

Origin of the term "Caucasian"

Hi, I'm Jim, I'm Erik, and I'm Jo and this is Speaking of Race.

Jo: Hi listeners. So as you probably know, the US Census is back in the news again. And that means race categories are in the news.

Jim: It seems like every ten years we have to have a debate again about what race terms are going to appear in the Census. Though maybe "debate" is too generous.

Jo: With this in mind, we wanted to take a minute to unpack a term that sounds sciencey and seems like it should be preferred to color terms, like "white." That term is "Caucasian".

Jim: Actually, "Caucasian" isn't a word that has ever appeared as a choice on the Census -- "white" is the only term that has appeared in every census since 1790, even when other groups aren't identified by color.

Erik: "Caucasian" is weird if you think about all the other descriptors we use to refer races. "African-American" or "Asian-American" -- I can wrap my mind around those terms. The old terms like Negroid or Mongoloid sound straight up offensive. But Caucasian? What the heck is that pointing to?

Jo: So today ...

Jim: "Caucasian" could be a term that refers to people from the Caucasus mountain range, which is in the present-day countries of Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Erik: Those are two countries sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and seem to always be in the orbit of Russia. And that term was first used in print for those regions two thousand years ago by the Greek scholar Strabo in his *Geography* ([Strabo, 1777](#)). But why in the United States in the 21st century does that mean "white person"?

Jo: I didn't realize it was Strabo! For people who remember way back to 2013, the *New York Times* weighed in on an affirmative action case in university admissions: *Fisher v. University of Texas-Austin* (2012) ([Dewan, 2013](#)).

Erik: Help me remember what that case was about.

Jo: A white girl sued UT-Austin because she said she was being discriminated because of her whiteness. But it is interesting for us because, in the majority opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy used the word "Caucasian" to describe her. That's what the *NY Times* was picking up on. And the *Times* asked if "Caucasian" was losing its meaning.

Erik: Is it?

Jo: Well, five years after *Fisher v. UT-Austin*, anthropologists Carol Mukhopadhyay and Yolanda Moses were still arguing to get rid of it ([Moses, 2017](#); [Mukhopadhyay, 2008](#)). They blamed Johann Friedrich Blumenbach as the originator of the term and, in some ways, the father of scientific racism.

Erik: Oh yeah, we mentioned Johann Friedrich Blumenbach during our series of episodes on the Enlightenment and the emergence of race science last year. Blumenbach classified humans into five major groups based on his set of skulls.

Jim: Unfortunately, those two cultural anthropologists got that wrong.

Jo: What do you mean?

Jim: It's "common knowledge" that Blumenbach was racist and did this skull stuff to promote his racism—besides the anthropologists we just mentioned, you can see that in a highly regarded source like Nell Irvin Painter's *History of White People* ([Painter, 2010](#)) while some folks, like Kat Blaque get it right ([Blaque, 2016](#)). But that's a misconception. Blumenbach argued long and hard for environmental causes of both physical and behavioral differences and he also was a staunch spokesman for intellectual equality--especially promoting African accomplishment. Blumenbach didn't even use the Latin for race in his major work on human variation, preferring varieties that blend into one another ([Blumenbach, 1795](#)). He also didn't come up with the term Caucasian, it turns out!

Erik: ... anthropologists ... history...

Jim: "Caucasian" in the *modern* sense comes from the historian Christoph Meiners.

Jo: ... historians ... racism ...

Jim: Meiners first used the term "Caucasian" as a term for a human race in 1785 in his book *The Outline of the History of Mankind*. That was almost a decade before Blumenbach picked it up and used it when he first named his previously numbered races in his 1794 description of some Egyptian mummies.

Erik: Meiners was part of the new Göttingen school that professionalized history and created the model of the modern research university. But he even borrowed the word Caucasian from older sources. A copy of the third volume of Strabo's *Geography* -- that was the volume that enumerated all the people groups and land divisions of Asia -- had just been translated from Latin and French into German in the 1770s. I can imagine Meiners saw the term for occupants of that west Asian region.

