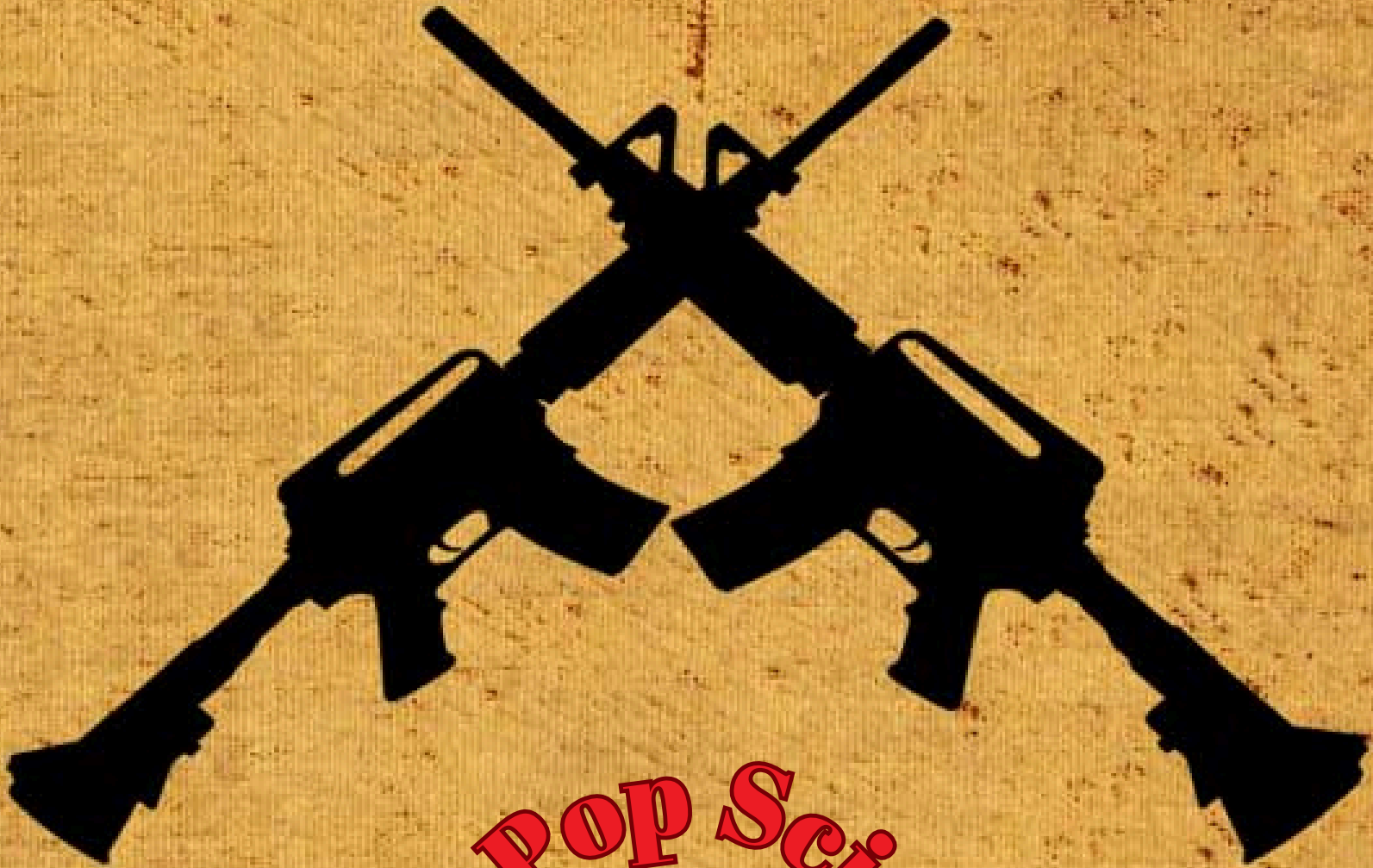


THREE MYTHS THAT FEED WHITE SUPREMACISM

By

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Pop Sci.



