

From Thug heads to ...?

Phrenology and race

Jo: Hey, guys, remember when I was in India and we did those episodes on race and caste?

Erik: Jim, can you take us in the WayBackMachine and play a minute of that episode?

[Sound clip of Jo: So a good example of measuring is the set of 7 Thug skulls that were sent from India to Edinburgh, Scotland in 1833. These were the skulls of convicted criminals who had been executed under the direction of Captain William Sleeman, an up and coming British officer assigned to an area where there was a lot of what was known as “thuggee” activity, or banditry. The Thugs were groups of highway robbers who would insinuate themselves into groups of travelers, gain their trust, and then strangle them and bury their bodies in mass graves. Often they were kept on retainer by major landowners explicitly for the purpose of pillaging people traveling through their land holdings. The Thugs’ association was more than just banditry; they worshipped various patron goddesses, and they were very secretive and insular, living together. Sleeman was convinced (like many other people at the time) that Thugs ought to be considered a distinct race because of their secretiveness, intermarriage practices, etc, and that criminality was inherent to their nature.]

Jo: ...and we talked about these 7 heads of executed members of the Thug ethnicity (which, yes, is where the term ‘thug’ comes from in English)?

Erik: Yup. We kept promising we were gonna get back to those, but we never did. What happened?

Jo: Well, it took me a year and a half, but I tracked them down!

Erik: No way!

Jo: Yup. they’re in the Anatomical Museum at the University of Edinburgh.

Jim: Scotland.... That’s interesting.

Jo: Turns out they were donated as part of the collections of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society in the late 19th century.

Erik: Phrenology! Oh man, there’s an interesting corner of race science. We should do an episode on that.

Jo: Ok, how about now?

INTRO: Hi, I'm Erik, I'm Jim, I'm Jo and you're listening to Speaking of Race.

Jo: So, phrenology. That's the study of the shapes of people's heads that was very popular in the 19th century because it was believed that they corresponded with aspects of personality and behavior. If you had a big bump on the back of your head, like I do, that was supposed to signal that you have unusually strong attachment to your children because supposedly that area of the brain was associated with this trait.

Erik: Um, okay.

Jo: And it was one of the many tools used in the comparative anatomy world to try to detect differences between races, which is why we are going to talk about it here. Word on the street is that you actually know quite a bit about phrenology, Erik, which is fortunate, because my expertise doesn't extend far beyond what I just said. So let's do some background...

Erik: As usual, there are tons of misunderstandings when it comes to phrenology. Those misunderstandings compound when we think about phrenology and race.

Jo: Well, everyone knows that phrenology was a pseudo-science.

Erik: So, let's start there. Pseudo-scientists think they're doing science! It's only in retrospect, now that we know better, that it's been labeled "pseudo". Phrenology maintained that human behavior was due entirely to the physical structure of the brain.

Jo: I mean when you put it like that ... that's not that far off from what we think today.

Erik: Exactly. But these guys were taking their cues from early embryologists, who had observed that mammalian skull joints gradually fused during gestation and early life. They thought the skull casing would take on the shape of the brain matter. Now mix this with the notion that human behavior is completely based on that brain and ...

Jo: ... human behavior would be literally written into the shape of the brain, which would be mirrored by the shape of the skull.

Erik: So, the early promoters of phrenology saw themselves as cutting edge scientists. Franz Josef Gall was the 18th century German physician who first came up with the phrenological idea that brains are collections of different "organs." Think about how different that way of thinking would have been at the time. I like the metaphor of balloons. Instead of thinking of the brain as if it was just one balloon. He insisted that it was like a whole bunch of balloons. And each of these balloons were of different sizes and colors -- 27 in fact--each representing different personality traits.

Jo: But if I'm not mistaken, it was the Scottish lawyer George Combe--the eventual founder of the Edinburgh Phrenological society, where the thug skulls went--who really made phrenology a mainstream idea. Isn't that right?

Erik: Right! That's a weird story. In 1816, George Combe came to a dinner party where a follower of Gall's was the guest of honor. Combe went as a skeptic regarding phrenology -- in fact he was there to jeer the guest. But during the course of the evening, the phrenologist whipped out a human brain to dissect!

Jo: Doesn't everyone do that at dinner parties?

Erik: George and his brother Andrew converted from skeptics to fanboys and became the biggest promoters of phrenology in Britain. They started giving lectures and writing articles and eventually founded the Edinburgh Phrenological Society.