Jim: It's possible Meiners wanted to create a more modern history of humankind based on race. Though in his book, he covered lots of different groups, he ultimately divided us into two main branches. Here's a quote from his 1785 book...

Erik: Can Jo read one?

Jo: "Of all the foundations and observations I have made, no other seems to be based on so many testimonies and facts, and none so rich in scientific deductions as this: the present human race exists of two higher tribes (*Hauptstämmen*), the Tartar or Caucasian (*Kaukasischen*) and the Mongolian (*Mongolischen*). The latter is not only much weaker in body and spirit, but much worse in its ways and devoid of virtue compared to the Caucasian. The Caucasian tribe divides into two races (*Racen*), the Celtic and the Slavic."

Jim: In other places he argued that the main characteristic separating human races was beauty. Granted, for him, that beauty was made up of things like body constitution, sensitivity, and intelligence, but he glommed all that stuff together under this aesthetic evaluation.

Jo: As if beauty is some stable, quantifiable thing.

Jim: Right.

Jo: So, we shouldn't foist off the blame for Caucasian on Blumenbach, then, you're saying?

Jim: Blumenbach was at the same university and must have picked up the term from Meiners. It first appeared in English in 1794 in a paper by Blumenbach called 'observations on some Egyptian mummies opened in London' ([Blumenbach, 1794](#)).

Erik: Hey that's a little known historical fact! Even the OED gets that one wrong!

Jim: Well, hopefully not for long. I wrote them about it a couple of days ago.

Jo: You're a badass, Jim. OK, so, just to make sure I'm following the action here--Blumenbach DID put the term first into English, then?

Jim: Yes, he did, but not in a racist way. That's the point I'm trying to make here. "Caucasian" to Blumenbach didn't mean "superior race" the way it did to many others at the time.

Jo: But like Meiners, Blumenbach still was a polygenist, right? He still believed in all these independent origination points for the different human branches?

Jim: No--not even close! Blumenbach identified five main groups. But he believed in monogenism—that all of them converged into a single *human* race. He even made a point of emphasizing that each race blended imperceptibly into the others on a spectrum. And Blumenbach wrote explicitly about how the mental faculties of one group did not, in his opinion,

differ from those of another. He thought the differences were purely physical and environmentally determined. ([Michael, 2017](#))

Jo [ask a Jo question]: So, what I'm hearing is ... race description vs. hierarchy. So...?

Jim: The important thing is that Blumenbach saw human variation as a continuum, without rigid borders between his 5 varieties or races. He DID NOT see a hierarchy with Caucasians on top and non-white races below in terms of ability or achievement or any other metric of racial value.

Erik: My read is that Meiners' use of race and the selective borrowing of Blumenbach's five variety seems to have been what set us in our current direction. Color terms like "white" were already appearing in the United States before Blumenbach's use of Caucasian. For instance, the First Naturalization Act of 1790, written by the same Congressmen who wrote the Bill of Rights said that only "free white persons" could become citizens of the US. So defining what "white" meant became really important in the US right off the bat.

Jo: Does "Caucasian" appear anywhere in 1790?

Erik: Not necessarily in government documents. But French scientists like the famous naturalist Georges Cuvier were using the term right after Blumenbach. And it soon spread to the US. In 1830, the Kentucky physician Charles Caldwell published his *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race*, citing four distinct types of human: Caucasian, Mongolian, African, and American corresponding to four skin colors: white, yellow, black, and red ([Caldwell, 1830](#)). And I even found an old medical book written by Dr. Robley Dunglison in 1832 that uses "Caucasian" as a synonym for white. Context: Dunglison was Thomas Jefferson's personal physician and was considered the "Father of American Physiology." And that 1832 book, called simply *Human Physiology*, was the first and most widely used textbook in all of the medical schools in early 19th century America ([Dunglison, 1832](#)). So that is probably why this conflation of Caucasian and white-skinned spread like it did in the US.

Jim: Samuel George Morton, who we talked about way back at the beginning of this podcast in 2017 followed Blumenbach's classification in his *Crania Americana* and *Crania Aegyptiaca* ([Morton, 1844](#); [Morton & Combe, 1839](#)).