Following the Buffalo hate massacre, a recent example of a global surge in terrorist attacks by white supremacists, there is an urgent need to take stock of the myths that are feeding the ideology of white supremacy. The aim of this essay is to identify these myths, and briefly describe how they interact to bolster white supremacist ideology.



The Buffalo murderer, an 18-year-old from Conklin, NY, targeted a Black neighborhood where he shot 13 individuals and killed ten. This young man copied elements from previous incidents of white supremacist terrorism, such as using paramilitary gear and an assault rifle, live streaming his atrocity, and writing a 'manifesto' to detail his deranged ideology of hatred. There are parallels with other massacres committed by white supremacists including:

- The Christchurch (New Zealand) mosque shootings of 2019, in which a 28-year-old Australian man murdered 51 Muslim people and injured another;
- The El Paso (Texas) shooting of 2019, in which a 21-year-old Texan man, from an upper middle-class family, murdered 23 Latinos and injured 23 others;
- The Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) synagogue shooting of 2018, in which a 46-year-old Pennsylvanian man murdered 11 Jewish people, and wounded six;
- The Charleston (South Carolina) Church shooting of 2015, in which a 21-year-old South Carolinian man murdered nine African-American people.

In the last few days, it has transpired that the young man who allegedly attacked Nancy Pelosi's husband with a hammer on October 28th seems to have been motivated by an amalgamation of right-wing conspiracy theories, including racism and antisemitism. White supremacist terror is a global phenomenon in countries where there is a significant portion of the population who are socially classified as white, including in South Africa where 'white' people are a socioeconomically powerful minority.

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White supremacist terror can be seen as the tip of an iceberg with a much greater mass of white supremacist ideology and practice lying under the surface. White supremacy is directed against Black and Indigenous people, against other People of Color, and against Jews.

Three clearly identifiable myths underlie the current instantiation of white supremacist ideology: (1) scientific racism; (2) the so-called “great replacement” and “white genocide” conspiracy theories; and (3) the “postracial” myth (where the existence of white supremacist racism is trivialized and the existence of structural racism is denied or downplayed).

There are interrelationships between these three central myths but the latter two depend more-or-less explicitly on the assumptions of the first. The first two myths have been discussed quite extensively in other places, so I'll go over them briefly and then move onto a discussion of how the third myth—which is generally seen as fairly innocuous— in fact interacts with the other two myths to reinforce white supremacy.