Jo: Whither the thug heads!

Erik: Yup, exactly. See how we came full circle there?

Jim: Speaking of, let's help people understand how this relates to race.

Erik: Well, it's complicated. Were the phrenologists racist? By and large, yes. But on slavery, there was a surprisingly wide spectrum of belief among phrenologists. From the beginning, some phrenologists, especially in Scotland, staunchly supported abolitionism -- well before it was a broader movement.

Jo: How does that work?

Erik: Everyone has different bumps!

Jo: What? Why does that matter?

Erik: Well, if you think about it, phrenology offers at least the *possibility* of individuality. Once you start thinking of people as individuals, it's a *little* harder to lump everyone together. And if you find a slave with similar bump patterns to a master, it messes the whole separate species thing up. It seems that this is how Franz Josef Gall and some of the early European phrenologists viewed things. But when phrenology got to America... well, let's just say it's harder to find phrenologists who didn't use their practice to defend slavery. Kentucky physician Charles Caldwell's very popular book *Elements of Phrenology* is one relatively mild example. Caldwell merely offered excuses for why slavery didn't do any harm. But I've also seen plenty of works like Richard Colfax's 1833 book *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes*.

Jo: What's that about?

Erik: One of the most important early moments in our discussion of phrenology and race was in the 1830s, and it centered around the “Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America,” better known as the American Colonization Society (ACS).

Jo: Uh, *colonization*? What were Americans doing colonizing in the 1830s? They had just *been* a colony a generation earlier.

Erik: You’re right, but beginning in the 1820s, some very influential Americans worked to move free blacks out of the US and to west Africa — it’s where “Liberia” came from.

Jo: Oh, was this the beginning abolitionism -- to try to undo slavery by sending people to a less racist place?

Erik: Uh ... well, that’s how some of the ACS trustees tried to sell it -- as part of the gradual process of emancipation. But the trustees were men like Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington, and James Monroe, who would soon be president, and Andrew Jackson, who was president a decade after that.

Jo: Those are some big guns! Why do you sound skeptical?

Erik: Because most of the leadership were slave owners! They pretended that their intentions were philanthropic and humanitarian -- to gradually end slavery and to make things better for blacks who were being discriminated against. But by the 1830s, after hundreds of free blacks had already made the journey to Liberia, two things became apparent. First, these slave owning elites and even some anti-slavery supporters in the ACS weren’t really interested in helping the new settlers to Liberia.

Jo: I guess that’s not surprising.

Erik: It’s more than that, though. When you dig a little deeper, you see that the whole ACS project was rotten to the core. Most of the free blacks sent weren’t even descended from enslaved ancestors in that part of West Africa; Liberia just happened to be the cheapest place for American ships to sail. Provisions were poor, funding was almost non-existent, and upwards of half of those sent died of disease. But more people kept coming. And then notice that they were sending *free* blacks....

Jo: Yeah, what’s up with that?

Erik: That was by design. The slave-owning trustees of the ACS were really interested in pushing free blacks living along the borders of the slaveholding South to leave the country to discourage uprisings and slave rebellions.

Jo: Were there uprisings happening?

Erik: There were some. But the individuals migrating to Liberia were often fleeing for their lives from *northern* cities. For instance, multiple times over the early 1830s, hundreds of newly immigrated Irish laborers in Cincinnati, Ohio, attacked established free black neighborhoods. Each time, the ACS swept in to “encourage” Cincinnati blacks to emigrate (Middleton, 2005; Stewart, 1998). And they were very successful: something like 1,000 Cincinnatians of African descent did leave the US over the decade. And not surprisingly, despite ACS marketing, there was almost no support for those who made it to Liberia. Eventually abolitionist leaders caught on, and they began to loudly condemn the ACS as an elaborate cover to keep slavery going by disrupting the Underground Railroad and exiling free blacks who might organize rebellions.

Jo: OK—so what’s all this got to do with phrenology?

Erik: Weirdly, it was the Scottish lawyer George Combe’s phrenology buddies at the Edinburgh Phrenological Society who began to defend the ACS right when it started to be attacked as a scam supported by slave-owning elites. In 1833, Edinburgh phrenologists published an article that—while it strongly condemned slavery—said that the job of the ACS was really to funnel American blacks back to where they came from. North America, said these Scots, was to be a white-man’s kingdom—an extension of Northern Europe. The science showed, they said, that integration between the races was impossible. Emancipation—even if it did come—would not result in social equality between races (Branson, 2017).