Erik: Even closer to home, in 1844, the Alabama physician Josiah Clark Nott began his project to show that blacks were inferior species. He started by trying to show that even the ancient Egyptians were "Caucasians or white." ([Nott, 1844](#))

Jo: So it seems like already by the middle of the 19th century, Caucasian just meant "white" and that it was being contrasted with Negroid or "black"

Erik: There was a little bit of pushback. "Anthropologists" in the 1860s by and large seemed okay with the either four or five race division and the designation "Caucasian" for white. But "ethnologists," the monogenistic opponents of the anthropologists, were pushing back on the sloppy application of the term. They were in the minority.

Jo: So it seems like already by the middle of the 19th century, Caucasian just meant “white” and that it was being contrasted with Negroid or “black”, so I can see how that’s working in science now. But we still haven’t really talked about how Caucasian shows up socially or politically. In order to do that, I think we need to talk about how “Caucasian” got used in the US judicial system. The landmark use of “Caucasian” as a weighty term in the US court system appeared all the way back in 1878.

Erik: So, 1878 -- by that point the 14th amendment had passed, saying that “All persons born or naturalized in the United States ... are citizens of the United States...”

Jo: Right, so what do you do with Chinese immigrants?

Erik: Oh yeah, all the anti-Chinese sentiment....

Jo: One such immigrant, **Ah Yup** attempted to become a US citizen. Judge L.S.B. Sawyer, ruled that Ah Yup was racially Mongolian. And, by 1878, Sawyer said, “one would scarcely fail to understand that the party employing the words “white person” would intend a person of the Caucasian race.”

Jim: What’s even funnier is that to bolster his decision, Sawyer referred to Webster’s Dictionary and the *American Cyclopaedia*, both of which referenced a bastardized version of Blumenbach’s 1795 classification. And even there, the *Cyclopaedia* mis-attributes to the French theorist Buffon! So, complete gobbledygook!

Jo: The 1878 *Ah Yup* case set the precedent for two significant cases about naturalization in 1922 and 1923 that went all the way to the Supreme Court.

Erik: That was right before all the draconian immigration laws were being passed by Congress.

Jo: That could be why there were so many of them right in the 1920s. These cases show how this category of “Caucasian” got solidified as a scientific concept that had legal force -- not just as a way of indicating whiteness, but also as a way of adjudicating who got to COUNT as Caucasian. The first one was *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/260/178>)— that was the 1922 case. The plaintiff, *Takao Ozawa*, was born in Japan but lived in Hawaii and California for over 20 years. He went to UC Berkeley, became a successful businessman, married, and raised his children to speak English. He even converted to Christianity--so he really assimilated to what was kind of mainstream American culture at the time. He petitioned the US to grant him citizenship, pointing out that people from Kyoto--where he was from--had PARTICULARLY white skin.

Erik: Ah, that makes sense because even by the 20th century the naturalization laws still contained that phrase “free white person” ...

Jo: But the Court ended up denying him citizenship based on the fact that Ozawa was from Japan. So that was not a part of the world defined as being “Caucasian” in the original Blumenbach sense of the term.

Jim: So in other words, Ozawa might be white skinned, but he wasn't "Caucasian" because he didn't come from one of the regions suggested by Judge Sawyer as he read Webster's Dictionary and the .

Jo: Right. Then, just a year later, SCOTUS heard a similar case, [United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind](https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/261/204) (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/261/204>) A man named Bhagat Singh Thind was a "high-caste Hindu, of full Indian blood, born at Amritsar, Punjab, India" --

Jim: -- so, closer to the Caucasus Mountains --

Jo: -- but had moved to the US and served in the military during World War I. Thind was a bit of an Anglophile; he'd been inspired to move to the West by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson, and, since -- just as you said Jim -- northern India was near Blumenbach's original Caucasian definition, he reasoned that he ought to be granted citizenship because he was Caucasian! The District Court in Oregon agreed and granted him citizenship.

Erik: Oh yeah, I would think after the 1922 *Ozawa* decision Caucasian meant "region of origin" for legal purposes rather than light skin. I'm guessing that Thind was granted citizenship as a "free white person" right?

