

# Letters on Strange Fruit by Kenan Malik

11 May 2010

*The following letters were sent to the WSWS in response to Nancy Hanover's review, "'Strange Fruit' by Kenan Malik: A polemic against racism and identity politics".*

The unity of *Homo sapiens*, which, regardless of variation across a range of physical attributes, constitutes a single biological species, is exemplified by the substantial genetic evidence that all currently living humans are descended from a single, small ancestral population in southern or eastern Africa less than 200,000 years ago. Notwithstanding the recent and controversial announcement from a team lead by Svante Paabo at the Max Plank Institute in Leipzig, Germany that there may have been some small admixture of Neanderthal genetic material into the gene pool of non-Africans, the very recent (in an evolutionary sense) origin of all modern humans means that any assertion of a biological basis for distinct racial classifications is simply not supported by the data.

While it is evident that some degree of biological adaptation has taken place among humans as they spread into different environments around the globe during the last 80,000 years, it is humans' capacity for adaptation via cultural innovation that marks our species' ability to survive in settings from deserts, to tropics, to the arctic. The biological adaptations (e.g. relatively shorter, more compact bodies in colder climates, as among the Inuit, as opposed to taller, thinner bodies in warm, dry environments, such as in East Africa) are specific to particular environmental variables and are part of a complex dialectic of natural, cultural, and historical factors. The distributions of such adaptations are cross-cut by other characteristics, such as adaptations to diseases (e.g. malaria), making any designation of unitary racial categories meaningless in biological terms.

I would like to make one comment regarding this excellent review. It is true that identity politics and post-modernism have had negative effects in anthropology, as in science more generally. However, I think it is important to affirm the need to be sensitive to the rights of national groups around the world. While there is no possibility that the oppression of national and ethnic minorities can be eliminated outside of the movement of the working class to overthrow capitalism, the revolutionary socialist movement should not ignore the cultural traditions and sensitivities of oppressed minorities. The question of the treatment of national minorities was an important one for the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution and remains so for us today.

As one who works with Native Americans regarding the treatment of human remains as well as being a professional archaeologist, I am very much aware of the difficult question posed by the loss of scientific information when ancient human remains are made unavailable for study. While to some degree, the insistence on repatriation of human remains on the part of Native Americans may be caused by the fact that this is one of the few points of interaction with the dominant society in which they have achieved some degree of success, it is also true that many Native Americans have deeply held beliefs regarding their ancestors and the need to protect their remains. The callous treatment of Native American human remains by anthropologists in the past is one among many ways in which the capitalist system has brutalized native populations around the world.

As a scientist I hope that in the future socialist society a balance can be achieved between the cultural beliefs of national and ethnic groups on the one hand and the value of scientific research for the whole of humanity

on the other. Such a balance will only be possible, however, when all people are treated with fairness and equity in a society which is rid of exploitation and oppression.

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8 May 2010  
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Thank you for this wonderful and important review. Indeed, as this current crisis sharpens, it is crucial to look at such things as identity politics clearly. Malik's book seems a good counter to such meandering race rhetoric as that put out by Walter Mosley, *the Nation* (interesting quote in the footnotes, by the way), and any number of disoriented and disorienting entities.

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8 May 2010



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