Jo: Wow, that sounds like what white nationalists say today. And it sounds like a paraphrase of what Thomas Jefferson said in “Notes on the State of Virginia.”

Erik: Here’s a quote from their 1833 paper:

“The large brain of Europe controls the small brain of India by an irresistible moral influence ... (p. 124). In other words, head shape meant that races were fixed and incompatible. “...the white is endowed with not only a larger volume but a better organization of brain...” (p. 124).

So they had this complicated idea. According to the phrenologists, Liberia was the beachhead from which emancipated blacks would act like “missionaries” and convert the entire continent of Africa into an industrious Christian colony.

Jo: Did anyone buy this?

Jim: Well, at least one very prominent American scientist did. As we mentioned in the beginning of our series on race and intelligence, Combe tied brain size to intelligence in his appendix to Samuel George Morton’s *Crania Americana*. While Morton was comparing brain sizes of racial groups, Combe pointed out that some Europeans had the largest brains and were therefore distinguished for “great aggregate force of mind, animal, moral and intellectual.” He especially noted “the Teutonic race compared with the Hindoo among nations” as examples of the relationship between brain size and national character.

Erik: The Edinburghers argument fit right in not only with the ordinary sorts of scientific racists like Morton and Nott, but even with abolitionists! Phrenologists condemned slavery. In fact, the Edinburgh phrenologists called slavery “an enormous moral and political evil ... a scourge to the American’s back, which will goad him and his children and his children’s children” (p. 125). The Edinburgh Phrenologists assured everyone that the ACS was against slavery. And that basically convinced the white abolitionists. But their defense was about white nationalism. And I think you’re right, Jo. This is the origin of an argument white nationalists still use (Combe, 1838).

Jo: It was about making America white again.

Jim: Except America never was white! There was no blank continent peopled by Europeans!

Jo: Good point. It’s always about colonizing an already peopled place. And, speaking of which, did you catch the reference to India in the quote Erik read?!

Jim: Ah! those must be your thug heads!

Jo: Yes, back to the thug heads!

Erik: At last, thug heads!

Jo: So, these seven skulls that ended up in Edinburgh came from the public executions of seven men labeled “Thugs” in the era when the British were busy biologizing the idea of “thuggee”. That’s going to become a very important point. Because of the ideas about caste that were circulating at the time in the work of H.H. Risley and others—

Jim: —and here’s the part where I direct people to listen to our 3 episodes on race in India—

Erik: —and here’s the part where I hope there’s a peacock sound—

Jo: You’re trying to derail me. Okay, so because of the caste-race conflation instigated by the British, there was a widespread assumption that people from one line of work would also be a biologically-distinct, isolated lineage. The thinking was that Indian castes were “pure races” because of caste endogamy practices. And the Thugs -- they became one such imagined group in the minds of the British.

Erik: When we call someone a thug, we sort of mean that they are low-intelligence guys who are hired to beat people up... and for some reason they always say “I’ll clobber yas” right before they do it.

Jo: That has *some* relation to what the British thought. They believed the Thugs were hereditary criminals. They were from a part of rural North India where it was common for local elites to keep bandits on retainer to defend their lands in this sort of patron-client relationship that is well documented in the historical records. Sort of like Robin Hood, thugs would associate

themselves with travelers, murder them, and take their money---except they didn't give it to the poor, they gave it to the landholder who employed them. The word "thug" means, roughly, "deceiver" in Hindi, and the British saw this "thuggee" behavior as a major cultural blight that needed to be snuffed out in order to modernize India.

Erik: Well, was it hereditary?

Jo: Not at all. There's plenty of record of Muslim and Hindu thugs, not to mention various Hindu castes of thugs. But because family members were often together when they got caught and rounded up in this subversive activity, the British assumed that thuggishness must be a hereditary occupation, especially because so many other occupations in India at the time were based around caste. And in the era of phrenology, British scientists believed thug heads would provide supposedly wonderful natural laboratories for learning what the brains of congenital criminals must look like.

Jim: I can see how law enforcement would like to know this!

Jo: Absolutely -- the idea was that Thug were so violent and deceitful that their thugheadz would have extreme representations of qualities such as violence or deceitfulness "readable" on their skulls.