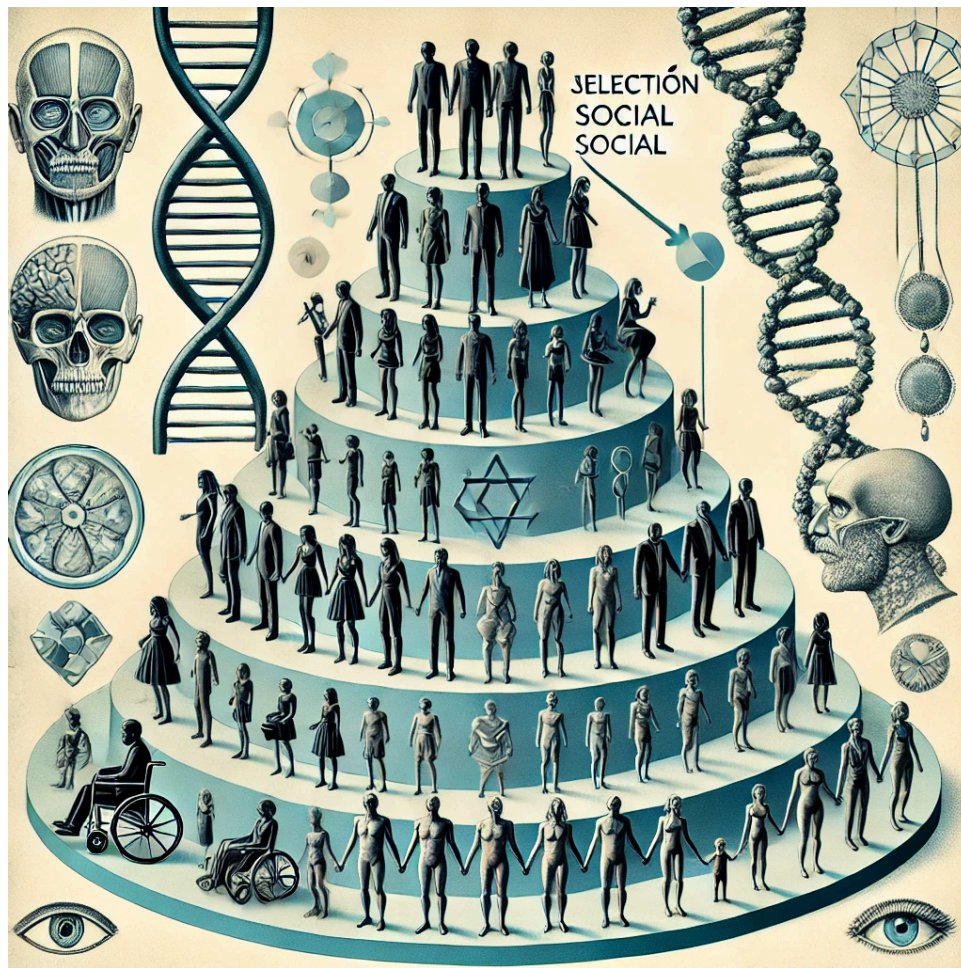
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Scientific racism, the oldest of the three myths, is an ideology that arose towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, merging pre-existing racist ideas about the supposed supremacy of northern European peoples with new ideas that had come about due to the emergence of evolutionary theory in biology. Scientific racism was a new form of racism that cemented the white supremacist ideology that predated it—the belief that the “Nordic”, “Aryan” or “Teutonic” race had a superior capacity for civilization, and the notion that the interbreeding with other races should be avoided in order to preserve the “purity” of the white race. Scientific racism also spawned the eugenics movement, in which it was widely believed that encouraging reproduction among people who had characteristics that were perceived as socially desirable could improve the “white race”. The corollary was that people and “races” perceived to be inferior should be discouraged from reproducing, a theme which later became entwined with “great replacement theory”.

The second myth involves conspiracy theories that white people are under threat by other “races” and ethnic groups. For example, “great replacement theory” and “white genocide” are interrelated myths that sprang up shortly after the emergence of scientific racism, in the early 20th century. In a nutshell, “great replacement” is an ideology that originated in French and North American nationalism. Its tenets are that racial purity is necessary for the survival of nations, that the “white race” is superior and will be weakened by interbreeding with inferior “stock”. There is usually also an antisemitic aspect to this myth where Jews are believed to be orchestrating the “replacement”, and a competitive obsession with the birth rates of different “races”.

The French nationalist and antisemite Maurice Barrès was an early popularizer of racial Darwinism, promoting the idea that different races were in competition for their continued survival and that preserving the racial purity of France was of paramount importance. In this he was no doubt influenced by his mentor, Jules Soury, a science writer who had become an authority on the physiology of the nervous system and intelligence, and who propounded the idea that Jews were inferior based on purported neurological differences between the “Aryan race” and the “Semitic race”. Meanwhile, in the USA, an elite New Yorker, Madison Grant, became involved with the Immigration Restriction League and the Eugenics Research Association, and turned to racial Darwinism to bolster his belief that Anglo-Saxon culture in the USA was endangered by immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. He subsequently adopted the idea that there are innate differences between northern Europeans, who he saw as being the legitimate ancestors of US culture, and their southern and eastern European counterparts.



Great replacement theory has seen an alarming resurgence in Europe and the USA in recent years, and forms the basis of the manifestos of white supremacist terrorists alongside scientific racism. Meanwhile, the “white genocide” myth in South Africa is promulgated by a far-right Afrikaaner group called the “Suidlanders” (southlanders) who believe that they are fighting in a war against non-white people led by “globalists” who are out to crush white and Christian people. They believe this war was prophesized by a Boer War spiritual leader by the name of Siener van Rensburg.

