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What is Race?

By

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What is Race?

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In 1919 more than 350,000 steelworkers went on strike to secure an eight-hour work day. They were crushed by employers who used thugs, government injunctions and troops to defeat them. The industry also relied heavily on ethnic divisions to undermine the union, and it worked.

This understanding was systematized into a management science to divide and conquer. Within a few years of the strike, race pseudo-scientists had developed racial hierarchies to delineate who was fit, by birth, to do different kinds of jobs. The chart below, produced in 1926 for the Central Tube Company in Pittsburgh, shows how the workforce would be carved up into an intricate hierarchy of talents based on supposedly innate ethnic talents.

At that time, ethnicity and race were viewed by science as one and the same. Religion was a race. Language group was a race. Skin color was a race. In the chart, there are 36 “races” evaluated along 36 different work traits and skills. Each race was believed to have in-bred talents and traits that the pseudo-scientists of that era believed they could statistically identify. The more blank ‘white’ boxes next to a ‘race’, the greater the skill set. American whites were believed by “science” to be the fittest of the fit in this Darwinian hierarchy of talent. After all the believed themselves to have conquered the continent, won WWI, and had created the largest, most dynamic economy in the world.

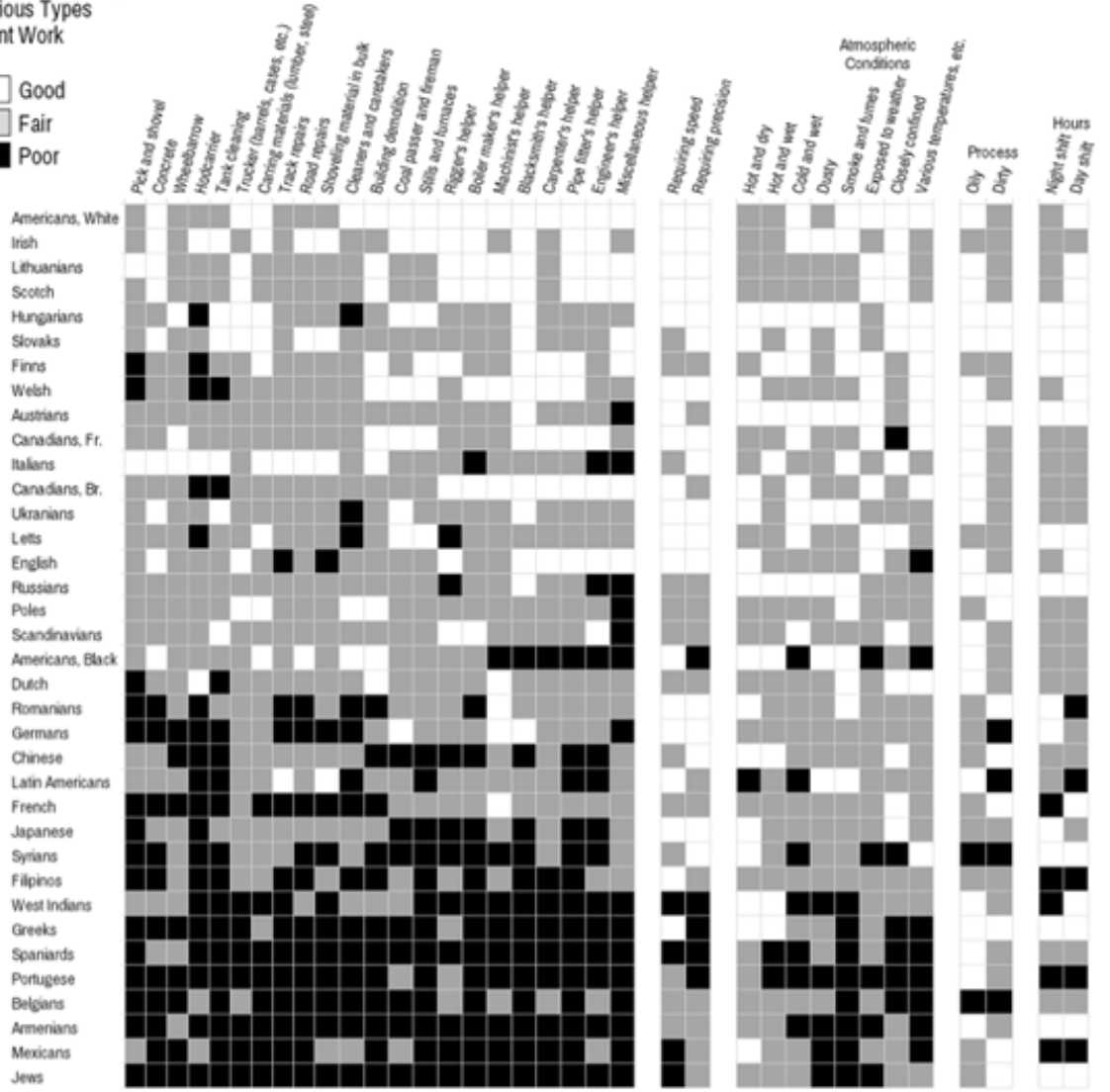
Note that Black Americans were not at the bottom of the list. This seems to run counter to that era’s white supremacy efforts including the rise of the KKK, increases in the number of lynchings, and the re-segregation of the federal government by President Woodrow Wilson. Clearly, Black workers were viewed as a ‘race’ of hard workers. But also, their position in the middle of the hierarchy may reflect the role they played during the 1919 steel strike. At that time Black workers, who had been excluded from membership by nearly all of the striking craft unions, served as strike-breakers in Gary, Indiana, (leading to a race riot and martial law). Their supposedly innate racial attributes may have also influenced management’s belief that Black workers would continue to shun unions.