Erik: And demonstrating this would have helped promote phrenology globally. I can see why the Edinburgh Phrenology Society would have liked to get their hands on them.

Jo: So these 7 North Indian men were tried between 1831-32 for a murder that took place a decade and a half earlier.

Erik: Whoa. That seems ... late.

Jo: You're right. The trial was probably a foregone conclusion since it was part of a larger British campaign to eradicate the "Thuggee." This particular case seems sketchy from the beginning. Dr. Henry Harpur Spry of the Bengal Medical Service oversaw the care of over a hundred prisoners. The whole lot of them were hanged *en masse* after being convicted and their bodies were ritually burned. But just before, Spry got seven heads. Its interesting that there were around 100 hanged, but it seems that Spry hand-picked the heads of those who seemed the most thuggish—who had confessed, for instance, or on whom there was stronger evidence of direct involvement in murder.

As far as we can tell from the historical records, he got someone to collect their heads, and then just let them sit out and become defleshed on their own. Then he sent them, along with life histories of their former owners, to Edinburgh. Their rival group in London wanted them, too. But Lord John Swinton, the Chief Secretary of the British Government in India, decided in favor of Edinburgh, since he himself had recently become a member of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society (Wagner, 2010).

Jim: That seems like the Senate impeachment trial.

Jo: The skulls arrived in 1833 and Robert Cox, George Combe's nephew, did the phrenological analysis. Spry published a paper in 1834 combining Cox's results with his own.

Erik: Ooooo! What did it say?

Jo: It's a weird paper. Cox admitted that there was no phrenological evidence of exaggerated "destructiveness."

Erik: Oh. That's not what I expected.

Jo: Well, that's because you're not a very good phrenologist! Cox and Spry instead found that the skulls were deficient in the "conscientiousness" part of the brain and had an exaggerated sense of filiality. In their interpretation, this meant that thugs were packish but generally immoral, killing not out of sheer bloodthirst, but for financial motives that would protect their filial line. So they may have been destructive, but they weren't *primally* so. Still, they concluded that the heads "perfectly" represented the prototypical criminal skull.

Jim: Sounds just like modern science to me!

Jo: Wellll... The Cox and Spry work had the dual effect of solidifying the idea that 'thuggee' was indeed a heritable quality and of reinforcing the validity of phrenology more generally. Lurid stories of thuggee violence were circulating in Britain at this time, and this particular paper added new scientific gravity to that designation. Thugs were biologically determined to be violent. It further solidified the backwardness of Indian society in the minds of the British colonizers—

Erik: —which, of course, justified the continued occupation of India by the British at the very moment in the 1830s when people were questioning the Empire's role in the region. I can see the "White Man's Burden" idea percolating here.

Jim: So did these seven skulls basically disappear after that?

Jo: Weirdly, they continued to play a role well into the 20th century.

Jim: Big shock!

Erik: Surprisingly, phrenology revived in the late Victorian period...

Jo: ...Right at the time anthropology was becoming a field.

Erik: I think the pivotal person in this transition was physician John Beddoe.

Jim: I never read anything by him.

Erik: I didn't expect anyone would have heard of him. I doubt he's ever appeared in any anthropology classes. But he was a founding member of the Ethnological Society of London, president of the Anthropological Society (1869–70), and one of the first presidents of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1889–91). He wrote field manuals for other ethnographers all over Europe and began using statistics and population studies in ethnography decades before anyone else. Later, he founded archaeological societies, including the ones responsible for preserving megalithic monuments like Stonehenge and Avebury.

Like many of these Victorian anthropologists, he had a medical background -- attendant at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh -- assistant surgeon in the brutal Crimean War in the 1850s. Before leaving for Crimea, he was involved in the phrenological community and in 1846 used phrenological categories when conducting the first ethnography of the west of England. He tried to correlate hair and eye color to discover what he called the original 'races' of the British Isles. He later reported that he found a very pure and light eyed "British Bronze race" (1862: 270) and then another lesser race, which he associated mostly lower class artisans. Not only did he find that race to be "darker," but they also had many more babies.

But his big contribution to our conversation today is his "Index of Nigrescence" developed in the 1860s. Using phrenological principles -- prognathous (protruding) and orthognathous (less prominent) jawed people of Britain. Irish/Welsh -- Celts -- prognathous, related to Cro-magnon Man, who was "Africanoid"; English "men of genius" were orthognathous. Linked skull shape, moral and social aptitudes. Correspondence with Paul Topinard, Paul Broca. And it's through Topinard and Broca that the phrenological ideas that we often assume were dead earlier in the 19th century came to possibly the more notorious point—the criminology of Cesar Lombroso (Richardson, 2004).

