

“Strange Fruit” by Kenan Malik: A polemic against racism and identity politics

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Strange Fruit by Kenan Malik, published by Oneworld Books, Oxford, 2008 (paperback edition published in 2009)

Race is a contentious issue. Is it biological? Is it cultural? Is it merely a historical vestige in a post-racial society? The recent adoption by the state of Arizona of a palpably racist anti-immigrant law indicates how inflammatory, and important, this issue remains.

Kenan Malik has situated himself in the crosshairs of the dispute over the nature of race, arguing from the standpoint of Enlightenment rationalism and scientific objectivity.

His book, *Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides are Wrong in the Race Debate*, was long listed as the British Royal Society’s 2009 science book of the year. It is a wide-ranging polemic against those who claim that race is a biological fact.

Continuing the investigation begun in his 1996 book *The Meaning of Race*, the new volume takes special aim against multicultural postmodernists and examines the biological, social and historical premises behind identity politics. [1]

Malik points out that identity politics mimics racism itself. The two outlooks, he emphasizes, share the claim that one’s political, social and cultural viewpoints should derive from one’s sex or ethnic identity. Liberal thinking, he says, has become infected with a racial view of the world. “Out of the withered seeds of racial science have flowered the politics of identity. Strange fruit, indeed,” he observes.

Malik studied neurobiology and the history and philosophy of science, and was a research psychologist. This multidisciplinary approach permeates his writing. What is most significant is that he places the sciences and their interpretation in a historical context and, most unusual of all, in a political context.

This book provides a compelling argument that race is not a scientific category, but a social one. He goes further to characterize the promotion of affirmative action and identity politics as the rejection of scientific universality and the “embrace of irrationalism as a political strategy,” a critique thoroughly welcome for its breadth.

Strange Fruit begins with Nobel Laureate James Watson’s 2007 controversial statement: “I am inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa... All our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas all the testing says not really,” he declared. Watson, together with Francis Crick, unraveled the structure of DNA; he also was the director of America’s Human Genome Project. His shocking statement, Malik suggests, was emblematic of the tenacity of racial thinking, even among scientists, and pointed to the fact that science alone cannot determine the veracity of race.

There are three main aspects to the book: an account of the biological dispute on the existence of race, its reverberations among cultural anthropologists, and the place of race socially, historically and philosophically.

Genetic differentiation and race

Malik examines a range of positions on the biological nature of race. He quotes the pioneering evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, “If the average difference between two groups of individuals is sufficiently great to be recognizable on sight, we refer to such groups of individuals as different races,” and describes him as a “race realist.” Mayr strenuously rejected typological definitions of race, but nonetheless struggled with the concept and concluded that races existed not only in man but in two-thirds of all species of plants and animals. [2]

Statistical population studies in genetic difference are now the standard. While most biologists refuse to use the word “race” in their studies, some persist. *Strange Fruit* cites biologist Alice Brues who defines race as “a division of a species which differs from other divisions by the frequency with which certain hereditary traits appear among its members.”

The perplexity of melding commonly held racial definitions with identification of race by genetic markers is the rub, the author demonstrates. For example, he points to sickle cell disease, one of most well-known “black” diseases. As sickle cell disease originates in areas where malaria is prevalent, it is found in equatorial Africa, parts of southern Europe, southern Turkey, parts of the Middle East and in much of central India. Four distinct types of sickle cell genes have been discovered across continents, says Malik. Scientists are forced to conclude that genetic traits based on ancestry do not necessarily conform to the self-identified race of various populations.

The author also points to the work of Neil Risch, a professor of human genetics at University of California, who argues that if races are defined according to the greatest degree of genetic difference, there should just two races, sub-Saharan Africans and others. [3]

Along the same lines, geneticist Jurgen Naggert comments, “These big groups that we characterize as races are too heterogeneous to lump together in a scientific way. If you’re doing a DNA study to look for markers for a particular disease, you can’t use ‘Caucasian’ as a group. They’re too diverse.” One way around this dilemma is the common designation of “continental” groupings as races, based on ancestry and migration patterns. These continental categories—Asian, African, American, European and Oceanic—express the complexity of mankind’s migrations out of Africa.

