

# Book Review: The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea by Robert Wald Sussman

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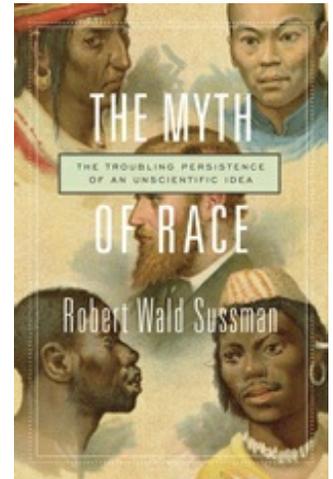
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In *The Myth of Race*, Robert Sussman aims to explore how race emerged as a social construct from early biblical justifications to the pseudoscientific studies of today. Sander Hölsgens finds a detailed and reflective account covering the rise and fall of eugenics.

**The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea. Robert Wald Sussman. Harvard University Press. 2014.**

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In *The Myth of Race*, [Robert Wald Sussman](#) describes, locates, and contextualises the history of eugenics, or the infamous attempts to prove that ‘race’ is a biological reality. Sussman’s main argument is that ‘race’ is, instead, a cultural invention, which has far-reaching implications in and outside of academia. It is, for example, worth reconsidering what it might mean that “modern moral theory and moral racial theory have the same father” (p.30). Immanuel Kant, Sussman suggests, proposes a racial philosophy – and has become one of the most influential racists of all times.



In the second chapter, Sussman discusses the birth of eugenics, the brainchild of Francis Galton (1822-1911). Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, “coined the term *eugenics* in 1883 from the Greek words for ‘well-being’ and based the concept on some of Darwin’s writing” (p.49).

Through a statistics based methodology Galton tried to prove a couple of things. First, that the notion of ‘race’ is real, and second, that there is such a thing as racial differences. Or, more precisely, that there is a hierarchy among ‘races’. Residents of ancient Greece had, Galton claimed, a higher intellectual standard than ‘Anglo-Saxons’. This reprehensible way of evaluating individuals and groups of individuals was not limited to intellectual abilities via IQ tests, but also included inter alia character, personality, gregariousness, longevity, craving for drink and gambling, and proclivity to pauperism and crimes of violence (p.50).

Galton believed that controlled breeding could produce genetically superior people. This approach is commonly defined as positive eugenics, and was more popular in the United Kingdom in the early 1900s. Negative eugenics, on the other hand, was more “in vogue in the United States” (p.50), and propagated “eliminating or excluding biologically inferior people through use of segregation, deportation, castration, marriage prohibition, compulsory sterilization, passive euthanasia, and, ultimately extermination” (ibid).

Here Sussman makes the well-developed, but harrowing argument that the ideological aspirations of the eugenics movement led to political decision-making – and, eventually, racial legislation. The First International Eugenics Congress of 1912 granted the movement political legitimacy in the United States, worldwide recognition, and industry support. Moreover, negative eugenics was embraced by the Nazi regime; the racial classifications of Hitler’s Germany can be traced back directly to the development of eugenics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fourth chapter of *The Myth of Race*, then, is a critical monograph in which Sussman reconsiders the eugenics movement in relation to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

In the fifth chapter, Sussman introduces Franz Boas (1858-1942), who developed the anthropological concept of culture. Before 1911, “the term culture was always used with a singular meaning, as another term for high society or civilization” (p.161). For Boas, however, the term expresses the idea that every society exhibits a culture. His notion

of culture emphasises the importance of history and comparative studies, not biology, in the “development of the mental, subsistence, technological and other major features of a coherent human population, social group, or society” (p.160). Contrary to eugenicists, Boas argued that all peoples have similar mental capabilities. His idea of cultural relativism, or the equality of virtue among different cultures, was an argument against notions of ‘race’ and ‘racial hierarchy’. Boas regarded eugenics as ‘pure fallacy’ and ‘driven by ideology’, and proposed cultural anthropology as an alternative.

In *The Myth of Race*, Franz Boas is celebrated as a key figure in the academic fight against the eugenics movement. Precisely here the crux of the book is located. Sussman notes that an increased interaction and assimilation “between and among peoples of all ethnic groups” (p.208) in the United States, as well as the Great Depression and the horrors of the Holocaust, led to the decrease in support of eugenics. However, the implications of these phenomena on the relevance and tenability of eugenics are relegated to the background. Instead, the emphasis is on how the concept of culture ultimately subverted the notion of ‘race’.

*The Myth of Race* suggests the crucial importance of individuals in the formulation of history. “Boas was ahead of his time” (p.199), and his anthropological inquiry and concept of culture “still dominate the life and social sciences today” (p.202). This approach to historiography can be challenged, for it allows Sussman to construct a narrative of heroes and villains. Moreover, it is an argument for contemporary anthropology as an academic discipline, which seems out of place. As a genealogy of modern racist ideology, however, *The Myth of Race* examines relevant sociohistorical and scientific developments, which are interpreted, contextualised, and presented in a reflective and detailed manner.

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