

Thicker than Blood

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Zuberi argues that racial statistics must be interpreted through a specific historical lens that places race with the historical and social context of how a particular society responds to the race of an individual. Additionally, he contends that racial statistics should be done to illuminate the process of racial stratification and never to essentialize race or justify discrimination. Theoretically, he engages in a genealogical excavation of the roots of social statistics in eugenics. His analysis parallels Foucault's, that is, demography is not a neutral science but is about surveillance, discipline and control (1995; 2003; 2000). Race is created by the active process of racialization, where racial categories are constantly being "created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994, p.55). Race is not, according to Zuberi, an abstract phenomenon, it is a social construct made by linguistic and societal structures, which organize human differences in consequential ways (Townsend 2007). His analysis resonates with Bobo and Dawson (2008, p.3) who state, "Notions of race...get defined, contested, and mobilized, and redefined, recontested, and remobilized in different contexts," and Best (2005) who advocates for the return to the acknowledgement that numbers do not exist independent of the people counting them. In this regard, the subtitle of the book is misleading, as the issue is not usually (at least with most academic demographers) between lying and telling the truth, but between evidence used to create a theory or to support a theory. Statistical evidence can only prove that a hypothesis can or cannot be rejected, not whether or not a theory is true.

Methodologically, Zuberi attempts to use an historical argument to connect present-day quantitative sociology with eugenics. While his historical account is rich, he does not convincingly demonstrate how the historical genesis of racial statistics in eugenics makes demography prone to eugenic argumentation. To say that because demography began in eugenic discourse the method will be forever be tempted to

support eugenics is akin to saying that because Volkswagen was begun by the Nazi's, it will always be a Nazi company. While demography has a certain historical trajectory, clearly the methods can be used to support different ends. Had Zuberi explicitly invoked Foucault and developed the idea that population science arose alongside broader advancements in surveillance and control, his argument would be more persuasive. The latter part of the book is the strongest, where he focuses on statistical theory and population genetics. The most helpful contribution he makes is pointing to the inherent problem in positing race as a cause because race is not grounded either genetically or biologically and because race cannot be randomly assigned to a treatment or control group.

The policy issues raised by this book are trapped in a difficult circularity. Simon (2005) discusses this problem in the context of the trade-off between the need for racial measurement to document discrimination; but that once measured, these measures become real social entities that reinforce racial hierarchies. Zuberi argues that ideally we want to move towards a system that does not collection racial statistics, but this cannot be done prematurely. He does not indicate in concrete terms how the transition between racial versus non-racial statistics could be done, nor how the present system for gathering racial information could be fundamentally changed. These seem extraordinarily difficulty issues that press for a revolution in terms of how race and ethnicity are organized and conceptualized societally. The present system is so strongly inhabited by racism that no amount of gradual change will ever get to the point where race will no longer be a fundamental category.

References

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