Yet even these continental categories, Malik says, have been deemed too broad for research purposes and therefore are typically divided into clusters. Studies of this type, cited by the author, have linked peoples as dispersed as Armenia, Norway, Ashkenazi Jews, the majority of Ethiopians and a minority of Afro-Caribbeans into one genetic cluster—indicating the problems with customary racial designations.

Malik’s survey demonstrates that, while it is incontestable that genetic differentiation between populations exists throughout the world, scientists differ on the significance attributed to these variations. At what point are

variations in characteristics “inter-racial” rather than indications of racial differences? There is no set of characteristics upon which scientists can define each publicly accepted race. Alternatively, a plethora of “races” can be genetically defined, which may or may not correspond to social perception or self-identification. Race appears to have validity only if we are willing to be deliberately vague as to what it constitutes, argues Malik.

At the same time, *Strange Fruit* concludes that the classification of genetic differences between human populations can be helpful in the scientific study of disease, as can ancestry information based on racial self-identification. But Malik emphasizes that use of these imprecise and vague racial categories does not just distort biomedical information, but may often do more harm than good.

Racial categories undermining science

In 2005, the US Federal Drug Administration granted the first race-based drug, BiDiL, for treatment of congestive heart failure for African-Americans. BiDiL was denied a license in 1996 because clinical trials demonstrated that it was not effective. After it was reassigned to a race-based study and relabeled for African-Americans, it won a new patent and was put on the market. The studies demonstrated a statistically significant benefit when restricted to those who self-identified as black.

The bottom line, the author points out, is that by marketing the pharmaceutical as a “black drug,” it will be prescribed for many who genetically cannot respond to the drug, while others who could benefit will be denied it.

The concrete effect of upholding the biological notion of race in medical research, Malik says, is that scientists endow differences between socially defined groups with greater importance than is warranted. At the same time, he holds out the hope that pragmatic use of the social, rather than scientific, categories of race could assist medical research. This latter position seems rather self-contradictory for the author.

However, when it comes to the political trend of multiculturalism and its fixation on race, Malik’s attack is unflinching. He is deeply disturbed by the position that the scientific method is a “local Western approach” or “a culturally-specific way of knowing,” a position that evolved as racial thinking gained left-leaning adherents.

Demonstrating multiculturalism’s chilling effect on science, he details the events surrounding the “Kennewick Man,” a 9,500-year-old skeleton found in 1996 near Kennewick, Washington state. These bones are some of the oldest ever found in North America.

However, following the guidelines of the Native American Graves Repatriation Act, passed in 1990, the US Army Corps of Engineers decided that Kennewick Man would be given to the Umatilla tribe for reburial. This “culturally correct” law was meant to restore “wrongs done to aboriginals” and requires federally funded institutions to return human remains and objects found in Native American graves to their original owners.

Leading anthropologists from across the country filed suit in an attempt to preserve the bones for science. But the Native American tribes felt this would desecrate their ancestors. An extraordinary legal battle ensued between anthropologists, the US government and the Yakama Indian Nation. Sadly, in April 1998, the US Army Corps of Engineers covered the riverbank where the Kennewick Man had been discovered in 600 tons of rocks, upholding what tribal leaders called the preservation of their culture.

This is not an isolated case. In 1999, Malik reports, Harvard University’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology repatriated the remains of more than 2,000 individuals to the Pecos and Jemez Pueblo tribes in New

Mexico. This collection had been considered extremely valuable because it was well preserved and large enough to be statistically significant and demographically representative.

The bones had been the basis of a landmark study on osteoporosis. It is now a resource lost to science. Other museums, among the most prestigious in the world, which gave up portions of their collections include the Smithsonian Institute, the Manchester Museum in Britain, and the American Museum of Natural History.

Cultural repatriation is an example of the growing and reactionary practice of rooting culture in blood or race, rather than speaking to universal truths and civilization as a whole, the author points out. It is a repudiation of the legitimacy of museums, the Enlightenment project of collecting objects for the purpose of science and knowledge, and the collective project of increasing the knowledge of mankind, he concludes. The embrace of these positions by postmodernist academia is deeply reactionary and Malik draws out its implications.

The history and politics of race

How did society become racialized? This is the most complex of the questions Malik tackles.

For most of human history, the concept of race simply did not exist, at least in the way we think of race today. Malik turns to Ivan Hannaford and his exhaustive study *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* to demonstrate this historical contrast. While the Greeks classified peoples of the world by skin color, they rejected a racial worldview in favor of a political and civic one, Hannaford asserts. For the Greeks, the key social distinction was between citizens and “barbarians.”

