What is race today? Scientific, legal, and social appraisals from around the globe

Race is a core concept in science and society. Yet, the meaning of the concept is constantly changing and varies by language and country. In science, race was once an unchallenged concept that was used to describe human biological or genetic variation, but we now know that dividing individuals into races is typological and explains a small fraction of variation. In this sense, race is an outdated idea and a myth. Yet, race continues to be used as a scientific term in many publications and fields such as medicine and forensic anthropology. In society, race has also changed in many complex ways, and varies by language, history, culture, and national tradition. Race is a global concept with profoundly local dynamics. Race in law, society and the public sphere is so salient today because racism is.

The purpose of this forum is to provide a basis for comparing the “state of the art” of debates around race, human biological variation and racism in science and society in different countries. The first set of articles that follows are from European countries and the United States. How is race used in science, law and other intersecting domains such as everyday and political discourse? Giovanni Destro Bisol, JASs Editor, suggested the idea for this forum and I have been honored to work with him. We hoped that others would contribute their own analyses on the state of race in countries they are most familiar with. While each author has been free to take the topic in directions that make the more senses to them, we provided some guiding questions.

• How is race used in science today? Although science is international, are there notable changes in how race is conceptualized and used in your country or the language of your country?
• Is there a decline in the salience of race as a proxy for human genetic variation, and if so, in what ways?
• How is race used in legal terms, documents and legal proceedings? Have there been any debates about changing the definition or use of race or related terminology?
• What are the current political and cultural points of tension or “hotspots” with regards to race and racism? Do they intersect in any way with the scientific and legal status of race?
• What forward progress might be made to better the study of human variation and to use a full range of humanistic and scientific expertise to eliminate (instead of perpetuate) racism?

The essays that follow provide a glimpse at the diversity of the salience of race today. These essays focus on The US, France, Germany, Norway, Greece, Portugal, the UK and Italy. Others will follow these European and North American perspectives with even greater geographic range. I hope these essays individually and collectively inform efforts to improve the science of human variation and dismantling racism.

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