Not so for the Jews who were relinquished to the very bottom. Antisemitism was an accepted norm during this period, especially within the more privileged corporate class (Henry Ford for example wrote many an article lambasting Jews). Keeping Jews from working in the steel industry may also have been connected to the image of urban ghettos, teaming with immigrants from eastern Europe and filled with crime and disease. Or maybe it was the idea that Jews were bookish and unfit for strenuous labor.

While these may be contributing causes, there is another explanation worth considering – Jewish-led clothing workers unions were a vital part of union organizing efforts in many industries. So, one way to keep union organizers at bay was not to hire any Jews.

Racial Adaptability to Various Types of Plant Work

Good
 Fair
 Poor



Another related factor concerned the Communist Party, USA and the many Jews within it. The Steel industry relied heavily on red-baiting to turn the public against the strike. The upsurge in walkouts all over the country after WWI, including a general strike in Seattle and police strike in Boston, made it seem to factory owners like the successful 1917 Bolshevik revolution was spreading to the U.S. Jews had a disproportionately high membership in the 1920s Communist Party. Yet another reason not to hire them.

In these ways, race science was shaped by the requirements of management control. And that may be the chart's most important lesson – the flexibility of the meaning of 'race.' The pseudo-scientists were sure they understood the great evolutionary hierarchy that explained why the white race ruled (and should rule). To scientific management, those 35 races were real physiologically and mentally. These 'races' were believed to be so fundamentally different that you could predict exactly what skills each had and did not have. The imperative of management control was built into the science of racial hierarchy.

Today, the number of 'races', according to the U.S. census, has collapsed to only five: white, Black/African-American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. Are these five 'races' any more biologically real than the 35 'races' in the steel worker skill chart? Would someone today really be able to argue that these five 'races' are genuine, while most of the 35 'races' on the chart are not?

Since the 1850s, the 'race' scientists have been trying to prove that racial differences are biological demonstrating inferiority and superiority. They have utterly failed, but the tradition still lingers. The quest to find racial differences may stem from the sense that visual differences like skin color and facial features signal deeper biological differences including intelligence. It may also reflect an ancient tribal understanding: The 'other' is fundamentally different. We are better.

I worry that every time the word 'race' is used (instead of ethnicity, for example) it reflects a bit of race pseudo-science. Using the word 'race' may continue to reinforce the failed notion of biological difference that, at most, is only skin deep.

For more from Les Leopold, subscribe to his Substack here:

https://lesleopold.substack.com/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=substack_profile

About the White Paper Series

LEARN launched the "A Better Tomorrow" White Paper series to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Institute of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University. The purpose of the series is to consider the lessons of the past and present and to ponder possible alternative futures. The contributions represent original research and reflections from scholars and practitioners and chapters from forthcoming books by LEARN-affiliated faculty, students, and friends. The arguments put forth in the papers reflect only the views and interpretations by the authors, not LEARN or the School of Management and Labor Relations. The goal is to advance dialogue on the pressing issues of our times and to further the mission of LEARN to "promote harmony and cooperation" and to "enhance the unity and welfare of the people of the State."

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