EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

Kirstin Munro, economist at St. John’s University, pursues the crucial discussion of the nature of household production in capitalist societies, rekindled most recently in our pages by Paddy Quick (S&S, July 2018). Munro proposes a three-sector model (households; capitalist firms; the state), invoking a broad conception of social reproduction and contrasting this with the narrow limitation of “reproduction” to reproduction of labor power, as seen in the work of various proponents of the “social reproduction theory” perspective. Her work can be read as a continuation of the Intersectionality Symposium in our

SCIENCE & SOCIETY

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S&S does not adhere to any particular school of contemporary Marxist discussion, and does not attempt to define precise boundaries for Marxism. It does encourage respectful attention to the entire Marxist tradition, as well as to cutting-edge tools and concepts from the present-day social science literatures.

Editorial correspondence: see “Instructions to Contributors,” inside back cover.
April 2018 issue, which reopens the rich literature in the Marxist–feminist tradition that blossomed in the 1970s and beyond.

James Reveley and John Singleton (“Mimesis, Scapegoating and Financial Crises”) draw upon the work of French author René Girard, who studied the social roots and functionalities of scapegoating and whose work is not well known outside of France. In contrast to other recent recuperations of Girard, Reveley and Singleton’s seeks to use the latter’s insights with careful attention to social context: “Girard’s thoughts on scapegoating and the persecutory impulse are, in our view, a live option for ensuring that resistance to financialization remains true to the tenets of Marxist crisis theory by focusing squarely on capitalism as a system of social relations, as opposed to the individuals . . . who are the agents of the system.”

Neoliberal privatization in today’s world has met with resistance of various types. In his paper “Constructing a Substantial Alternative to Privatization,” author Ahmet Zaifer looks at forms of resistance which he calls state ownership, corporatization, and democratic control; these are studied in detail in several historical settings, including Turkey, the UK, and several Latin American countries. Working squarely within the view that the experience of contesting capitalist power within capitalist societies is crucial for building the capacity to transcend capitalism as such, Zaifer calls for a sophisticated, non-binary approach to combining various arenas (inside the state; outside the state) in which democratic content may be built.

Returning to a long-standing topic and classical Marxist literature (especially Marx’s 1857–58 manuscript, Grundrisse), Paul Stasi (“The Grundrisse as Method: Surplus Value, Surplus Labor and Freedom from Work”) detects a distinct transcendence of Hegelian logic in Marx’s insistence that transcendence of alienation and exploitation is impossible without conscious engagement on the part of human subjects: “Transforming the misery of not being exploited into the many-sided individuality Marx imagines, requires action.” This insight is unfolded in relation to the current context of automation and the new technological revolution.

In the wake of recent studies in S&S on the rich content of early-20th-century debates among Marxists, by Lars Lih, Paul Blackledge, Alan Shandro and others, Damian Winczewski (“Did Rosa Luxemburg Accuse Lenin of Blanquism?”) challenges the common view that Luxemburg’s early (1904) polemics were a simple precursor of her later critique of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, from anti-authoritarian positions. Winczewski shows, to the contrary, that the early works were much more tactical in orientation, and that they in fact reflect some authoritarian tendencies in Luxemburg’s own political work.

We conclude our survey of the current issue with Lea Kuhar’s film review — of the much acclaimed 2017 film The Young Karl Marx, by Haitian director Raoul Peck. Apart from a few historical inaccuracies that can be
chalked up to artistic license, Kuhar raises the more substantive question of whether the film tends to a certain teleology: seeing Marx entirely as following a “predetermined theoretical path,” rather than embracing all of the uncertainty and complexity of the real-life Marx. While this is debated, we urge readers who have not seen the film to do so — and expect that in this our reviewer would enthusiastically concur: https://www.amazon.com/Young-Karl-Marx-English-Subtitled/dp/B07B84S6B1

