Race decoded

Catherine Bliss is on the side of the angels. There will be no immoral race science on her watch.

The author is addressing what she calls a "triple helix" of genomic science, social concerns and politics. What genomic researchers learn about our DNA has significant real-world implications on how we and others see ourselves. Politics is an expression of the collective will.

Her opening chapter starts with the very good observation that the experts were wrong. Craig Venter, Bill Clinton, and the majority of the sages of the last quarter of the 20th century echo the line that race was a false construct. All people are essentially alike, they claimed, and investigating potential differences between the races was both fruitless and immoral. Now they agree it exists, and the question is what to do about it.

She is attempting to square the circle. She writes: "Stressing that their values shape the formulation of research interests and questions, a number of scientists attested to performing political acts even in their most basic scientific inquiries. Such an overt politicization of science allows scientists to cope with a politically fraught state of affairs. This shows a clear change from earlier scientists' ethos of a `culture of no culture.' A politically conscious ethos in the production of scientific expertise has yet to be explored in the context of the new genomic sciences."

In a nutshell, she advocates that scientists no longer look for objective truth, but only truths which are consistent with contemporary notions of social justice. The heavy hand of government, which controls funding among other things, demands such things as the imposition of government-defined racial categories to identify DNA samples and aggregations of humans, and affirmative action in forming diverse research teams.

Though the author is too young to know, the world has previously witnessed what happens when the political process dominates science. The Soviets favored Lysenkoism, the belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics. In the extreme, the belief that you can establish a breed of short-tailed dogs by cutting off puppy tails and breeding the adults. Their politics said that they could establish a "New Soviet Man" who was altruistic and loved to work. In one bizarre episode the Soviet government dictated an experiment to breed a half-gorilla "super soldier," and found lackey scientists servile enough to conduct it.

Here is the contradiction. Science seeks new knowledge, but "social justice" seeks to avoid new knowledge. It is enough to make one schizophrenic.

The author makes rich use of the contemporary American vocabulary of social justice. Words like "disadvantaged," "privilege," "inequalities," "social change," "privileged communities," " elite members of society," "ranking categories of difference," "white supremacy." The vocabulary is a shorthand summation of several assumptions:
1) A value judgment that all groups of human beings are entitled to equal outcomes.
2) An assumption that the society, rather than the individual, should provide the outcomes which must be equal. These include, education and health care and in the negative, freedom from incarceration.
3) The assumption that all human beings are equally endowed with the intelligence and motivation to achieve the equal outcomes, and therefore,
4) If it does not happen, someone is to blame. Where to place the blame goes without saying.

There are corollary assumptions. It is assumed that whatever problems the African-American community suffers today is a legacy of slavery. Even examining this assumption is taboo. One who did so was the late John Ogbu, a Nigerian sociologist, in "Black American Students in An Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement." Since he cannot be disparaged because he is black, his challenge to the orthodox assumptions is simply ignored. Despite the fact that slavery was an uneven institution, certainly unfair but sometimes comfortable and even paternalistic, it is taken to be uniformly harsh and cruel. No - black slavery was not categorically different from the slavery described in the Bible and classic Greece and Rome. Or, in fact, the slavery borne by my Ukrainian wife's ancestors, who were only manumitted one year before American slavery ended.

Dissenting voices are dismissed without refutation. She writes offhandedly "Around the time when the infamous tract on IQ heritability, The Bell Curve, was released to a wave of criticism..." without citing any of that criticism, simply assuming that all right-thinking people simply abhor the very notions presented in that blasphemous book. "The Bell Curve" does not exist in isolation. I point readers to titles such as "The g factor," "IQ and the wealth of nations," "Race, Evolution and Behavior," and Earl Hunt's "Human Intelligence." I have searched and cannot find any solid science to refute the findings of these books, just a lot of angry hand-waving arguments. I have included Richard Lynn's summary of the case for genetic differences in my review of "Race Differences in Intelligence." For this issue, Bliss chooses to invent a category of questions "immoral to ask" rather than admit the existence of "impossible to answer."