Jo: I feel like I've heard that name before.

Jim: He kicked my ass on my MA exam, then I studied up on him and found out that he's the founding father of criminal anthropology! He also strongly influenced my academic grandfather, Earnest Hooton, who spent a lot of time and energy trying to find measurements that could discriminate between criminals and us good guys.

Jo: Oh yeah, he's the guy who said that genius and madness were close together.

Jim: Probably lots of people said that before him, but Lombroso had anthropometric measurements to show it -- or so he claimed.

Erik: He really doubled down on the phrenology stuff at the turn of the twentieth century—going all the way back to the earliest measurements made by Franz Josef Gall, adding Beddoe's "Index of Nigrescence" stuff to separate out racial differences, and also bringing in the newer statistics of Francis Galton and the face anthropometry stuff of Topinard and Broca. He was pretty clear about what all these measurements meant (here's a quote from his 1891 book *Man of Genius*):

“The influence of race is as visible in genius as in insanity. Education counts for little, heredity for much. ‘By education [...] you can make bears dance, but never create a man of genius’” (p. 137)

Jo: I’d say Lombroso was pretty solidly onboard with biological determinism there. And it worked for him: he not only created the field of scientific criminology but the category of the criminally insane. Governments across the world built a large number of asylums for the criminally insane based on Lombroso’s work. What’s more, he advocated for Francis Galton’s idea of a front and side profile photograph to be taken of every prisoner -- specifically because they thought they would be able to pick out the biologically-determined criminal from the incidental criminal by the shape of their heads!

Jim: So Lombroso popularized the mug shot!? Wow, so this phrenology stuff just keeps on giving.

Jo: It really did. Lombroso’s followers thrived under Mussolini’s regime. That biological determinism stuff helped scientifically justify facism (Gibson, 2002). And I think it’s fair to say that it stuck around in lots of different corners of science. In 1906, for instance, anatomist William Turner reanalyzed the Thug skulls still kept at Edinburgh to try to map Aryan race (or lack thereof) onto them. While Turner found no evidence of consistent traits or stigmata that could reliably identify criminality across all the skulls, he did muse about how they might help shed light on the new science of race--and so the story of phrenology blended into the history of the mythical Aryan invasion of India.

Jim: That’s another great example of what we’ve been talking about for this entire episode: how even something seemingly silly like phrenology played a role in the solidification of scientific racism in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Jo: But weirdly, tendrils of phrenology hung around well into the middle of the 20th century.

Erik: You don’t say!

Jo: No really, have you heard of the Harvard Study of Adult Development?

Jim: Yeah, they called it the Grant study back in my youth.

Jo: Well in the late 1930s, Arlie Bock and Clark Heath, the two physicians in the Harvard University School of Hygiene who initiated it, started the longest longitudinal study of adult men by nabbing 268 Harvard University men. I think it’s still going on today, seventy years after it started! Though most of the subjects are still anonymous, we know about a lot of them. A reporter discovered that John F. Kennedy was one of their subjects because that particular record ended in the early 1960s and has been sealed until 2040. Bock and Heath did comprehensive anthropometric measurements of all of their subjects -- including, you guessed it, the same face and skull measurements promoted by Lombroso and others (Shenk, 2009).

Erik: Some threads of phrenology hanging on.

Jo: But there's one point of this whole thing that we haven't really stressed. The W. T. Grant-funded study that Bock was running was set up to find a "normal" man's measurements -- the default man. But they only examined relatively successful white men.

Jim: Ah, I see what you're getting at: there's this subtle way race works its way into science by picking particular white men and making them the "normal" -- all others end up not only being labeled as different, but as deficient.

Jo: Exactly. And it's telling that after World War 2, they expanded the study to also include a comparison class: "inner-city Bostonians." Take a guess who had better health outcomes over the study.... This all gets built into the contemporary obsession with 'happiness studies,' by the way.

Erik: I guess that just affirms what we've been saying since day one on this podcast -- these historical racial prejudices have woven themselves deeply into many aspects of our lives and we don't even realize it.

Jim: I think that's a good ending point! So, I'm Jim ...

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