it appears to us. They inevitably reveal our inner sorting mechanisms: Recently, I heard a man call to his small dog, “Come here, Mommy!”

What attributes does he assign to dogs and/or mothers in joining them taxonomically? How does such joinder affect his behavior toward either?

Metaphor, catachresis, anthropomorphosis, code-switching, “passing,” inflection, speaking in a different voice, satire—these all reflect versions of what we receive as truth. It follows that the relentless typecasting of underrepresented religions, cultures, or ethnicities—i.e., populations generally unable to present themselves in mass media—keeps us stupidly naive. Hari Kondabolu’s documentary *The Problem With Apu* makes this point brilliantly by examining the intent, connotation, and effect of Hank Azaria’s “brown voicing” of Apu, *The Simpsons*’ most prominent South Asian character.

Everyone on *The Simpsons* is a caricature: bratty kids, deadbeat dads, mad scientists, stupid teachers, and so on. But the problem with Apu is that he’s a meta-caricature: an animation of white Americans performing what they imagine South Asians to be. Apu is little more than the avatar of a specific team of white television writers and producers carelessly and inaccurately mouthing how they think Indians speak—despite more than two decades of complaints from actual Indian Americans and South Asians who get bullied with Apu-isms every day, and who resent relentless requests to “do the accent.” Kondabolu repeatedly points out the faulty syllogism: In *The Simpsons*, Apu is the singularized cultural representation of his parents—but his complex, plural parents are not Apu.

Kondabolu’s film looks at the wider social injury of various forms of minstrelsy that are too often romanticized as “funny” or “exotic” or “typical” of “them” and “their culture.” On-screen and off, the show’s producers grow anxious when Kondabolu explains the lived consequences of their misrepresenting Indian-American experience with no humanizing countercurrent. Over and over, they question whether criticism of Apu means that they can never use accents or speak for another.

Yet humor without wholesale misrepresentation or diminishment is not impossible. What it does require are thought and research, as well as a disciplined refusal to crudely generalize. If we can’t see that Apu is a projection of white self-regard and not a “real Indian,” then we probably won’t ever grasp the insidious irony of Donald Trump blackfacing and brown-voicing the world beyond our borders, while White House–voicing—and thereby legitimizing—Alex Jones, David Duke, and possibly Vladimir Putin. When comedic reductionism becomes (sur)realpolitik, it is no longer just minstrelsy; it is disenfranchisement. We cakewalk to the polls.

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