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Is It Okay to Say that Research ‘Verges on Scientific Racism’?

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By Matthew Wolf-Meyer

Last fall, a group of researchers – mostly biological anthropologists and sleep researchers – published a study of three ‘pre-industrial’ communities, one in Latin America, two in Africa, and claimed that based on their data, consolidated nightly sleep is a human norm, inferring that it is the product of natural selection. The media picked up the research findings, and I read write ups of it in a number of outlets, which led me to the original article and sparked conversations with me and other sleep-interested scholars about the validity of the research. A couple of months later, I was asked by the editor of *Sleep Health* if I would like to respond to the findings of the article (which you can find [here](#)), in part because the researchers made an argument against a claim that I have made – corroborating [Roger Ekirch](#) – that human sleep has only recently consolidated, largely as a result of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. But I was primarily motivated by the anthropology-informed opportunity to point out that no contemporary society offers us a window to some pre-industrial past or earlier evolutionary moment. To suggest otherwise – and here I’m quoting myself – ‘verges on scientific racism.’

So what was the assumption that the researchers were working off of that would lead them to such a claim and why would I find it controversial? They took a form of social organization – namely hunter-gatherer foraging – as indicating that the people who practice that form of subsistence share qualities with a stage of human history when that social organization was predominant. Put another way, they assumed that modern hunter-gatherers are fundamentally the same as hunter-gatherers from earlier periods in human history. With that assumption in place, one can infer that beyond their subsistence pattern are other shared practices, including sleep. That these three communities each slept in consolidated, nightly fashion was then taken as a window onto our shared human evolutionary past, and led the researchers to make the further inference that humans have always been consolidated sleepers. Where there is variance from that pattern, we might be seeing something like social preference or ‘culture’ interfering with basic human biological patterns.

This idea that a modern society could stand in for a pre-industrial society is akin to what sociocultural anthropologists refer to as ‘unilineal evolution.’

This understanding of social development arose in the 19th century, at the very beginnings of modern social science, including sociology and anthropology, which were foundational in elaborating the theory. Although there were various theories of unilineal evolution, the overriding assumption shared by its proponents was that Western civilization (in which they meant Western Europe, Canada, and the U.S.) was the most advanced form of social organization, and that all other societies were developing towards this pinnacle of scientific rationality, freedom from violence, objectivity, orderly laws, aesthetics, and economy. So, parts of Eastern Europe might be construed as close to the Western ideal – as might Japan – and Central America, Africa, interior Asia, and the island Pacific were seen as pre-modern. As anthropology developed as a discipline, unilineal evolution was quickly debunked, first by Franz Boas at the turn of the 20th century, and even more profoundly, and through a variety of sociological, historical, and philosophical means, by Johannes Fabian, Eric Wolf, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Faye Harrison, and their colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s. By the turn of the 21st century, one would be hard pressed to find a sociocultural anthropologist – or anyone in the social sciences – who believed that any modern society could offer a window onto our evolutionary past.

Where does scientific racism come into the equation? It was no mistake that the early proponents of unilineal evolution were all white men in Europe and the U.S. By building the theory of unilineal evolution in the way that they did, they rationalized Western civilization as the endpoint of social development. In so doing, they justified the civilizing missions of settler colonialism and global imperialism, suggesting that it was ‘the white man’s burden’ to uplift the savage societies of the colonies and American frontier. Race, for these early thinkers, was synonymous with earlier stages of social development, and distinctions were also made among white communities – between the urban elites and rural poor and working classes. White elites were the outcome of the civilizing process. Everyone else was in need of civilizational intervention. To support the theory of unilineal evolution, evidence about ‘modern’ societies needed to be disregarded or ignored, including ideas about superstition, religion, irrational orderings of society, gender bias, and legal and domestic violence. White elites, everyone came to agree by the turn of the 21st century, were just as subject to bias and irrationality and everyone else.

Unilineal evolution leant itself directly to early 20th century eugenics movements, providing ammunition for American and European political organizations that sought the promotion of some races over others. In [The Mismeasure of Man](#), noted biologist Stephen Jay Gould thoroughly critiqued these early 20th century scientists and the implicit biases built into their science that led them to see some people and societies as more advanced and worthy than others. In the present, we continue to see

inferences between race and behavior – despite the thorough debunking of the genetic reality of race. Whenever someone claims that a person or society behaves a particular way because of their race, they are participating in a kind of scientific racism that relies on a baseless understanding of race and conflates that with a faulty notion of social development. Similarly, when subsistence patterns – like hunter-gatherer foraging – are mapped onto particular places because of their evolutionary import, the people who practice those lifeways become conflated with earlier stages of human social – and potentially, evolutionary – development.

