

On Eugenia Shanklin's, *Anthropology and Race*

Christopher A. Tucker, Paradox Technologies, Turlock, CA.

chris.tucker@paradoxtechnologies.org

Introduction

In addressing the scope and inputting my critique of the work, I have chosen to include analysis within the main body, while leaving the bulk of opinion to the beginning and end of this paper. The book Anthropology and Race is an issue-based text which concerns itself with race in an anthropological perspective, as a social phenomenon, derived from popular opinion. Demonstrating the metamorphosis of attitudes throughout time, the book also deals with personal belief systems of the people who defined man (humanity) and his place in the hierarchy of evolution.

This book is an attempt by the author to assimilate all aspects of the schema of race and racism in today's culture. While "calling" for an impassioned need to make the playing field level, it falls short of achieving that goal. In attempting to recall science to the forefront of racial issues—defined in layman concepts—it succinctly displays how and why science has removed itself from the heated issue. It also shows, without disrepute, why science steers away from said issue.

The goal of this book is to pull science together, unite the various camps of thought, and have those who ignore race issues back on task. Also, to demonstrate race is not purely a social phenomenon. Not for the lack of trying, the author inadvertently does exactly what she hopes not to do.

Chapter One: Race as a Social Category, Not a Biological Fact

Shanklin spends the bulk of these pages discussing the definition of race in society and its ramifications in today's world. She elaborates on the scientific concept (or lack thereof) of race in terms of academe and world view. Existing as a preface or historical treatise, she provides some insight into the mechanisms of race in the scheme of the beginnings of anthropology. She also includes references into education's response (or lack thereof) and its role in contributing to the problems of classifying race in sociological schema.

She begins by pointing out the difficulty in classifying race. Classification, in the classic sense, is primarily a fractualizing of the world into hierarchies to fit into a predominantly Western concept, denying simultaneously the individual and the whole, keeping attention focused on group behaviorism and group power. The hierarchy is as follows: **Classification** ⇒ **judgments** ⇒ **value assertions**. For lack of scientific depiction of this process, the concept of race is defined purely in sociological terms; this idea exists as folk taxonomy, or the habit of categorizing items by their apparent similarities, (Shanklin 1994:v-vi). Because it is a byproduct of society, the values of the times in which taxonomies prevail are subject to value assertions accordingly. For example, on page vii, Shanklin discussed the “invention of slavery in America.” At this time she may believe Americans “invented” slavery; because of the value judgments of today, it may seem to be a correct assumption. However, in removing the socio-political viewpoint and viewing slavery in historical reality, one will discover this statement is erroneous. This is so because Shanklin employs indirect association, or removing concepts out of their proper temporal placement. It is a pitfall that, in my opinion, plagues Shanklin throughout the book.

Considerable attention has been given in this chapter (the main crux of the argument of the homogeneous nature of race) to the concept of the Mitochondria Eve—a hypothetical woman who lived in Africa somewhere between 90,000 and 180,000 years ago. Through DNA testing, biochemists believe that Eve’s descents moved out of Africa in the years between and populated the world. I can identify with the need to embrace the similarities of a species of people (the world population), and that differences exist only in appearance and behavior; however, Wilson and Cann’s 1992 study to gather support for a crucial point weakens the argument rather than strengthens it. The results from the Mitochondria Eve hypothesis have been shown to be inconclusive at best (Mysteries of Mankind, 1993).

The idea that “race doesn’t exist” (17) is a noble one, however, support for this idea must be firmly grounded in scientific fact and not emotional jargon, or what somebody “feels” is right. Just because I feel good about the elimination of racial borders, doesn’t mean that I can affect it by hoping it goes away. By identifying factors in proper context, one can defeat race as a sociological phenomenon. For example: In

the struggle between individuality in a world where uniqueness is frowned upon, there is a penchant for peer group identification from which, as differences are acknowledged between groups, the vestiges of racism are formed. Contextual understanding is crucial; it is upon this ground that Shanklin tries to get her point across.

Chapter Two: The Anthropological Curiosity: Why Are There Differences?

