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HUMAN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

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Human cultural diversity, culture itself, race vs. ethnicity, the parameters of "whiteness," the social, economic, and political implications of race and ethnicity: none of these categories and processes can be defined for all time. All are highly politicized and entirely historically contingent. As well, these terms index not only sifting human social realities and politics, but also the histories of the outward adaptive radiation of the various social sciences and history over the course of the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

Culture is like all of these concepts highly polysemous, and lies at the center of contemporary political and intellectual contest. The course of the 19th century saw the Great Chasm open between Arnoldian High Culture, and the globally varying ways of life documented by the newly labeled field of anthropology. In the early to mid-twentieth century, a new contrast emerged: the wealthy West had specific histories, while peasants and "primitives," and by extension, the Western (especially nonwhite) poor, had small-c cultures and were the "people without history." It is of course the case that there is "something" to cultural variation, as there is to ethnic identity, but these variations are vastly more historically contingent, economically freighted, and internally heterogeneous than the ahistorical vision would allow. The rise of white ethnicity, of "model minorities," and the "the urban underclass" in American history illustrate these points.