

TRANSLATION

Bio-history and bio-politics¹

Michel Foucault

Under review: Jacques Ruffié, De la biologie à la culture [From biology to culture] (Paris: Flammarion, 1976).

Experience has taught us to be wary of grand monumental syntheses that take us from the infinitesimal point of the molecule all the way to human societies, traversing at a gallop the entire history of life across thousands of millennia. This “philosophy of nature,” which evolutionism once produced in abundance, often brings out the worst. That ambition is completely foreign to Jacques Ruffié’s book. It avoids the chastisements that such ambition ordinarily merits, because the author has a perfect mastery of the immense domain that he addresses, and especially because, instead of taking what he knows as a pretext to say what he thinks, on the contrary, he interrogates what we think on the basis of what he knows.

I will take only one example: what biology has to say today about human races. It is doubtless on this point that Jacques Ruffié’s method and accomplishments are most apparent, since he is one of the most eminent representatives of the new physical anthropology. And it is here, as well, that a rigorous scientific knowledge can have an immediate political significance in an age when the repetitive, global condemnation of racism, combined with a tolerance in actual fact, permits the maintenance of segregationist practices and of insidious “scientific” endeavors like those of [Arthur] Jensen² or the shameful UN resolution on Zionism.³ Rather than a rhetoric whose indignations shelter so many complicities, a filtering of the problem of races in scientific terms is indispensable.

¹ Translator: This essay was first published in *Le Monde*, no. 9869 (17-18 October, 1976), 5, and is translated from *Dits et Ecrits*, © Gallimard 1994 (no. 179, vol III, pp. 95-97). It appears in English for the first time here, with the permission of Éditions Gallimard. The article is translated for *Foucault Studies* by Richard A. Lynch (DePauw University, USA). The translation of this text was supported by a grant from the University of San Francisco; my thanks also to Jeffrey Paris, Eduardo Mendieta, and Kevin Thompson.

² Translator: Arthur R. Jensen argued in the late 1960s and early 1970s that IQ was largely genetically determined, and that Blacks were therefore intellectually inferior to Whites. Ruffié discusses Jensen in a chapter entitled “Black racism and slavery” (by “Black racism” he means racism against Blacks); Ruffié cites several studies that refute Jensen’s conclusions (cf. Ruffié, 436-438).

³ Translator: United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 (November 10, 1975) declared Zionism to be “a form of racism and racial discrimination.” It was revoked on December 16, 1991, by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 4686.

Out of the many pages that Ruffié devotes to the problem of “human races,” I think we must retain several fundamental propositions:

- just as a species cannot be defined by a prototype but by an ensemble of variations, race, for the biologist, is a statistical notion—a “population;”
- the genetic polymorphism of a population does not constitute a decline; it is biologically useful, whereas “purity” is the result of processes, often artificial, that weaken adaptation and make it more difficult;
- a population cannot be defined according to its apparent morphological characteristics. On the other hand, molecular biology has made it possible to identify the factors upon which the immunological structure and the enzymatic equipment of cells depend—characteristics whose conditioning is rigorously genetic. (Because it is easier to study them in blood cells, they are called, a little improperly, “blood markers.”)

Briefly, “blood markers” are for the problem of races today what “sexual characteristics” were for species in Carl Linnaeus’ era. Except that for a long time the sexual typology was able to establish the great botanic classifications, whereas the hemato-typology now authorizes the dissolution of the idea of human race. With a whole series of supporting evidence from pre-history and paleontology, it can be established that there never were “races” in the human species; but at the very most a process of “raciation,” tied to the existence of certain isolated groups. This process, far from having succeeded, reversed itself beginning with the Neolithic era and, through the effect of migrations, displacements, exchanges, and diverse interminglings, it was succeeded by a constant “deraciation.” We must conceive of a humanity not as juxtaposed races, but as “clouds” of populations that are interwoven together and combine a genetic inheritance that is all the more valuable the more its polymorphism is accentuated. As Ernst Mayr puts it, humanity is a “pool of intercommunicating genes”⁴—populations, that is to say, ensembles of variations, are unceasingly formed and dissolved. History designates these ensembles before erasing them; we must not look at them as raw and definitive biological facts that impose themselves, from the basis of “nature,” upon history.

Jacques Ruffié’s text contains a number of other analyses of this type. All are important, because one sees very clearly formulated here the questions of a “bio-history” that would no longer be the unitary and mythological history of the human species across time, and a “bio-politics” which would not be one of divisions, self-preservation, and hierarchies but of communication and polymorphism.

⁴ Translator: The phrase comes from Ernst Mayr’s *Populations, species, and evolution* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 394. Ruffié cites this work—in its French translation, *Populations, espèces et évolution*, translated by Yves Guy (Paris: Hermann, 1974)—throughout *De la biologie à la culture*; this phrase is quoted on page 415 (citing page 435 of the French translation of Mayr). In fact, Ruffié and Foucault have misquoted Mayr: What Foucault quotes as “un « pool des gènes intercommunicants »,” Ruffié had quoted as “« un seul pool des gènes intercommunicants ».” Mayr’s sentence actually reads, “They [humans] form a set of interconnecting gene pools”; in the French translation, « Elles forment un seul lot de pools de genes intercommunicants. »

Translated by:
Richard A. Lynch
DePauw University
Indiana, USA
richardlynch@depauw.edu