Jo: Wrong! SCOTUS ended up denying Thind citizenship based on the fact that although he was from North India, he wasn't white skinned *enough*.

Jim: Wait, how does that work? Thind might be scientifically Caucasian, but he wasn't white, so he couldn't be a citizen?

Jo: This is the legal magic of "Constitutional originalism," I guess.

Erik: I don't understand: do you mean that the justices used an argument about what the framers meant in 1790 in the original Naturalization Act?

Jo: Actually, I meant that "Constitutional originalism" can mean whatever you want it to mean in order to fit what you already think. Erik, can you read that quote from the decision:

"Mere ability on the part of an applicant for naturalization to establish a line of descent from a Caucasian ancestor will not *ipso facto* to and necessarily conclude the inquiry. 'Caucasian' is a conventional word of much flexibility, as a study of the literature dealing with racial questions will disclose, and while it and the words 'white persons' are treated as synonymous for the purposes of that case, they are not of identical meaning.....It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them to-day"

Jim: So you're saying SCOTUS has always been as racist as it is now?

Erik: So much for logic or science. Ozawa was white but not scientifically Caucasian, so no dice for him. Thind was scientifically Caucasian but didn't look like he was from Nebraska, so no dice for him either.

Jo: So even though we use the word "Caucasian" as this sort of scientific-ish-sounding, PC term for white people, it's been used and misused again and again throughout history as a way to draw a political and economic line. It can be used to include some people into whiteness in the United States. And it can just as easily be used to exclude others.

Erik: But this has been changed more recently, right? I just had a conversation with a student the other day who was complaining that he has to check the "white" box on the US Census when he is clearly not "Caucasian."

Jo: The words are slippery, right? There have been a bunch of legal battles built on that slipperiness. For instance -- you'll love this one, Erik -- there was an early 1980s case based on a professor denied tenure that he claimed was based on his race.

Erik: GROAN

Jo: In *Saint Francis College v. Al-Khazraji* (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/481/604>), decided in 1987, an Iraqi professor teaching in the US claimed that he was denied tenure in 1979 because he was racially discriminated against. The college claimed that, since he was scientifically "Caucasian," he was not protected by a civil rights code pertaining to discrimination by race. He claimed that, just because he was Caucasian, he was not thought of as white and therefore his civil rights had been violated. So ... what do you think happened?

Erik: I have gotten up my hopes before and you've dashed them repeatedly.

Jo: I, then, will read from the decision:

"There is a common popular understanding that there are three major human races — Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid. Many modern biologists and anthropologists, however, criticize racial classifications as arbitrary and of little use in understanding the variability of human beings. It is said that genetically homogeneous populations do not exist, and traits are not discontinuous between populations; therefore, a population can only be described in terms of relative frequencies of various traits. Clear-cut categories do not exist."

Erik: Is that a 'yay'?

Jo: A small one, yes.

Jim: Yep, it is, and one reason why we need to think critically about using “Caucasian.” It makes the speaker sound sciency, but it is totally pseudo-. I love the fact that all this fooforah is over a label whose type specimen was probably a sex slave--the young Georgian woman of Blumenbach!

Jo and Erik: Wait, what?

Jim: The skull that Blumenbach picked as the holotype of Caucasians was from a slave and had been sent to him by a friend who was visiting an anatomist in Moscow and the provenance that came with the skull was that this was a young Georgian woman who had been captured by Muslims and was lost in war to the Russians and had been serving as a sex slave when she died at a young age in Moscow.

Erik: Man, science is messy.

Jo: So the original Caucasian was a woman from Georgia.

Jim: A sex slave, yeah.

Erik and Jo: Wow!

Jim: And “Caucasian” is *anything but* neutral the way its used today. Especially among the white nationalists. It has had a slippery beginning and it’s been used politically in ways that Blumenbach certainly wouldn’t endorse.

Erik: Yeah, even if Christoph Meiners may have endorsed them.

Jo: I’m sure he would have. On that short and sweet note, I’m Jo, the cultural anthropologist.

Jim: I’m Jim, the biological anthropologist.

Erik: And I’m Erik, the historian of science and thank you for listening to Speaking of Race.

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