So, scientists are to pursue the objective truth, but they are to bind themselves to

unchallenged a priori assumptions. Moreover, failure to do so will jeopardize government funding. Bliss' book is a sociological analysis of the beliefs of those scientists. The verbal dexterity with which they navigate these shoals is impressive.

She writes that scientists do consciously alter their science to fit their preconceptions of race. One admitted that he would falsify data if necessary. There certainly take liberties with things that can be moved, such as defining the boundaries and taxonomies to favor the appearances of race. In other words, it is not objective, but the science is performed with concepts of race in the background.

She reports that the view advocated by Stephen J. Gould in "The Mismeasure of Man" and Richard Lewontin's "Not in our genes" of race as a meaningless construct has to be abandoned. Since 2000 she finds that "What I call antiracist racialism, or the idea that there is no rank to races but that there are nevertheless discrete populations worth studying, now prevails across science and society." In other words, there are significant, measurable differences between the DNA of different population groups. Also, there are meaningful clusterings which correspond more or less with the lay concept of races.

She talks about the active recruitment of minorities into genetic research. This is akin to the active recruitment of blacks into black studies. In literary criticism you call this the "genetic fallacy," the notion that the truth discovered via research depends on the genetic background of the researcher. Following a reductio ad absurdum, one could say that research on chimpanzees could only be accurate if the research team included chimpanzees. It does, however, have the social advantage of lending credibility to the research. Research subject who donate DNA samples will do so more readily to a researcher of their own race.

Certain groups, such as Native Americans, do not wish to donate DNA at all. They do not like the notion that they are descended from Asian stock, and do not want to contribute to science which might support that conjecture. Getting samples is political, and the use which is made of the samples is political.

There are few enough blacks in the field of genetics that they are called on to be spokesmen for their race whether or not that is their desire. No doubt there is also a script it behooves them to follow if their race is to help them achieve career advancement. There are some blacks, such as Joseph Graves, whose academic careers seem dedicated to proving a preconceived notion of black equality, and other researchers who simply happen to be black, such as John McWhorter, who let the science lead them.

Government census forms require categorizing of all Americans, and to obtain

government funding one's project must use these categories. Subsequently, laws were passed requiring that pharmaceutical research and other such social science research involve representative samples of populations, by sex and race. This was especially important in pharmaceuticals, because it became increasingly well known that pharmaceuticals have different effects on members of different races.

She talks about how the US developed the standard categorization system, and how, because it was first and is used by a wide number of researchers, it affects the way race is defined worldwide. This distorts the total picture of the world, for obvious reasons. Other populations do not have the same structure of racial minorities as the United States, and few categorizations. The "white - black - Asian - other" paradigm, with Hispanic/non-Hispanic as a separate check box, does not fit the US very well and certainly does not fit the world. She reports the many ruses researchers use to get around this hurdle.

Medicine is the major force behind recognition of racial realities. Diseases such as hypertension and prostate cancer affect different populations differently, and they respond differently to various therapies. Though recognizing race makes many in the field nervous, it is too useful of a construct to abandon.

A controversial question is the use of forensic DNA evidence to identify the race of a perpetrator. Some researchers look at this is frightening. It was used in Louisiana to identify a serial killer, theretofore presumably Caucasian, who was in fact of black and Indian ancestry. Many do not want DNA to tell us the demographic makeup of our prison population, for instance. Even if they are convinced that the system which incarcerates them is unfair, and that all races should be equally represented in prison.

I have to imagine that places where science is conducted without the filter of racial consciousness, in other words, without the funding going to projects which meet the federal government's muster for being respectful of all races and so on, ultimately succeed. I look at other countries such where these considerations don't come into play, and I imagine that a some geneticists will want to abandon the United States for places where their sciences is unfettered by such other considerations. Iceland has a head start through deCode Genetics, but I could see Finland, China, Japan and even my adopted Ukraine following suit.

What's to like about the book? It is not strident in its crusade for social justice. It does a pretty good job of reporting the present scene in genetic research. It gives one hope that whatever truths there are about race will find their way to the surface regardless of the politics and social concerns of individual researchers. There is a healthy diversity of opinion, even among those on the side of the angels.