**MARXISM IN OUR TIME**

*Notes from the Editor*

**SCIENTIFIC RACISM, NATURAL SELECTION, AND SYMBOLIC REFERENCE**

James Watson, co-discoverer of the double helix structure of DNA, was the subject of an “American Masters” episode on PBS this past January. As readers may remember, Watson achieved some notoriety later in life by announcing his view that Africans and people of African ancestry had lower intelligence than other “races” (as measured by that bizarre scalar entity, IQ), and that the gap was based in genetics. Watson thus joins the ranks of the “scientific racists,” going back to Robert Boyle, Karl Linnaeus, and (more recently) Arthur Jensen, Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein (incomplete list). His musings in this area would of course have been ignored had he not been a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry. Watson, now in his 90s, has been widely denounced for his utterances on race, repeated in interviews for the “American Masters” documentary, and he was stripped of a number of awards and honors he had received earlier. But “scientific” racism persists, and takes on an ominous role in connection with the incipient fascist trend represented by Donald Trump in the USA, and related movements worldwide. The hold of racism and “white nationalism” over sections of the USA’s working class of European origin is clearly rooted in culture-based hostility and irrationality, and does not depend directly on “scientific” genetic-determinist arguments. Nevertheless, it is important to get to the heart of these arguments, from a standpoint based in Marxist theory.
The common counter-arguments over the years may be represented by this, from a 1950 statement by UNESCO on “The Race Question”:

The biological fact of race and the myth of “race” should be distinguished. For all practical social purposes “race” is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. The myth of “race” has created an enormous amount of human and social damage. In recent years, it has taken a heavy toll in human lives, and caused untold suffering.

Numerous anti-racist commentators, including some of Watson’s colleagues quoted in the “American Masters” episode, elaborate: IQ is a faulty measure, which actually registers differences in education, cultural bias, socio-economic condition, etc.; “intelligence” is not a pure scalar quantity identifiable outside of its many concrete applications and manifestations; the measured differences among human populations are mainly due to cultural factors, which are not controlled for in empirical work on “race”–IQ correlations (including the famous twin studies). In short: environment and culture are more important than genetics. It should be (and has been) noted that Watson never actually linked his opinions on race to any of his earlier scientific research on the structure of DNA.

All of this is fine, and true, but I must express a lingering doubt as to its ultimate adequacy. When we say that “culture, not biology, determines ‘intelligence,’” this appears to be an empirical, and thus falsifiable, proposition. Could the statement be reversed in some alternate universe? Could it be “more” true in some circumstances than in others? Has modern research, especially the mapping of the human genome, been able to identify the actual gene markers responsible for behavioral traits, including those we might identify with “intelligence”? My questions center on whether the problem of genetic determinism has a logical core that is not properly revealed by the usual culture-based critique.

The argument will rest on two foundations: the core mechanism of Darwinian natural selection, and a Marxist understanding of the symbolic foundations of human “species being.” There is this implicit pre-argument, or “lemma”: neither of the two giants of the 19th century, Darwin and Marx, has been transcended or replaced by present-day scientific methods or results.

The genetic profile of a species, or sub-category of a species, according to Darwin, is shaped by the competitive selection of spontaneously appearing

1 We know, of course, that “race” is a cultural and social construct: witness the enormous variation in definitions of “whiteness”/“blackness” in the United States vs. Caribbean and Central American countries; the changing “racial” status of Jews and peoples of Mediterranean descent from the 19th century to the present; and the complete arbitrariness of racist typologies and myths. Scientific racism persists, however, and it must not be underestimated or relegated to the past, as the recent controversy around Watson so clearly reveals.
adaptive traits. In brief: Random mutations appear in the genetic code. Some of these are adverse, having a negative impact on the capacity of the individuals displaying them to survive and reproduce. Most are neutral, with no effect one way or another. A few mutations, however, produce “adaptive” traits: ones that enhance individuals’ reproductive potential. These traits are differentially passed on to offspring, and therefore quickly (in biological time, at least) generalize to the species population. The process thus requires that the spontaneous “survival of the fittest” mechanism is functioning: nothing intervenes between the presence (absence) of an adaptive trait and the reproductive success (failure) of the individuals possessing (lacking) that trait. Present-day electronic mapping of the genome is moving ever closer to unpacking the actual content of genetic transformation and its causes — replacing the rather non-explanatory references to “genetic mutation.” To my knowledge, however, modern DNA research, to which Watson importantly contributed, has never impugned or replaced the core role of natural selection in the explanation of biological evolution.

