

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach

The major significance of the German naturalist-physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840) as a topic of historical study is the fact that he was one of the first anthropologists to investigate humankind as part of natural history. Moreover, Blumenbach was and continues to be a central figure in debates about race and racism.

How exactly did Blumenbach define race and races? What were his scientific criteria? And which cultural values did he bring to bear on his scheme? Little historical work has been done on Blumenbach's fundamental, influential race work. From his own time till today, several different pronouncements have been made by either followers or opponents, some accusing Blumenbach of being the fountainhead of scientific racism. By contrast, across early nineteenth-century Europe, not least in France, Blumenbach was lionized as an anti-racist whose work supported the unity of humankind and the abolition of slavery.

This collection of essays considers how, with Blumenbach and around him, the study of natural history and, by extension, that of science came to dominate the Western discourse of race.

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Race and Natural History, 1750–1850

Edited by Nicolaas Rupke and Gerhard Lauer

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Race and Natural History, 1750–1850

Edited by
Nicolaas Rupke and Gerhard Lauer

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Preface

Speaking to *Newsweek* magazine in January 1988, Stephen Jay Gould commented on the announcement a few months earlier that a group of scientists had found DNA evidence tracing all human beings to a common matrilineal ancestor. Mitochondrial Eve, they christened her, and she roamed the hot savannahs 200,000 years ago. “If it’s correct, and I’d put money on it,” Gould mused,

this idea is tremendously important. It makes us realise that all human beings, despite differences in external appearance, are really members of a single entity that’s had a very recent origin in one place. There is a kind of biological brotherhood that’s much more profound than we ever realized.

The politics of human equality that Gould discerned in the science of mitochondrial DNA and that gave new voice to his own credo that “human equality is a contingent fact of history” were echoed a year or two later when researchers encountered Y-Chromosome Adam – Eve’s male equivalent. Peter Underhill, the geneticist who pioneered the laboratory technique involved, declared, “We are all Africans at the Y chromosome level and we are really all brothers.” In one way or the other, anthropological genetics found itself mobilized in the cultural politics of contemporary race relations.

This is no new development. To the contrary, anthropological science has routinely been freighted with cultural significance. The moral ecology of human rights, the ethics of racial equality, and the grounding of moral values have all surfaced in debates – often between monogenists and polygenists – about human origins and human variation. Coming to terms with the complex history of this turn of events is of crucial importance. And *Johann Friedrich Blumenbach: Race and Natural History, 1750–1850* is an ideal place to begin, for it not only brings to prominence one crucial moment in the birth of what has come to be called ‘scientific racism’ but also illustrates just how contested that narrative has proven to be.

For one reason or another Johann Friedrich Blumenbach has often been implicated in the emergence of scientific racism, even though he explicitly affirmed the common origin and unity of the human species, insisted that all human varieties were equally worthy of respect, championed the spiritual and moral equivalence of all human beings, and sought to preserve non-Europeans from abuse at the

hands of colonizers. At the same time, by placing the Caucasian at the center of a racial cartography that expressed a presumptive anthropological normativism, he resorted to a mode of classification that later served to reinforce a far more tyrannical set of judgments on human alterity.

Reflecting on the thought of Blumenbach two and a half centuries ago, and on his fate in the subsequent annals of cultural history, has salutary lessons for our own day. First, the different stagings of Blumenbach as champion of egalitarianism or unwitting accomplice in the fixing of racial hierarchy serve to highlight the fragility of intellectual legacy. Was he a champion of racial parity or a precursor of Nazi eugenics? In different settings Blumenbach and his work have been judged in markedly different ways, delivering a variegated reputational geography. Blumenbach has meant and has been made to mean different things in different settings. As the essays which follow make clear, later readers have imposed anachronistic meanings on past terminology; they have sought to mobilize or repudiate the intellectual prestige of an eminent figure for their own purposes; they have failed to historicize past judgments by placing them in the cultural context of the times in which they were issued. For these, and no doubt many other reasons, Blumenbach's standing has been shaped and reshaped by the vicissitudes of historical circumstance.

Second, these essays reveal just how contested the origins of racism in general, and scientific racism in particular, really are. In what follows we see different genealogies at work. Is the genesis of racial hierarchy to be located in Enlightenment projects to measure human difference? Or is it rooted in Christian thought and a supersessionist reading of Judaism? Is it a product of secular reason or theological dogma? Is it more profoundly anchored in Darwinian biology and the evolutionary anthropology of Thomas Henry Huxley than in the Enlightenment cultivation of the natural history of 'man'? Was the term 'race' itself stabilized by the accidents of politics, the ruminations of philosophers, or the experiments of naturalists? Even if we cannot definitively adjudicate on these competing narratives – and whether we *should* remains an open question – getting to grips with them ought to widen the scope of our understanding and inform the ongoing task of working for universal human flourishing.

Reexamining Blumenbach and his influence delivers a third salutary lesson: language has the power to spiral well beyond the control of any author and to acquire associations operating to subvert or undermine writers' declared intentions. Blumenbach's use of the very term 'Caucasian' displays something of the hazards involved in the naming of entities. Regardless of his motives, his deployment of the expression meant that later readers, sensitive to the un-innocence of language, fastened on it as disclosing a blameworthy Eurocentrism shaped by a pernicious geographical imaginary. In a comparable vein, his efforts to bring the human species within the sphere of objective inquiry by mathematizing the study of the human form could not prevent successors from harnessing his findings for purposes alien to his own aspirations.

Finally, these revisionist essays reveal just how critical aesthetic judgment was to Blumenbach's cultivation of a science of the human subject (as indeed it was

to other contemporaries), and bear witness to the power of material objects and artistic illustrations as rhetorical devices of persuasion. In the end, it was Blumenbach's sense of beauty that led him to place the skull of a Georgian girl, perhaps reflecting ancient ideals of female beauty, at the apex of human excellence. The painstaking geometrical scrutiny of cranial shape, proportions, morphology, and the like was used to aestheticize, as much as to scientize, the anthropological analysis of the human physical form. Subjective judgment and aesthetic appeal, pleasure and taste, it seems, all had a crucial role to play in the cultivation of the science of anthropology and the measurement of the body of humanity.

One contributor to the essays ahead observes, "To a large extent Blumenbach's impact was a consequence of the fact that he took up a political debate that was passionately discussed in the eighteenth century, and presented a scientific solution." In our own day, governments, funding agencies, and the like press upon scholars and scientists the need to demonstrate the impact of research outside academia. The concern is to foster research that has an effect on, and brings benefit to, the economy, society, culture, public policy, health, environment, and quality of life. A careful reading of this collection of essays on Blumenbach will reveal something of the complexities and consequences of seeking to fulfill that mandate.

David N. Livingstone
Queen's University Belfast
November 6, 2017

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The Editors

