How to argue about ‘race’: Charles Murray and Adam Rutherford are not so far apart

Shortly before the killing of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer in May this year, two (now tragically relevant) texts on genes, biology and human differences were published by two prominent commentators on race: geneticist Adam Rutherford’s How to Argue With a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality; and, Human Diversity: The Biology of Gender, Race and Class by political scientist Charles Murray.

While overshadowed by both the protests and social upheaval that followed Floyd’s death (in addition to the concurrent coronavirus crisis), these books claim to bring an impartial scientific lens to bear on that most vexed and contentious modern issue, the question of ‘race’.

Is there a left-right divide on the ‘race concept?

Given that Rutherford and Murray openly inhabit opposing poles of the political spectrum—the former, a popular scientific broadcaster in his native England, at the progressive end, with the latter, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, at the conservative—the books’ authors (or rather, the positions they represent, or are assumed to represent) are almost as significant as the subject matter that they address.

For the last four decades, to use a worn but nevertheless accurate cliché, Murray has been no stranger to controversy — most especially since the 1994 publication of The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life, in which Murray and co-author Richard J. Herrnstein argued that both environment *and* inheritance influenced human intelligence, and that this in turn had implications for social policy. Most controversially, The Bell Curve also touched upon race and intelligence, leading its numerous critics to treat it as an endorsement of racial prejudice and hatred. To his detractors, Charles Murray epitomises the egregious current of thought that sustains today’s deeply unjust and divided society.

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Charles Murray

Adam Rutherford, on the other hand, is an outspoken critic of both systemic racial inequality and of the sort of intellectual racism that The Bell Curve is seen to represent. As his strong social justice beliefs are clearly evident in his personal social media accounts, he is also often simplistically linked to the post-modernist concept of ‘race’ as largely a social construct. Yet while he readily acknowledges that he has himself “been accused many times of misrepresenting real science because of political correctness,” he makes clear that “scientific integrity” demands that he and his fellow scientists “should be led by the data, and not by our political prejudices”.

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Adam Rutherford

Challenging left/right orthodoxy

In this period of widening polarisation and increasingly toxic non-debate, it is therefore reassuring to note

that Murray's and Rutherford's books both share much common ground, not merely in subject matter, but also in their arguments and conclusions.

As a quick spoiler, Rutherford's is a far easier and more engaging read, one that clearly and intelligently explains the complexities of human genetics for the popular reader; Murray's is a much drier and more academic tome, replete with extensive appendices and page upon page of references (albeit that Murray's focus is also much wider than simply 'race').

Such differences in style aside, however, both texts are designed primarily as resources upon which political and ethical arguments can be based. Rutherford makes this aim explicit: "This book is a weapon," he explains in his opening paragraph. "It is written to equip you with the scientific tools necessary to tackle questions on race, genes and ancestry." The ideas that it addresses, he subsequently states, "provide a foundation to contest racism that appears to be grounded in science".

Murray also wishes to challenge what he believes to be erroneous beliefs about race, although in this case, the apparent academic "orthodoxy" that race is merely "a social construct" and that "cosmetic [racial] differences in appearance … are not accompanied by inborn differences in personality, abilities, or social behavior". He suggests instead that it is "evolutionarily reasonable to expect that phenotypic differences among races in cognitive repertoires [i.e., personality, abilities, etc.] could be at least partly genetic". And the evidence for such human group differences, he claims, is both widespread and ever-growing: "this is not some new, fringe position, but the result of accumulating knowledge about genes and race that goes back almost 30 years".

Importantly, Rutherford also accepts that many observed differences between 'races' are likely partly genetic: "These differences are rooted in biology, in DNA, and also in our behaviour as social animals," he acknowledges, while also emphasising that "[t]he visible differences that are the roots of racism are encoded in our DNA". And Rutherford too warns against the "glib" (if "well-intentioned") belief that race is *solely* a social construct, a claim that, he believes, "can have the effect of undermining the scientifically more accurate way of expressing the complexities of human variation".

So far, so similar. Both Murray and Rutherford cover much common ground in detailing the historical misunderstandings and misuses of the concept of 'race' and of the recent findings from modern genetic research (including, for instance, ancient DNA evidence of human migration and interbreeding). They largely concur that, as a result of our species' evolutionary history, there appear "many interesting but usually small distinctions" (as Murray puts it) between geographically distinct human populations.

Indeed, in a sentence that could easily have been made by Rutherford, Murray underlines the key point that modern genetic research "does not support the existence of the classically defined races, nor does it deny the many ways in which race is a social construct".