In this section, Shanklin continues her prospectus into the history of anthropology as pre and post-discipline. Again, in her analysis, there are contextual problems regarding the viewpoints of the writers she identifies. Instead of observing them within the confines of their respective times, she superimposes 20th century, politically correct values. Her Herodotus and Empedocles arguments, while illustrating the ill-perception of the times by our perspectives, are not so “racist” as she makes them appear. Empedocles’ fantastic account speculates on “what lies beyond the boundaries of the known world,” which throttles the imagination universally. A modern example of this habit by people of different cultures responding similarly lies in the response regarding extraterrestrials. There are fascinating accounts, filled with fear of the unknown. It is understandable to demonize something which one does not understand or cannot relate to. This errant behavior was the driving force behind the early hypotheses of how the “others”, the “ones from beyond the rim of the world” would appear, how they would behave (they couldn’t be civilized, they’re not like “us”), and how they might influence or take over our cities with their “strange” (a term Shanklin favors) mannerisms.

She continues into pre-scientific interpretations of the Marco Polo expedition. She gives him credit for “scientific” coast-charts that served as guidelines for later explorers, including Columbus. Injecting the word “strange” into everything that doesn’t agree with her ideology (six instances in three pages), her interpretation of historical thought/reaction to “alien” peoples lacks perspective and temporal understanding (empathy), which should have revealed to her the notion of *why* they reacted as they did, rather than providing her fodder for attacking and belittling the well-ingrained beliefs of the people of the times. Put simply, Shanklin doesn’t employ the “cultural relativism” she purports. Analysis is “tailored” to fit one particular viewpoint (Shanklin’s), and doesn’t take into account variations that have existed within temporal context.

In the section titled How and Why Questions, Shanklin touches on early scientific interpretation of peoples and moves headlong into Darwin and Wallace. Both Darwin and Wallace arrived at the answer to the how question of differences between peoples, but they disagreed on the answer to the why questions. Pages 28-30 give background information on the theory and the problems associated with Darwinian evolution:

“The answers to the how question could be found by comparing and classifying the different species; the answers to the why question were not so easily found. Why had God or evolution designed or brought into being a world in which there were so many places to be filled and then filled them with the most diverse creatures? Natural selection and environmental forces accounted for that diversity, but not for the special place occupied by humans. (Aye, there’s the rub.) Why had God or evolution given dominion over the earth to the human species? As an answer to the how question, evolution involved only natural cases; as an answer to the why question, evolution, like religion before it, sometimes had supernatural overtones” (29).

What may be a reason for the “erroneousness” of Darwinian evolutionary theory is that they (the evolutionists) were not aware of the vast amount of time in which evolution had transpired. Shanklin notes that Darwin was trained as a theologian, but abandoned it (29). This leads to the conclusion that the reason for “errant” evolutionary/quasi-racist view was the fact that Darwin and others of his time were firmly grounded in Creationism which only provided a narrow window of time in which evolution could take place (approx. 5,600 years).

What may lie at the heart of the misconception of the early evolutionists was the concept that things “improved” or “progressed” instead of simply changing. “Evolution to professionals is adaptation to changing environments, not progress” (34). This hierarchy found its way into Tylorism and his three stages of cultural “progression” — savagery ⇒ barbarism ⇒ civilization. That instead of interpreting differences of perspective, they concentrated solely on slow improvement of a people who ended up in a civilization that must look markedly similar to Victorian London. Today, this old idea is humorous, but understandable, considering the times. I don’t believe (and this is only

a matter of opinion) that Tylor, Darwin, Wallace, and others made a conscious effort to display their dominance over another culture (that was for the elite and the imperialists to do). In fact, they tried to get as close to what the facts were as possible. Sure, there were problems, and plenty of mistakes were made—at least some serve as models of what **not** to do—however, the fact later scientists discovered, that “[c]ulture was not so well developed [as] a concept of race” (33), was because of the research of Wallace, Darwin, and others and not in spite of it. Shanklin notes that “Descartes observed about knowledge that if the first button be wrongly done up, then so will the others” (34). She reiterates this quote later (42). She implies (wrongly) that the racist, ethnocentric history of science (removed from how anthropology was manipulated by the imperialists) has been revealed and she has dispelled the myths (42). It is of quaint, intellectual curiosity why she makes such a verbose statement. It is not a question of how or why, but what are her intentions in employing said means?