Even in the Middle Ages, Hannaford emphasizes, the main issue with regard to strangers was, “Do they possess a rule of law,” “Do they act like us?” What defined a person was his or her relationship to law and to faith, not biology or history.

Hannaford’s conclusion is not cited by Malik, but is worth noting. He emphasizes that racial and political thought are two opposed approaches to social organization. He goes further to characterize political thinking as “inherently and logically resistant to the idea of race as we understand it.” He states that race is “inimical to Western *civilization* in the strict sense of the word,” and that ethnicity is an idea introduced in modern times that gained importance only in proportion to the decline in political thought (emphasis in the original). Both writers concur that the word “race” may have been in use for a long time, but its modern meaning has not. As man’s social organization has evolved, the imputed content of “race” has taken on very different significance, a point often not understood.

Like Hannaford, Malik provides a survey of the development of racial categorization, tracing the role of various schools of thought from romanticism to positivism and postmodernism, as well as a whole range of thinkers from the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder through the founder of cultural anthropology, Franz Boas.

However, Malik takes strong issue with Hannaford, and many postmodernists, when they blame both the Enlightenment in general and its adherents among more modern scientists such as Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin for creating and perpetuating racism through taxonomy.

Malik does not dispute the rise of such trends as “scientific racism,” as developed by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, but he emphasizes that the Enlightenment’s attitude toward human difference was permeated by the revolutionary ideas of social equality and the perfectibility of man. The predominant view of that revolutionary period was that human variation, physical or cultural, represented differences not in kind but in degree.

Darwin and the majority of the scientists of his age embodied this spirit.

[4] In fact, the fundamental philosophical orientation of racial theory—which assumes the fixity of characteristics—ran entirely counter to natural selection, as Malik notes. For the misnamed “social Darwinists,” struggle eliminated the impure specimens of the race to perpetuate the ideal type. Darwin, on the other hand, dismissed the idea of an ideal type of a species as nonsense. [5]

However, when the Enlightenment’s ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were not realized following the French Revolution, when social inequality continued and worsened despite the developments of science, the tendency developed to explain poverty and other *social* ills in racial terms, as though they were somehow *natural*.

As for the common theory that racism, at least in the New World, evolved directly from slavery, Malik notes, “As a biological theory, 19th century racial thought was shaped less by the attempts of a reactionary slave-owning class to justify privileges than by the growing pessimism among liberals about the possibilities of equality and social progress.” C. Vann Woodward argues similarly in his groundbreaking book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* in which he points to the loss of support for Radical Reconstruction by Northern liberals as a decisive factor in the rise of Jim Crow segregation.

Malik also states that in Victorian England “race” was considered a description of social distinctions rather than a skin color. With social degradation developing alongside intensified exploitation in British industry, the existence of classes began to be interpreted as hereditary.

Malik concludes that race did not cause inequality, but that the persistence and growth of inequality provided the basis for the growth of racial thinking. This profound point, well worth emphasizing, is at the center of his prior volume, *The Meaning of Race*. This truth needs to be firmly grounded in historical analysis, and both Malik’s and Hannaford’s summaries tend to give heavy weight to the views of a long series of intellectuals without fully connecting this history of ideas with the social relations and the class struggle. At times, this line of argument conflates the naïve fears of those at the bottom of society with deliberate state policy decisions at the top.

The rise of ideas expresses social and class forces

In *The Meaning of Race*, Malik says that the preoccupation with race at the turn of the 20th century reflected the concern for social stability, the fear of working class unrest, the growth of national rivalries and the emergence of imperialism. Unfortunately, he does not return to this point in *Strange Fruit*.

While there are many complex intellectual strands that influence the rise of ideas, at bottom they reflect the movement of social forces. At critical historical junctures, certain ideas are “selected,” or found to express the interests of social forces, particularly those of the dominant class. “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,” said Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*.

As a book emphasizing the implications of racial thought for science, *Strange Fruit* lays less emphasis on this relationship between rise of ideologies and class forces than Malik’s prior work. Nevertheless, the growth of racism historically did not reflect the state of biology. It was the reverse—biology was often interpreted in the service of prevailing social interests, a point he himself refers to.