The third myth is racial justice backlash in the form of denying that structural racism exists, and overestimating how much has been done to redress centuries of systematic racial oppression. Systemic racism, defined as “the macrolevel systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another to generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups”[1], is a concept that has recently come under attack by conservatives. At the time of writing, Conservative justices in the USA Supreme Court are showing signs that they will put an end to affirmative action in college admissions. Affirmative action in college admissions is aimed at increasing representatives from racialized minority groups in the student body.



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Racism denial undermines attempts to redress racism, either by asserting that there isn’t any need, or by claiming that such measures are discriminatory “reverse racism”. Although there are various localized terms that describe this tendency, the term “postracial myth” seems most apt for covering all the geographically disparate cultural contexts in which it applies. The postracial myth is insidious in that it usually doesn’t rely directly on claims generated by scientific racism (although there is also a great deal of inconsistency and contradiction in this regard).

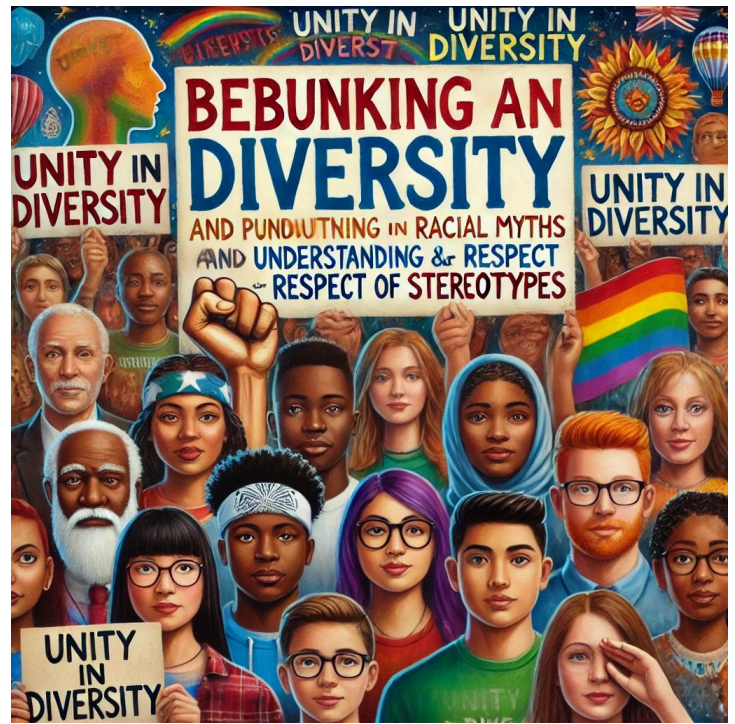
Much of the recent moral panic in the USA about the teaching of “critical race theory” in schools, for example, is aimed at preventing US-American children from learning the country’s unpleasant history of racial injustice. Denying the role that white supremacist racism has played in shaping our world since the rise of European imperialism serves to further marginalize racialized groups in society. So-called “racial” disparities in socioeconomic outcomes can then be either ignored or blamed on racialized groups themselves, usually by insinuating that there are deficiencies in their “culture”. There is latent racial essentialism in the process of blaming the “culture” of racialized people for negative social outcomes, as this process obscures the immense and ongoing harms done to such people by racism. In fact, this is straight out of the playbook of the architects of apartheid in South Africa. During the post-WWII era, when antifascist sentiment was still very strong, they turned to cultural essentialism to sanitize and promote their system of disenfranchisement:

“In constructing an intellectually coherent justification for apartheid, Christian-nationalist ideologues frequently chose to infer or to suggest biological theories of racial superiority, rather than to assert these openly. For pragmatic as well as doctrinal reasons, the diffuse language of cultural essentialism was preferred to the crude scientific racism drawn from the vocabulary of Social Darwinism.”[2]

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a resurgence of overt scientific racism in South Africa but an ever-present undercurrent of apartheid racism was antisemitism and the belief that perceived cultural retardation or primitivity of non-white peoples was due to their innate racial inferiority.