To my knowledge also, the explanation for the main element in the identification of races among human groups — the degree of presence of melanin determining variation in skin color — likewise stands the test of time. Melanin shields against the harmful effects of direct sunlight, especially the ultraviolet radiation contained in it. It also makes it harder for individuals to absorb vitamin D from sunlight. Darker skin, therefore, is adaptive in tropical regions where sunlight is strong and direct, and is counter-adaptive in the colder climates.2 As modern humans migrated out of Africa and populated the other land masses, beginning about 30–40 thousand years ago, natural selection will have lessened the melanin content of skin and lightened its color, resulting in the variety of skin tones that is the main basis of the cultural perception and identification of “races” in today’s world.3

Now the racist argument — to the extent that it does not rely on brute empirical force, by simply asserting that measured IQ differences, e.g., are evidence of genetic differences between “races” — must add a crucial additional element to the above summary on climate and skin color. It must make this

2 From Smithsonian/National Museum of Natural History: “Melanin, the skin’s brown pigment, is a natural sunscreen that protects tropical peoples from the many harmful effects of ultraviolet (UV) rays. . . . As people moved to areas farther from the equator with lower UV levels, natural selection favored lighter skin which allowed UV rays to penetrate and produce essential vitamin D.” http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/genetics/human-skin-color-variation/modern-human-diversity-skin-color

3 I leave aside the much more complex aspects of “racial” typification, such as shapes of facial features, hair type, height, body mass, and so forth, about which much is still not known. These aspects do not affect the main argument. I should also mention that the link between adaptive properties and the spread of specific physical and/or behavioral characteristics in plants and animals need not imply that every biological trait has a functional explanation; accidental and fortuitous elements may intervene.
further claim: *greater intelligence is also adaptive in colder climates.* This would create what the James Watsons of our time, and earlier, need: a necessary link between skin color and intelligence. The logic (if I may presume to state the argument that its adherents do not seem to wish to present explicitly) would be as follows: colder climates involve more powerful challenges: sources of food are less plentiful (game is more scarce, foraging for vegetation more difficult). This requires more creativity, greater capacity to manipulate the environment, higher efficacy in development and use of tools, cooperation, and so on. There is therefore an adaptive selection for intelligence in the non-tropical zones, a fact that establishes the correlation between skin coloration and intelligence.

Critical dissection of this argument proceeds, as so often, along two branches: empirical, and theoretical. The empirical case against it suggests itself immediately. Tropical climates may indeed mean greater abundance of food sources, but this also suggests greater competition for those sources. Population density is likely to be greater; humans will face the “powerful challenges” posed by the presence of competitors and predators (including both mammalian species for which early humans may be lower down on the food chain, and bearers of disease); fire and floods may pose threats comparable to those stemming from conditions in the cold zones. In short, it is an empirical question whether the adaptive qualities of intelligence are greater in non-tropical environments. There are many reasons to deny the connection claimed by the scientific racists; the burden of proof clearly rests with those who would assert it.

The empirical argument against the racist connection is therefore strong. It is not, however, decisive. To clinch the matter, we must turn to symbolic reference, for which one of the earliest sources is the young Karl Marx.4

Marx’s distinction between the worst of architects and the best of bees (the former raising his structure in imagination before doing so in reality) has been quoted *ad nauseam,* precisely because it is so pithy. That, in fact, is the distinctive species being, or defining characteristic, of the human. Unlike other species — leaving aside the uniqueness issue for the moment — humans erect a symbolic realm between the external world and individual subjective perception of that world. This “superorganic” realm of language (the main terrain of symbolic reference) must be present in all consciousness.

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4 The main text, of course, is the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.* More recently, I have drawn upon work by George H. Mead, Charles H. Cooley, Leslie A. White, Ernest Becker, Marvin Harris, and the Soviet psychological school of Pavlov, Vygotsky and Leontiev. The term “symbolic reference” comes from Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species.* What follows is of necessity a highly telegraphic summary; fuller statements will be found in my *Deep History* (1974, ch. 1), and *Passion and Patience* (2015, ch. III). Long-time *S&S* readers who value the shelf life of this journal may turn to “Editorial Perspectives” pieces from Winter 1997–98, Summer 2002, and April 2013.
and action; it cannot be turned off. Just as language is the main (not the only) locus of the symbolic faculty, so labor is its main (not the only) site of application. For present purposes, symbolic reference endows us with the capacity to alter the environment, to our advantage, not by waiting for random genetic changes to occur, but precisely by short-circuiting that process. The importance of this insight simply cannot be overstated.