The origins of racist ideology were complex and multifaceted; the ruling classes seized upon this outlook repeatedly to try to control rising class tensions [6] using Jim Crow in the US in the aftermath of the rise of organized working class, anti-Semitism in Europe, particularly in France

and Russia for the same reasons, and various formats around the world, such as “White Canada” and “White Australia.” [7]

Moreover, the persistence of this racial ideology, although sometimes transformed into various culturally or politically correct formulations, expresses the continued need to suppress the class contradictions within modern society.

In conclusion, Malik returns to the reactionary impasse of identity politics and multiculturalism. In a very valuable section, he indicts the postmodernists for their inability to confront the problem of social inequality and their pessimism, pointing to the role of the New Left and the Frankfurt School.

He denounces the viewpoint that the Holocaust was rooted in the Enlightenment, as well as the position of post-World War II radicals who despaired of the role of the working class. As he correctly puts it, the New Left turned to surrogate proletariats—Third World liberations struggles, feminists, etc.—while its supposed anti-racism turned against rationalism and all that was progressive in the Enlightenment.

“What is lost in this dichotomy between biological universals and cultural difference,” Malik excellently summarizes, “is the sense of human *agency*; that is the existence of humans as rational, social beings with the power to transform themselves and their societies through reasoned dialogue and activity. All animals have an evolutionary past. Only humans make history... Humans are able both to create social distinctions (and to view them as natural or fixed) and to ignore natural differences (as irrelevant to social intercourse).”

Malik’s resounding appeals to humanism and reason are appropriate; however they are an inadequate antidote to modern racial thinking. The only thoroughgoing and consistent antiracism is based on internationalism and socialism, that is, Marxism, which is a scientific development over the humanism and rationalism of the Enlightenment. Malik’s disillusioning experiences with the New Left in Britain only express, in another way, the fact that Trotskyist internationalism represents the living opposition to all forms of postmodernist identity politics.

Strange Fruit is to be welcomed, nonetheless. It is a serious contribution to the clarification of a complex issue.

Notes:

1. Identity politics, the promotion of racial, ethnic or sexual group identity as a social interest group, arose as a major middle class phenomenon in the 1970s under conditions of the failure of the war on poverty, general economic stagnation and the overall collapse of liberal reformism. Significant sections of the middle class swung behind affirmative action and similar policies that dispensed privilege among elite layers of various ethnic constituencies. Living standards of the broad masses of working people, African-American and Latino as well as white, women and men, stagnated or continued to decline. Identity politics became a core organizing principle of the US Democratic Party whose “diversity” has culminated in the right-wing administration of Barack Obama.

2. The complete quote from Mayr in “Typological Versus Population Thinking,” is substantially more nuanced than the excerpt would indicate: “The typologist stresses that every representative of a race has the typical characteristics of that race and differs from all representatives of all other races by the characteristics ‘typical’ for the given race. All racist theories are built on this foundation. Essentially, it asserts that every representative of a race conforms to the type and is separated from the representatives of any other race by a distinct gap. The populationist also recognizes races but in totally different terms. Race for him is based on the simple fact that no two individuals are the same in sexually reproducing organisms and that consequently no two aggregates of individuals can be the same. If the average difference between two groups of individuals is sufficiently great to be recognizable on sight, we refer to such groups of individuals as different races. Race, thus described, is a universal phenomenon of nature

occurring not only in man but in two thirds of all species of animals and plants.”

3. The nature of human genetic variation and its geographic distribution is the subject of a study published in *Nature Genetics*. “The amount of genetic diversity currently estimated species-wide indicates that all *H. sapiens* are 99.6-99.8% identical at the nucleotide sequence level.” The authors point out that this degree of diversity is less than what typically exists among chimpanzees. The sequencing of the human genome is providing a more detailed understanding of global patterns of genetic variation, most of which, interestingly, is of no known function. The greatest human diversity exists within the African continent, pointing to a possible genetic bottleneck created by the migration of just one branch of the species out of Africa. These authors conclude that, “Because disease genes may be geographically restricted due to mutation, genetic drift, migration and natural selection, knowledge of individual ancestry will be important for biomedical studies. Identifiers based on ‘race’ will often be insufficient” pointing to the fact that “ ‘Races’ are neither homogenous nor distinct for most genetic variation” (Tishoff & Kidd, “Implications of biogeography of human populations for ‘race’ and medicine,” 2004).