Chapter Three: Ignoble Savages or Just Others? Darwin and Wallace

This chapter continues the evolution question—differences in approach and methodology between Darwin and Wallace. She claims Darwin was wrong, and lists a series of five reasons for this (46-7), but has been defeated. She states Wallace was right and champions him. While Darwin’s analysis was couched in deep ethnocentrism, Wallace was a good early model of an informative / scientific ethnography. Perhaps the credit for the first true ethnography should be given to Wallace and not Tacitus. Darwin was an elitist; he was ordained by those in power, given to task; so everything he said has to be wrong. And I mean everything! Discard Darwin and embrace Wallace, ideologies outside of what she believes to be right are obviously wrong.

This was the thinking of the day; this is the thinking of today. Wallace and his work were pretty much swept under the rug because what he was doing didn’t agree with those in power. This is fact. It is also fact that, despite the overwhelming ethnocentrism of Darwin, he provided aspects and modes of thought that became extremely valuable in fields such as psychology, (Stocking 1992:315). Shanklin fails to provide relevance to the student in her quest to “point out the need for an interesting book, yet to be written, about the changes in ideas over time and the length of time that an idea, scientifically

advanced, takes to fully enter the popular consciousness” (bad word-choice) and be accepted. In a few centuries, the Western world has moved from flat earth to round planet conceptions, from heliocentric to solarcentric (same thing) theories; how much longer will it take to move from folk taxonomies of race to an understanding of human diversity?” (67). She makes the call for such a book, but I submit such books already exist—maybe not in her EXACT words—but they do, just look in any high school or college history textbook. Although I am not an expert in matters of race and ethnocentrism, I logically understand and I empathize with the subject. I know the ramifications, discard what is wrong and keep what is best; it is not true to science to burn disquisitions that contain, at the very least, tidbits of knowledge that transcend the metaphoric or allegoric implications. The controversy between Darwin, Wallace, and methodology continues. Yes, there are differences—one’s bad, one’s good, and neither could work in conjunction with the other. Overall, Shanklin promotes a nihilist perspective.

Chapter Four: Race, Culture, and Eugenics

The primary theme of this chapter concerns the fallacy of the mixing of cultural physical traits. Assigning traits solely on genetic predisposition, ignoring the wholeness of the inclusive species, *Homo sapiens*, Shanklin divides the history of anthropology into three phases: 1. Race as a conglomerate descriptive term, before anthropology came into being (17th and 18th centuries). 2. Race as a typological device (Darwinian evolution). 3. Race refined as a category within what is sometimes called the modern synthetic theory or the blending of Darwinian theory with genetic theory and its ultimate replacement by the idea of breeding populations and their adaptation to specific environments (71). Some observations: “Wallace’s dilemma was in the concept of culture, the idea of learned abilities available to all humans at whatever level of technology. But this answer was not to be fully accepted in anthropology until the middle of the 20th century, after race was discarded as a scientific concept” (71). This assertion seems to cause Shanklin quite a bit of grievance, since she believes that science needs to debate current social issues. Boas, in his career, was a patron of such activities

and had his students do exactly that, but in today's world, one can foresee some constraints.

In the era of political correctness and labels, it is difficult to get to the root of the problems that plague society. A quotation that may be applicable was made by Oscar Wilde: "If you cannot defeat a man's argument in civilized debate, then call him names." It appears to be the habit of modern day people to get wrapped up in labeling people or groups of people not only to classify them, but to distinguish their relative position to one's own cultural or idealistic group. The Franz Boas of the late 20th century would be hard pressed to monitor a debate on the issue of race. Take, for example, pages 79-81 in Shanklin's book. She classifies Boas as (paraphrased), "the sum of Jewish freethinkers, liberals who embraced ideals including 'equality of opportunity, education, political and intellectual liberty, etc.'" She goes on to use "liberal" two more times on page 81: "In addition to his liberal upbringing, Boas has studied with Rudolf Virchow, also a liberal and a scientist who was rather cool toward Darwinism. . .". Is such classification (labeling) necessary? By employing such means, the end results in a further distancing of scientific stance (divided between conservative and liberal), further exacerbating the rift between the two ideologies. Therefore, I submit that race can seldom be debated logically. Debates on such topics invariably turn heated, emotional, and malign, whereby nothing substantial is gained. Shanklin illustrates this point quite well in her inane equations that liberal = good—conservative = bad.

