St. Louis professor’s new book explores concept of race

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
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In 1924, the Richmond Times-Dispatch published an editorial in support of the Racial Integrity Act. The editors warned that intermarriage between the races “will sound the death knell of the white man. Once a drop of inferior blood gets in his veins, he descends lower and lower in the mongrel scale.”

Passed by the legislature and signed into law by the governor of Virginia, the Racial Integrity Act made it a felony, punishable by imprisonment of one to five years, to falsely register one’s race.

Praised by the American Journal of Public Health as “the most important eugenical effort that has been made in the past 4,000 years,” the legislation stayed on the books for more than 40 years.

Pattern of prejudice

The bill, according to Robert Sussman, a professor of physical anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, was part of a 500 year-old pattern of racial prejudice, supported by a pseudo-scientific theory that asserted that human characteristics are biologically determined, vary by racial classification (with some races superior to others), and cannot be substantially altered by environmental factors.

In “The Myth of Race,” Sussman tells the important, albeit familiar, story of the 16th century origins of racist ideology, the rise of the eugenics movement, and its logical culmination in Nazi genocide.

Not ‘completely shed’

He reminds us as well that racism was discredited in the first half of the 20th century by cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, who demonstrated that
mental aptitude was not determined by heredity, that there was more variation within races than between them, and that environment accounted for many of the differences between the races; by research in genetics; and by revaluation against the racist atrocities committed by the Nazis.

Sussman claims as well that although we “have made major strides against the age old myths,” we have not “completely shed” the views of “racist eugenics and the biological basis and fixity of certain complex human behavioral traits.”

Some factual errors
Sussman is not an historian and, unfortunately, “The Myth of Race” contains mistakes and questionable judgments.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was not the chief justice of the Supreme Court in 1927.

News of the treatment of eastern Europeans in concentration camps did not “fill the world’s media” between 1936 and 1939.

Sussman’s description of socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson is a straw man. And he may well have overestimated the influence of eugenicists on public policy in the United States and the sympathy of American industrialists for the racist goals of the Nazis.

‘New bigot brigade’
In the last third of his book, Sussman provides a chilling account of the activities of a new generation of American racists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Funded by the Pioneer Fund, the American Renaissance Foundation and other shadowy organizations with patriotic names designed to deceive, “the new bigot brigade,” he reveals, has supported and disseminated research that purports to prove inherent and immutable differences between the races, has weighed in on debates over education and immigration, and seems “to have made some major inroads into the right wing of the Republican party.”

Difficult to eradicate
Sussman believes that these new, sinister, racist “interlocking associations appear to be alive and well in today’s political arena.”

Clearly, he is determined to sound the alarm, even at the risk of being branded an alarmist.

In any event, he has made a good start in this book with an authoritative demonstration that “race is not a biological reality among humans; there are no human biological races.” And he had made a compelling case that, unlike race, racism is a reality in the United States and elsewhere, a reality that is difficult to eradicate.

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