Leslie White, in *The Science of Culture* (1969), noted that the biological or genetic basis for symbolic reference ("reactivity," in his usage) is not known. Nothing in subsequent scientific work of which I am aware suggests that any progress in this direction has occurred in the years since. What we do know is that the early migrating humans, facing colder temperatures and dying off from the effects of this, at some point stopped "waiting" (please ignore the possible teleological interpretations of this metaphor) for genetic mutations to grow fur coats onto their bodies; they invented warm clothing, thereby insuring not only their survival but also the failure of the gene pool to clarify itself in a direction adapted for survival in cold climates. Instead of growing claws, they invented weapons for hunting. Instead of evolving for greater speed and agility in the hunt for game, they developed cooperation and learned to hunt using teamwork and language. Today, people with dark skins who have migrated to northern regions take vitamin D supplements; so their skin (really, of course, the skin of their descendants) will never lighten. People with light skins who migrate to the tropics use sunscreen with a high SPF; so their skin will never darken. "Genetic mutations" (this is essentially spurious explanation for things we don’t yet know, like the 19th-century diagnosis of death “due to consumption”) presumably still occur (although on a much longer time frame than we are accustomed to envisioning). However — and this is the crucial point — we do not allow individuals lacking adaptive traits to fail to reproduce, and so the evolutionary clarification of the gene pool is blocked. The conclusion seems inescapable: To the extent that symbolic reference controls human behavior, the biological basis of human existence, and of other species to the extent that we control their environments and reproductive paths, is no longer evolving.

We come back, finally, to the central question of this essay: What does this imply for scientific racism, and the argument concerning intelligence? If "intelligence" means, as it only can mean, some measure of the efficacy with which we transform the environment,\(^5\) that efficacy is simply not located in single individuals, and therefore cannot be found in the genetic code of individuals. To see this, grant, for argument’s sake only, the premise of the case for a correlation between race (meaning, for the moment, skin color)

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\(^5\) We may take it for granted that *short-term* efficacy in transforming the environment may harbor longer-term disastrous ecological consequences.
and intelligence: suppose that migration to colder climates did increase the need for (what we may call) more intelligent behavior. That need, however, was met, and could only have been met, by symbolic behavior changes — e.g., the discovery of long-lasting pine-tar torches, used in hunting wooly mammoths on the Eurasian continent — that can not have had systematic genetic impacts, because they were transmitted from person to person, and group to group, by learning and diffusion, and therefore enabled individuals and groups to survive and reproduce who could not have had positive adaptations in their genetic makeups. It is not simply that the scientists do not find (or have not yet found) the genetic markers for “intelligence”; it is that they can not find these markers, because they can not be present.

If, at some point, the mappers of our genes are able to isolate a gene (or some interacting group of genes) that determines a specific capacity, such as, let’s say, an aptitude for numbers — they have not been able to do this to date — we can be sure that that presumably adaptive property will not spread to the population as a whole, because, outside of some dystopian eugenics nightmare, no one will prevent people who do not have that gene from successfully reproducing. The capacity in question will therefore be distributed randomly, and sparsely, throughout the population. It cannot be correlated with any observable physical characteristics — in particular, those associated with “race.” Symbolic reference undermines genetic evolution in general, and with it the very possibility of genetic determination of differences in mental and behavioral capacities that can be associated with particular populations possessing specific physical traits.

“Scientific” racism, in addition to being odious, is false — not because it goes against certain realities that happen to exist (such as the “facts” of social–environmental impacts on education or lack of association between climate zones and the need for “intelligent,” or efficacious, behavior), but because it contradicts the inherent nature of human sociality and consciousness — our shared symbolic, superorganic and therefore ultimately super-genetic mode of existence.

To conclude: it is not just that a scientific basis for racism does not exist; it is that it can not exist! If Marx was right about human species being, then the search for differences in “intelligence” among identifiable human groups can be discarded once and for all. The actual material roots of modern racism in the capitalist need to reproduce its structures of exploitation and power can be revealed irreversibly, and the foundation secured for sustained and successful opposition both to scientific racism and to the entire range of racist, “white nationalist” and similar ideologies, which stand as key obstacles to both science and human solidarity.

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