In the middle of the chapter, she discusses the contributions of Boas to the field of anthropology. While leaving out substantial parts of his influence, she assesses the formative role he played in "realigning" anthropology. An early supporter of Eugenics (i.e., selective breeding to enhance persons), Boas noted that although the idea of eliminating suffering by raising the standard of human physique and mentality was beautiful, its flaw was that only those features that were heredity were thus eliminated and the interactions between hereditary and environment (Nature vs. Nurture) were not yet understood (87). Referring to Boas solely as a proponent of Eugenics, Shanklin misses the greater profundity of his work—his contribution to the later field of psychological anthropology. George Stocking (whom Shanklin quotes freely) noted this about Boas:

“Despite his evident distancing from the culture and personality movement which in the 1930s became the distinctive incarnation of ‘psychological anthropology,’ Boas’ role in the development of the broader tendency cannot be minimized. His infusion of the Germanic interest in the ‘genius of peoples’ reinforced and generalized an orientation that was already foreshadowed in earlier American anthropology (as far back as Schoolcraft); his critique of evolutionary racialism laid the basis for a cultural interpretation of psychological differences. Following up various threads of his interest, his students were instrumental in establishing the culture and personality movement. Some of the methodological and theoretical reservations he had about that movement foreshadowed more recent tendencies in what is once again often called ‘psychological anthropology’” (1992:321).

In looking into the larger vista, Shanklin fractured and skewed perspective into items out of context gives rise to formats that convey ulterior agendas. This does not imply this to actually be Shanklin’s intention, but it does cause one to perhaps think of it. And in thinking along those lines, by crafting Boas’ ideologies to fit a specific criteria, she triggers the idea that she may be no better than Broca manipulating his statistics—for intentions such as this are created for one purpose: to deceive.

Chapter Five: Discarding Race, Dealing with Racism

In coming back full circle, Chapter Five doubles as a conclusion. The main point lies on page 100, when Shanklin says, “the challenge of the 1990s is to discover ways in which people can be socialized (socialism?) as group members without identifying targets to persecute. These issues are among the most important of this and the next century.” She offers what has been proven by past anthropologists in regard to racial classification: “What we must prove in the next century is that we can abandon the social attitudes intermingled with our mistaken applications of ‘scientific knowledge’ and get

on with the process of studying cultural differences and similarities.” These are all good points and are of value to future students taking introductory courses. In a holistic perspective, Shanklin’s above statements engage themselves to reinforce the old saw “question authority.” This idea (well suited in a variety of academic, social, and political environments) exists regardless of race, racism, and ethnocentrism. It is well and good to illuminate people to the “correctness and incorrectness” of today’s society, however, it must be utilized in a careful manner. It must be used to not to weed out the “evil ones” of Shanklin’s book, but instead to remind the individual to never compromise when searching for the truth.

In the review of anthropology’s progress in the late 20th century, Shanklin feels that the discipline has, “[the] seeming determination to write itself out of one of the most important discussions of the present era. . .” (104). The statement may indeed be true, but what is also true is people today cannot have discussions of race and racism without pointing fingers. “So and so did this to my ancestors so I have full right some 300 years later to get those oppressors back.” The follow-up may be: “My ancestors are long dead, I don’t engage in the same belief systems.” Retort: “It doesn’t matter, I’m going to hate you anyway.” The 1990s is a decade of hate, not logic. There may be some forums where hate can be removed from the debate on racism, but I submit they are few and far in between. Shanklin fails to point this out. Instead, she further exacerbates the problem; she does this by her misinformation and her misunderstanding and her lack of reading finesse. Let me illustrate.

On page 104-5, she observes, “Coe notes that [Eric] Thompson’s thinking [about the Maya] was “quasi-racist” (I would call it racist).” Fortunately, I had just finished reading Michael Coe’s superb work Breaking the Maya Code from which Shanklin so freely quotes. To be honest, I was shocked by Shanklin’s gross misinterpretation. Coe says there were problems with Thompson’s findings in that for a long time it was thought the Mayan glyphs were ideographs—with no phonetic translation—used in the Mayan calendar (for which the credit went to Thompson; his analysis was crucial in understanding the true nature of the glyphs). Thompson believed the remaining glyphs must also pertain to the calendar. So did his mentor, Sylvanus Morley. This was during the 1920s when Thompson made his discoveries. This was also a time before the

discovery of the *Dresden Codex* (1947), when it seemed quite logical these glyphs couldn't possibly be part of a language. They decorated temples, buildings and stelæ, and before the *Dresden Codex*, were found nowhere else. It was with the *Dresden Codex* that linguists finally latched onto the idea that the glyphs transcended their purely ideological functions and became analogous (however slight) with the Egyptian glyphs. Thompson disagreed, to be sure, when the evidence pointed to this conclusion, not on a racist level, but from an academic one. Late in his life he admitted he had been wrong, but he was only wrong in his interpretation, not his perception, of these people.

