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Editor's Corner: Social Constructs

Actress/Comedian Whoopi Goldberg, who is one of the hosts of the American talk show, “The View”, got in hot water not long ago for comments she made during a discussion of the Holocaust. The Holocaust, she opined, was not an act of racism, because it was “white people doing it to other white people.” This stirred up considerable controversy, and accusations that she did not understand the true nature of the Holocaust.

Yet context is everything, and in the context of the American race relations with which Goldberg was familiar, her statement made perfect sense. Of course, in the context of the Nazi mindset, indeed, of European culture of the early 20th century, it WAS an act of racism — Jews and Aryans were considered very distinct races, as were Slavs, Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons, Italians and so on. Hierarchies were established based on which of these races was superior to the others, and so justified attempts to ‘purify’ the races.

It was all intellectual nonsense of course, and only goes to prove what anthropologists and sociologists have long claimed: race is a social construct, not a biological fact. Research has shown that the variation in the genetic makeup of two people of different races is no greater than the variation between two people of the same race. There really is only one ‘race’ of homo sapiens; the human race. Needless to say, telling this to someone who has suffered the results of racial oppression is as unhelpful as telling someone suffering from physical illness caused by stress that their problems are “all in their head”. Social constructs may not be ‘real’ in an objective sense, but to the people involved, they are very real indeed.

This is even more true in the case of the social construct we call nationality. Nations are what some scientists call “imagined kinship.” We create these idealized communities because humans are by nature social creatures and they need to identify with a group in order to survive. There is nothing inherently evil about this tendency, but it can lead to great evil. Racism at least has some small basis in objective reality. It is possible to look at a newborn baby and tell by its physical characteristics whether its ancestors came from Africa, Europe or Asia. However, one cannot look at a newborn child and tell whether it was born in Russia or the Ukraine, Israel or Palestine, India or Pakistan. As has been pointed out before, the borders we draw on our maps do not appear on photos taken from outer space. The north bank of a river does not differ from the south bank. These things are all in our heads.

How does that help us? For one thing it liberates us from the illusion of the inevitability of nationality. Nation states are finite entities, of limited duration — very few of the members of today’s United Nations existed

five centuries ago, and none of those few retain the same borders, political structures, or cultures they had back then. Nations are made and unmade constantly. Moreover, the people within nations are constantly changing. The notion that all the people within a specific nations are the same — that they speak the same language, eat the same food, think the same way, and laugh at the same jokes — is demonstratively inaccurate. People migrate to new countries, and adopt their new nation as their own. Regardless of what we have been taught, we are not prisoners of our nationality.

Freed from the misconception that nations MUST exist and that human beings MUST be citizens of one or the other of them, there is scarcely any limit on what we humans can then achieve. We could, for instance, embrace the radical notion that all human beings have value, regardless of who they are or from where they come. From that might flow the recognition that all human beings have rights, which ought to be respected. From that, in turn, might arise a drive to create the political and social structures to delineate and protect those rights; in other words, to establish a unified global commonwealth in which every single human being is a free and equal citizen.

As was said earlier, humans are social creatures, and will always seek to identify themselves with various communities. The drive to belong is instinctive, and it is very strong. Yet belonging to a community is not the same as denigrating, oppressing or behaving violently toward those who belong to a different one. The t-shirt my kids gave me for Father's Day may proudly proclaim I am the "World's Greatest Dad" but that does give me the right to look down at all those other dads out there. We can all seek and find our place in the sun, without blocking it from others. Indeed, given the threats to long-term human survival, we may well have no other choice.