Divergences

Yet if Murray's discussion largely chimes with Rutherford's, where exactly do they diverge? Ironically, one of the biggest differences is in the weight each author places on the concept of *classically defined races*. I

say ‘ironically’ because it is progressive Rutherford who relies, at least implicitly, more on out-dated ideas about race than does conservative Murray.

In fact, for Murray, the traditional conception of ‘race’ is so flawed that he himself advocates discarding the term completely:

> *The word carries with it the legacy of nineteenth-century scientific racism combined with Europe’s colonialism and America’s history of slavery and its aftermath. Scientifically, it is an error to think of races as primordial. … The combination of historical and scientific reasons makes a compelling case that the word race has outlived its usefulness when discussing genetics.*

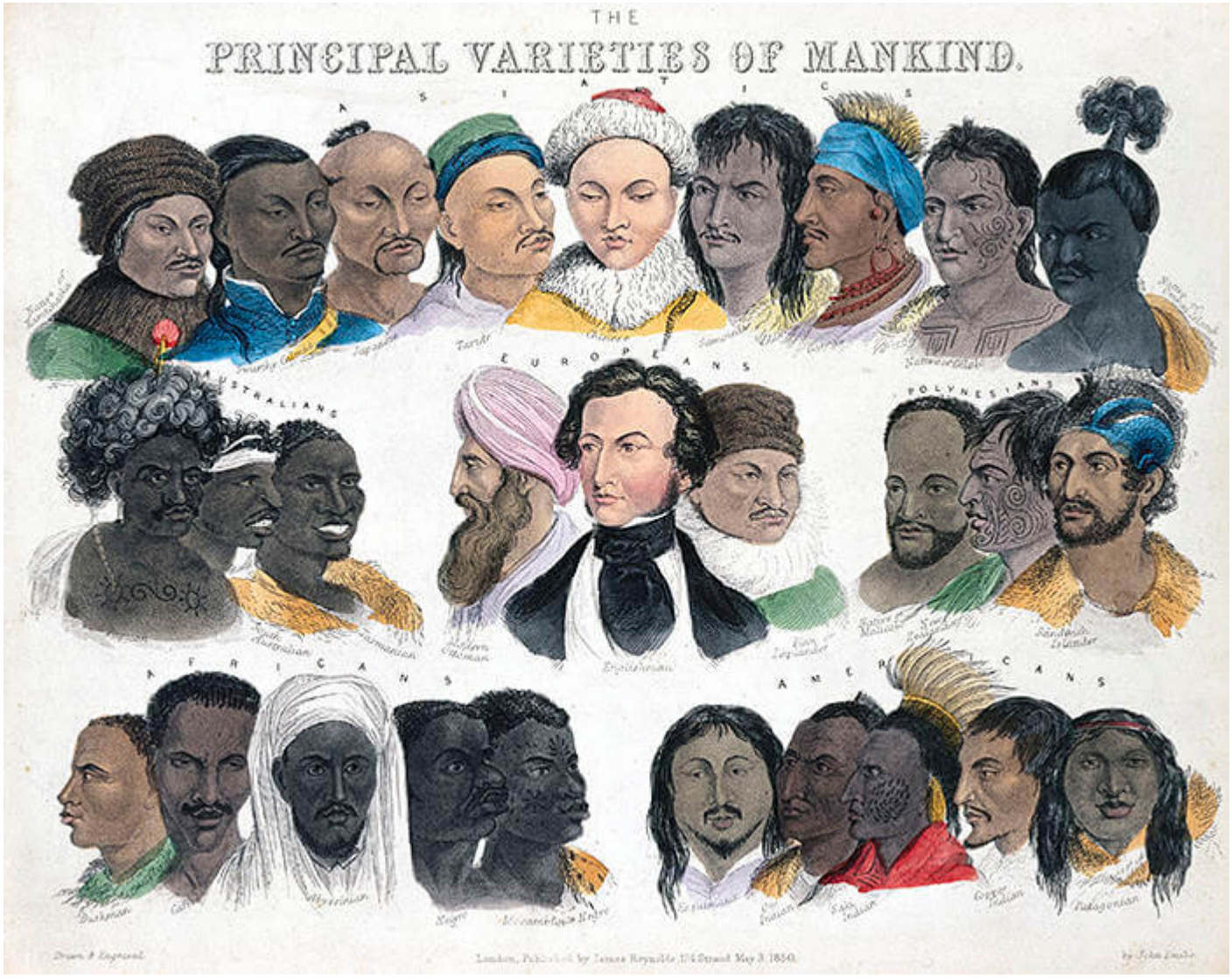
Given this, Murray adopts the “contemporary practice” of using “ancestral population or simply population” as an alternative to the term ‘race’—a position that has little bearing on the force of his subsequent discussion.