The debate I had stepped into by commenting on that sleep research is really at the heart of anthropology's inability to communicate across the subdisciplines as they are currently configured, and emblematic of how anthropologists have a hard time communicating with people outside of the discipline. Biological and sociocultural anthropologists have moved further and further apart over the last century – and especially over the last 20 years – to the point that a whole department's worth of biological anthropologists can subscribe to forms of biological reductionism that sociocultural anthropologists in the same department actively work to debunk. Medical anthropology, as a subfield, is particularly gripped by this inability to communicate, as we can have positivist, treatment-focused, lab-based scientists publishing in the same journal as deeply constructivist, interpretivist social scientists who conceptualize disease as largely a social byproduct. Moreover, as biological sciences outside of anthropology move further away from the social as an explanatory possibility, when a critique of biological sciences comes out of a society-focused discipline, like sociocultural anthropology, it seems to come as a broadside, spurious, or out of school. Consulting a sociocultural anthropologist at the beginning of a study might have led to the development of a very different research design – and one that stayed away from any controversial assumptions about race, society, and human evolution. Developing those kinds of consultancies and partnerships is important not only to produce socially-aware science, but science that produces valid knowledge.

Now, it has been several months since my response appeared in print, and I wonder if 'verges on scientific racism' was untoward. Does suggesting that the interpretation of a set of data might harbor racist or otherwise prejudicial assumptions thwart the goals of critique? Does it shut down the possibility for an interdisciplinary conversation, or are we just at a point where interdisciplinary conversations are impossible, at least between particular disciplines, and especially those interested in human evolution, biology, and history?

In an earlier version of my response, I hovered over the phrase 'verges

on scientific racism,' wondering if it was the right wording. My concern wasn't so much for the authors of the piece – my assumption was that they were unknowingly reproducing assumptions that social scientists and humanists had long debunked – but for people who might read the piece and take its findings at face value. My audience wasn't the authors of the original piece, but, hopefully, other scientists who might forward a research agenda that would help get away from such assumptions about people, places, and history. I hoped that my critique might be taken as a teachable moment, since there was clearly a point of theoretical contact between the assumptions of the scientists and longstanding bodies of anthropological evidence. My assumption was also that 'verges on scientific racism' put enough rhetorical distance between actual racism and the authors of the piece that they might not see themselves reflected in my language – but rather see some of the assumptions in the science as part of the problem and work towards fixing them in the future. In fact, shortly after my response appeared, a group of scientists made a very similar [critique](#).

I fully believe that it's possible to have racist, or sexist, or classist, or any number of other prejudices buried in science and that you can have well-meaning, non-biased scientists practicing that science – that's one of the basic assumptions of science studies. And it's also the basis of critiques originating from science studies: pointing to the unmarked assumptions of knowledge production helps to expose implicit biases and helps to forge new ways forward that will – hopefully – lead us to better scientific understandings of the world and the things that inhabit it. The problem with prejudice, especially in the context of a scientific ideology, is that it rarely names itself (unless it's [The Bell Curve](#)). Individuals can be indoctrinated into scientific practices and unknowingly reproduce findings that have implicit assumptions and biases (for example, the scientists in Emily Martin's ['The Egg & the Sperm'](#) and a recent Wellcome Trust-funded [video game](#) about fertilization).

At the end of the day, I chose the wording that I wrote, 'verging on scientific racism,' because I fundamentally believe in the advancement of science, and drawing attention to prejudicial assumptions should help us collectively forward a scientific agenda that sheds more light than darkness. I found it distressing that media outlets accepted the assumptions of that particular scientific paper — as if any science should be uncritically accepted. Scientific knowledge production is an ongoing project and no one should be afraid of being proven wrong – in findings or assumptions. Sometimes critique can be difficult to hear – and 'verging on scientific racism' might be especially harsh given the contemporary U.S. political climate – but only through honest critique can we begin to unfetter ourselves from the restraints that limit our scientific imaginations and build truly interdisciplinary research agendas that overcome assumptions in the social and biological sciences, especially about race and history.

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