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The postracial myth also underpins the naïve idea that being “color blind” is the way to achieve racial justice. Proponents of color blindness are usually well-intentioned people who would like to move beyond a racialized world by downplaying the existence of socially-constructed racial categories. They may be either expressly against the racial essentialist system that was created by scientific racism, or express agnosticism about “genetic differences” between racial groups. The problem with the “color blind” approach is that although the goal—achieving a non-racialized world—is a virtuous ideal, the pragmatics of how to achieve it are very much neglected. Ignoring the existence of deeply-entrenched structural racism simply washes away generations of trauma, disenfranchisement, and impoverishment for racialized people of color and the proliferating ideology of white supremacy. It is unlikely to achieve concrete and material victories in redressing racial inequalities, and it either does little to stamp out white supremacist ideology or actually reinforces it. Social problems, such as racial differences in life expectancy in the USA that map onto the geographic patterns of slavery in the past, are unlikely to disappear simply by ignoring their existence, when socioeconomic status is such a key issue in public health, and when the share of income for the poorest half of the global population is today about half of what it was in 1820.

For example, the organization Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR), which includes popular academic Steven Pinker on its board of advisors, advocates for “color-transcendence” and says of systemic racism that:

While reasonable people disagree on the meaning, impact, and nature of systemic racism, many of our institutions are now presuming differential group outcomes are always the result of racism or other bigotry, overlooking our nation’s successes, and promoting a grievance-based, race-essentialist ideology that defines people by their immutable traits and groups them accordingly.

They do not say what they believe structural racism to be, but it most definitely cannot be reduced to “bigotry” (the concept was developed precisely for the purpose of moving beyond intentional behaviors of racist actors and the moral character of such actors)[3], and it is also certainly not a “race-essentialist ideology” as here implied. Structural racism is rather a concept that explains how the process of being racialized by white supremacist ideology and practices (i.e. racism) has harmed groups that have been racialized in a system based on racial essentialism.

FAIR also do not say what they believe to be the causes of “differential group outcomes”, if not structural racism. If disparities in social outcomes between racialized groups are not believed to be the result of a centuries-old process of racialization, i.e. structural racism, it is incumbent on the sceptic to explain what they believe such disparities are in fact based on. Short of doing so, statements of this kind can only serve to further promulgate racial essentialism (of either the biological or cultural variants).



The more noxious form of the post-racial myth turns to scientific racism when ongoing social disparities in life expectancy, health measures, economic status and educational attainment are instead attributed to the genetic and/or cultural inferiority of racialized peoples. For example, crime statistics are manipulated to portray racialized peoples as a threat to white people. Far right extremist groups also play a large role in distributing propaganda designed to persuade others that Black and Indigenous People have social advantages over white people but have not managed to reach social and economic equality due to genetically-based differences in intelligence (otherwise known as the hereditarian hypothesis).

The hereditarian hypothesis has been promulgated in academia ever since the invention of IQ tests in the early twentieth century, but despite the scientific consensus moving away from the idea during the late twentieth century, it achieved a popular resurgence when hereditarian academics began promoting it to a wider audience through the rightwing webzine Quillette (along with other scientifically defunct ideas about race). A typical ploy used to promote hereditarian speculation about racial differences in IQ and achievement in the USA is to undermine the idea that the environmental conditions of structural racism are responsible. In order to do this, they unfavorably compare Black and Indigenous People, who have a unique history of racial oppression within the USA, with Asians Americans, who, while often facing racial discrimination within the USA, are an ethnically diverse group heavily comprised of recent immigrants (71% of Asian Americans adults were born in another country). This includes, among others, elite Indian- and Chinese-born entrepreneurs.

By presenting attempts to achieve racial justice through the conscious provision of opportunities to racialized peoples (e.g. affirmative action) as both unwarranted and unsuccessful, the post-racial myth furthers the grievances of white-identifying people who see themselves as victims of “woke” culture and who are inclined to believe the myths of scientific racism and great replacement.

The postracial myth lures susceptible individuals further into white supremacist ideology, and radicalizes them against doing anything concrete to redress racism. More attention should be paid to this myth as a potential gateway to white supremacist extremism.



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