

SHOULD WE USE “THE CLUES OF CATEGORY”?

The articles in the October 10 section of the reading packet have to do with a class of basic social categories that are widely used by individual Americans and by various organizations and agencies in the United States, including those of the government – local, state, and Federal. These categories include sex/gender, age, race, ethnicity – even nationality and what we might call “peoplehood.” (We will come back to this last concept later.)

This selection of articles is intended to sensitize us to the complicated issues – “the perplexities of pluralism” – that the presence and use of these categories raise. What follows are some of the central questions which will serve to direct our discussion on Tuesday, October 24. **Please come to class prepared to enter into this discussion.**

- Is race real? Stated another way, in what ways are the concepts of race and/or racial distinctions pragmatically valid or legitimate?
- Our biology is given to us largely genetically and our brains are part of our biology. Should we not then accept Steven Pinker’s argument that there are characteristics of what we call “human nature” that are also genetically given? Pinker argues that we have been distracted from this conclusion by several common ideas regarding human nature which he calls “the Blank Slate,” “the Ghost in the Machine,” and “the Noble Savage.” What’s misleading about these three ideas, and what does Pinker want to replace them with? Where do you come out in this discussion...?
- In the attempt to rectify past grievous social wrongs – at the very least biased and exploitative discrimination and segregation practiced against Native Americans, black African Americans, Hispanics, various groups from Asia, women (to name just the major groups) – how can institutional correctives be implemented without using these same (racial, ethnic, sex/gender) categories? The epidemiologist Robert Hahn says, “We need these categories essentially to get rid of them.” [Does this resonate at all with the description of an eruv as a means whereby a group of people “could undertake to break their own rules.”?]
- Yelundi Webster, a sociologist, is quoted as saying “it is not race but a practice of racial classification that bedevils [our] society.” And yet “racially profiling” doctors argue that it is a valid medical practice to take into consideration the race of their patients, along with age, sex, appearance, and presenting complaints.
- J. Craig Venter, a major geneticist, states that “there is no basis in the genetic code for race. 99.9% of the genetic complement is the same in everyone, yet humans share approximately 98.2% of their DNA with chimpanzees, and certainly we sense some significant differences there....

How do you wend your way among these many competing claims....