Rutherford, however, repeatedly refers to the traditional *essentialist* definition of ‘race’ (i.e., that certain *essential* characteristics, shared exclusively by one group and not another, differentiate distinct human populations). For example, Rutherford asks “Are there *essential* biological (that is, genetic) differences between populations that account for socially important similarities or divisions within or between those populations?” (emphasis added).

And he later repeats the same point: “The questions we have to answer in relation to biology, culture and race concern the weight of the influence of genes, and whether it is *unique or essential* to certain populations” (emphasis added).

As modern genetics clearly shows, “no, there are no *essentia*l biological differences among ‘races’” (with the proviso there may be *unique* differences, such as genetically-based disease proclivities). As Murray points out, “the genetic distinctiveness of populations is minor compared to their commonalities”, and while “Human beings can be biologically classified into groups … [l]ike most biological classifications, these groups have fuzzy edges”. (Indeed, Rutherford himself makes the same claim: “We see broad geographical clustering of people and populations on the basis of sampled genetic markers, but the borders are fuzzy and continuous.”)

Why then does Rutherford even ask the apparent non-question of whether “socially important” facts depend on *essential* differences? It appears that, constrained by his primary goal of arguing against racist ideas, he chooses to focus on the flawed ideas of racists themselves—in this case, on the persistent real-world racist claim that observed *social* differences between racial groups are indeed caused by the unique *genetic* differences between such groups.



Rutherford provides his non-specialist readers with the means to challenge this belief—that is, modern genetic science shows that racial groups are *not* genetically unique, therefore observed social differences between such groups *cannot* be the result of essential biological differences. He similarly expends considerable energy refuting other popular racist beliefs, such as “[the] common assumption … that there is something implicitly associated with pigmentation that translates to physical abilities”.

Yet Rutherford’s counter-argument, that “Skin colour … is a very bad proxy for the total amount of similarity or difference between individuals and between populations”, does little more than shoot down the patently absurd idea of a *causal* relationship between skin color and ability or behavior.

Meaningful unique differences?

Unfortunately, by concentrating on the ignorant beliefs held by actual racists, Rutherford underplays the

possibility of average rather than absolute differences between populations, differences that could in fact have real world social repercussions (health disparities, for example, being one area where such differences between populations could have meaningful effects).

Murray, in contrast, does address the possible consequences of unique “small distinctions” between racial groups; for instance, he points to evidence of population differences in the prevalence of mental illnesses, and asks “what happens if findings from European samples about cognitive-related traits such as depression, autism, or schizophrenia lead to more effective treatments for Europeans but not for other populations?” In Murray’s view, this would make it “ethically imperative to study the genetics of mental disorders in other populations as well, which means studying the ways in which they differ from Europeans”.

And here is the crux of the contrast between Murray’s and Rutherford’s approach to genetics and ‘race’. The *fact* of (slight but significant) racial differences is, in Murray’s view, beyond dispute; the real issue is what we *ought* to do with this knowledge. With health, the answer appears obvious – use it to design appropriate interventions that take into account any relevant evolved genetic differences between populations. That is, use the knowledge to help improve people’s lives.

But mostly, as Murray argues in his conclusion, our reaction to “genetically-grounded population differences” need not be moral panic.

> *Some of these genetic differences may consist of alternative routes for getting to similar ends …. Many others will be differences that are neither better nor worse, but just differences. Probably some will lend themselves to value judgments, but even those will cut both ways. No population is free of defects nor possessed of all the virtues. We can expect most of the genetic differences to range from small to moderate and to explain just a portion of the phenotypic differences we already live with. Every population will be represented from one extreme to the other on every trait.*

Rutherford, on the other hand, views things in more fraught terms. In his concluding chapter, for instance, he hypothetically suggests:

> *If science were somehow to show that there are genetic differences that align with our folk use of the terms of race, and that these also accounted for perceived differences in ability, would that justify segregation? Would you afford people different rights if they are ancestrally faster, brighter or stronger?*

Rutherford's answer is clear: "Imagined differences between individuals and between populations have been used to justify the cruellest acts in our short history."

Yet a more direct response could be: why *should* genetic differences lead to segregation or unjust treatment or cruelty? Or as Murray suggests, just as we can learn to accept and to live with the obvious cultural diversity between groups, so too should we simply accept and live with genetic differences that likely exist between human populations. Ironically, here it is the conservative who has the far more optimistic view of human beings *despite* our differences.

To Rutherford's credit, and regardless of the shortcomings highlighted above, he is at least prepared to openly and honestly discuss these issues—something that appears rare in progressive circles. Indeed, this is something equally positive about both Rutherford's and Murray's books: the fact that arguments about 'race' can be dealt with reasonably and rationally from either side of the political divide.

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