In searching for Shanklin's source, I reread the passages in Breaking the Maya Code to see if I may have missed the racist inferences. I didn't miss them—they simply were not there. Shanklin's reference—"According to Coe, most of the scholarly discussion of Maya glyphs was informed by the belief that 'the brown-skinned Maya' could not have had a culture as complex as that of Europe, China, or the Near East"—is irrelevant. This quote refers to C.E. Long, not Thompson (Coe: 137-8), and "This was the opinion of one man, Eric Thompson, who opposed Russians (one single Russian, Dr. Yuri Knorosov) who wanted to treat the glyphs as writing and translate them," (Shanklin 104).

Shanklin successfully convolutes the issues in this chapter and offers sparse solutions to seemingly overwhelming problems. It is on that note of her abhorrent twisting of source and word that I conclude this analysis.

Conclusion

In assessing the anthropological "value" of Shanklin's book, *Anthropology and Race*, I have come to a singular conclusion. Shanklin, while being relatively well informed of the history of the discipline and can relate that history to suit the goals implied by the title, sorely lacks analytical prowess with the examples she has given. She relies on implicit argument and negative example, while simultaneously missing an etic perspective. Although she does well assessing the myriad problems within anthropology and "making the call" for us (future students and professors moving toward the 21st century) to resolve the race issue, she provides few solutions, demonstrating her lack of grasp.

Shanklin spends an inordinate amount of time on a “soapbox” about evolution; she wholly condemns Darwin and mildly endorses Wallace. She ignores the scientific concept of evolution demonstrated by fact—sure there have been (and will be) errors in interpretation of those facts; however, it is not relevant (nor does it inspire faith in the author by the reader) to insist on denigrating those devices science uses to achieve truth. Instead, concentrating solely on methodology and leaving out the personal whims of the researcher is the correct form of analysis—which Shanklin does not attain. While reading this book, I found myself fearing for the future; are these the times when we will put a scientist’s personal schema under a microscope—and if we find some minuscule item which is distasteful to us, torpedo everything under his/her name? Is this the ulterior means that we wish to embrace? Is this truly what Shanklin is championing? It must be. I discovered this tendency of hers when she paraphrased Coe as saying Thompson was a “quasi-racist (I would call it racist).” This type of character assassination is unwarranted and, in my opinion, should not be tolerated. What kind of researcher is the one who must stoop to manipulating sources, misquoting, removing items out of context, and outright misapplication of the data in order to make her point? Is Shanklin that insecure of her work? She must be. What if I went through the book and checked the rest of her sources—will I find the same erroneous representation I found in regard to Thompson? In this example, it is the trust between reader and author that has been detonated; it is trust that is crucial and it is trust one must inspire. If the author cannot establish it, then the reader is hard-pressed to find worth in the remaining ideas. As I said, Shanklin has some good insights; however, the overwhelming weight of misinformation renders this text useless—for lack of context and point.

What I came away with was this: At one point, I was beginning to get the feeling Shanklin is locked into this “destroy the white-**man** mode” (i.e., her slanted viewpoint, sarcastic asides [105], and pedantic study questions [122]). This mode doesn’t sit too cozy with me because, well, I’m white and of Saxon descent. So I guess that makes me a bona fide racist and ancestral oppressor—of the “evil breed.” Sounds bad. Instead of tearing asunder the shackles of racial identification, she’d rather accuse me and my ancestors (although we too have our history of being slaughtered and enslaved at more than one point in time—the 8th century AD, e.g.). I too can muster up some oppressive

people (Charlemagne), but is it the proper anthropological message? I believe it is not. Is this how it should be, pointing fingers at one another? This appears to be Shanklin's ideology. Is this the wave of the future, the call to the 21st century as Shanklin notes? If it is, then I'm in the wrong field.