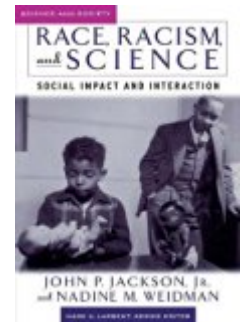


John P. Jr., Jackson, Nadine M Weidman. *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. xi + 403 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-3736-8.



Reviewed by Leigh Bregman

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In developing this account of the history of race and science, John P. Jackson Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman fail to pull their often worthwhile and fascinating material into the coherent introductory textbook that they surely hoped to produce. My main criticism is not so much that it is poorly written or conceived, although I have my reservations on both counts, but that the authors fails to take their own historiographical claims seriously.

This book has been published as part of the Science and Society series, whose aim is to provide accessible introductory textbooks on the history of science to complement existing U.S. history textbooks. It would seem therefore that *Race, Racism, and Science* is aimed primarily at U.S. students in their first year of university, and the book needs to be judged on this basis. This is unfortunately not a market familiar to a South African historian of science, so I can only make some general remarks on this subject.

Although not desirable, the book, especially the first sections on the nineteenth century, read like lecture notes. This is less a criticism than a

recognition that teaching the history of science at an introductory level is inordinately difficult, because the primary function is to quickly familiarize students with the basic outlines and contents of debates they mostly do not even know existed.

On the assumption that this is the basic educational purpose of the book, it is moderately successful. Certainly the first few chapters cover, in an efficient and workmanlike manner, the intellectual origins of racial classification from antiquity, through the emergence of racial typologies in the first half of the nineteenth century, to the development of evolutionary biology in the second half of the nineteenth century and the formation and then retreat of scientific racism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Given the amount of material to be covered and the introductory level, it is not surprising that the focus is on the ideas of key thinkers on race, and only very secondarily on interrogating the intellectual, social, economic, and cultural context of these ideas. In part this is mitigated by the book's extended bibliographic essays on each topic and a useful selection of primary documents at

the back that could be utilized as the basis for discussion and debate.

The second half of the book moves from a historical overview of racial thinking in the European, colonial, and American worlds to a narrower focus on science and race in the United States in the twentieth century. In many ways this is the more interesting part of the book as it is clearly the authors' area and period of expertise and interest. This is particularly clear in their discussion of the fascinating links between psychology, sociology, and race in mid-twentieth-century America. This focus does, however, mean that events in the rest of the world, and especially the experience of decolonization, are ignored. This largely limits the book's interest to an American audience.

The authors also adopt a far more polemical stance in their later chapters and focus increasingly on the history of race in the twentieth-century United States at the expense of the history of science. This makes for a bracing and fascinating read, but raises serious issues about their commitment to both wider historical concerns as well as the history of science.

In their discussion of wartime anti-racism in the 1940s they describe "America's most pressing wartime problem" as "racial injustice" (p. 174). It is not entirely clear whether this is the view of the authors, or whether this is a view they ascribe to those at the time who were attempting to deal with the issue. It seems highly unlikely that racial injustice, as understood by the authors, was in fact seen during the war as America's *most* pressing wartime problem outside of a small race-policy elite and certain members of the affected communities. Nor does it seem that the development of racial thought is the *most* important historical question to ask about America's involvement in the Second World War.

That race was and is important is without doubt, but it was not exclusively the most important factor. For instance, one of the most interesting features of the Second World War is that it

marked a profound change in the place and role of science in the United States. Yet the dramatic emergence of state funding and support for science, as well as the equally dramatically raised profile and image of science, go largely unremarked in this account of the history of science in the period.

The second half of this book needs to be seen not as a history of the science of race in the United States in the twentieth century, but rather a history of race that attempts to appropriate science in the defense of anti-racism. Jackson and Weidman wish to make the point that science proves that race is not a meaningful biological category, and that recent attempts to prove the contrary (such as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, 1994) are "genuinely unscientific" (p. 225). This unfortunately sits uncomfortably with the authors' own claim in the prologue that science as well as racist and anti-racist views are likely to be socially or culturally structured and that it is simplistic to assume that the development of science will necessarily remove evidence for racism.

This draws attention to one of the bigger difficulties with this book, which is that the nature and role of science remain largely unexamined. While nodding to constructivist ideas of science, the authors fail to take one of its most important methodological lessons seriously--the idea that there is no such thing as good or bad science per se, just that which acquires support and that which fails to do so. The historian's job revolves around debating alternative claims for why things developed as they did and not who was right or wrong, or good or bad. In the earlier sections of the book, this presents little problem. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sciences of race will, for most students, be sufficiently remote from their own experience and beliefs for time itself to provide the necessary critical distance.

The lack of any clear methodological or systematic approach to the history of science becomes a liability in the more recent period. The constructivist agenda, on which much of the critique of the past racial science is based, falls by the wayside as the authors embrace new science compatible with their views as both correct and good, and attack that which they disagree with as wrong and bad. While understandable from an ethical point of view, this hardly makes for a viable primer in methodological consistency.

The history of science is exceptionally difficult to teach at an introductory level, especially in its constructivist forms. Few areas lend themselves as well to introducing constructivist history of science as the human sciences, but at the same time few areas are as ideologically fraught. The authors have failed to negotiate this complex of issues successfully. In the early chapters they skate over social and cultural bases of science in the nineteenth century, which offers some of the best pedagogical opportunities. In the later chapters they abandon their claimed methodology to support those views with which they agree. These are not, however, failings unique to this book. For a lecturer able and willing to tackle these weaknesses directly, in lectures and seminars, this book would probably provide an acceptable entry-level textbook for those teaching in the United States.

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