4. A moving excerpt from Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* demonstrates his attitude toward slavery and racial attitudes, despite his well-known allusion to white superiority:

“On the 19th of August we finally left the shores of Brazil. I thank God, I shall never again visit a slave-country. To this day, if I hear a distant scream, it recalls with painful vividness my feelings, when passing a house near Pernambuco, I heard the most pitiable moans, and could not but suspect that some poor slave was being tortured, yet knew that I was as powerless as a child even to remonstrate. I suspected that these moans were from a tortured slave, for I was told that this was the case in another instance. Near Rio de Janeiro I lived opposite to an old lady, who kept screws to crush the fingers of her female slaves. I have staid in a house where a young household mulatto, daily and hourly, was reviled, beaten, and persecuted enough to break the spirit of the lowest animal. I have seen a little boy, six or seven years old, struck thrice with a horsewhip (before I could interfere) on his naked head, for having handed me a glass of water not quite clean; I saw his father tremble at a mere glance from his master’s eye. These latter cruelties were witnessed by me in a Spanish colony, in which it has always been said, that slaves are better treated than by the Portuguese, English, or other European nations. I have seen at Rio de Janeiro a powerful Negro afraid to ward off a blow directed, as he thought, at his face. I was present when a kind hearted man was on the point of separating for ever the men, women, and little children of a large number of families who had long lived together. I will not even allude to the many heart-sickening atrocities which I authentically heard of;—nor would I have mentioned the above revolting details, had I not met with several people, so blinded by the constitutional gaiety of the Negro, as to speak of slavery as a tolerable evil.... Such enquirers will ask slave about their condition; they forget that the slave must indeed be dull, who does not calculate on the chance of his answer reaching his master’s ears.... Those who look tenderly at the slave-owner, and with a cold heart at the slave, never seem to put themselves into the position of the latter;—what a cheerless prospect, with not even a hope of change! picture to yourself the chance, ever hanging over you, of your wife and your little children—those objects which nature urges even the slave to call his own—being torn from you and sold like beasts to the first bidder! And these deeds are done and palliated by men, who profess to love their neighbours as themselves, who believe in God, and pray that his Will be done on earth! It makes one’s blood boil, yet heart tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendants, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty (*Voyage of the Beagle*, pp. 496-98).

5. Much of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* is a battle against typological thinking, and in favor of population thinking. Darwin is often

concerned with whether a group of organisms should be considered a variety, or a species.

“... That varieties of this doubtful nature are far from uncommon cannot be disputed. Compare the several floras of Great Britain, of France or of the United States, drawn up by different botanists, and see what a surprising number of forms have been ranked by one botanist as good species, and by another as mere varieties... [he cites many concrete examples] ... Many years ago, when comparing, and seeing others compare, the birds from the separate islands of the Galapagos Archipelago, both one with another, and with those from the American mainland, I was much struck how entirely vague and arbitrary is the distinction between species and varieties ... to discuss whether they are rightly called species or varieties, before any definition of these terms has been generally accepted, is vainly to beat the air” (from Chapter II, p. 48, edition 1).

Darwin has two purposes here. The first, and slightly more pragmatic purpose is demonstrating that species vary internally, and that what is now a variety may tomorrow be a new species altogether. The second and more philosophical purpose is showing that nature varies and moves, and has an existence independent of assigned categories unless those categories can account for movement and variation.

6. One early example of the way class policies governed the rise of race in the US was the colonial government’s response to the revolt of servants and poor freedmen known as Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676. Anthropologist Theodore Allen terms it, interestingly, the “invention of the white race” in his paper “Race and Construction of Human Identity” in that it consciously sought to divide the masses of poor along color lines.

“As African servants were vulnerable to policies that kept them in servitude indefinitely, and European servants had the protection of English law, colonial leaders developed a policy backed by new laws that separated African servants and freedmen from those of European background. Over the next half century, they passed numerous laws that provided resources and benefits to the poor, white freedmen and other laws that restricted the rights of ‘Africans’, ‘mulattoes’ and ‘Indians’.”

7. In the United States, the historian C. Vann Woodward points out that at “the very time that imperialism was sweeping the country, the doctrine of racism reached a crest of acceptability and popularity among respectable scholarly and intellectual circles.” For example, the *Nation* wrote in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, that the eight million new souls under US control were “a varied assortment of inferior races which of course, could not be allowed to vote.”



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