

# Putting race on a bronze pedestal

October 27, 2009

Planning a Columbus Day radio broadcast this year with Native American friends from across the hemisphere brought back a childhood memory. We were talking about that unfortunate human capacity to regard groups of strangers as "others," as qualitatively different, strange, threatening and of lesser worth, and about the town that succeeded in getting rid of its "illegal aliens" only to discover that its workforce, consumers and everything that sustained its economy had been eliminated. The "others" of my childhood recollection, however, weren't flesh and blood people but statues, supposed racial types cast in bronze. The Columbus story itself contributed to my recovered memory, suggesting multiple links between metal and race. It was the Tainos' lack of iron and unfamiliarity with iron-based weapons that partly prompted the Admiral's thoughts on enslaving them. It was his (and his patrons') obsession with gold that drove the horrors he inflicted. Race and metal are anyway associated in my mind from my experience as the first white to work in the previously all-black domain of the blast furnaces at Republic Steel in southside Chicago. Then, too, I remembered this passage from the Victor Serge novel I happened to be reading the morning of our meeting: All that could be seen of the two [Indian] men digging the trench was their bronze backs, gleaming with perspiration. Spadefuls of ferrous earth, as if ringed with blood, landed noiselessly at the horses' feet. "Bronzed body" and "bronzed athlete" have become clichés, referring not only to sculpted muscles but to skin tone. The alloy has other associations, of time past and nostalgia. We speak of Homeric warriors and the "Bronze Age." Parents might bronze their baby's shoes. But what should we now think of a twentieth century effort to cast race in bronze, defining and fixing racial characteristics for all eternity in a museum collection of metal statues? When I was a child, though long after my parents recycled my baby shoes to expectant relatives, my family moved to Chicago for a year. It was the aftermath of the Korean War. Steel had long ago supplanted iron as the successor to the Bronze Age. But in 1954 steel was momentarily scarce and in demand. A relative knew where there was a good supply, and so, for a brief period, my parents became steel brokers. That supply exhausted and the mills geared up again for domestic production, my parents returned to their secretarial and gas station jobs in Detroit, of course taking my brother and me with them. But that year in Chicago left lasting impressions, one of which came back abruptly as my friends and I planned. My recovered memory was a museum exhibit of a huge number of large statues of men and women, all in bronze, each designed to display a distinct racial type. The flashback prompted me to track down some reading on the "Races of Mankind" exhibition at Chicago's large and famous Field Museum of Natural History. From my research, I can tell you the display consisted of more than a hundred sculptures. I now know the story of how it came about and how it has been reorganized in response to protests and changing sensibilities. But I'd like to linger a moment first with my childhood impressions, with what stuck with me in the 55 years since my mother walked me through the museum. I already knew a bit about race; it was something I had thought about since I was little. 1954 was the year the Supreme Court decided in favor of school integration in the South. It was the era when professional sports teams integrated. But I knew little about the South and have no memories of the first black players on Detroit or Chicago teams. Integration at those levels just was not significant to me. I did know which families were moving, however, and which teachers were leaving, because they wanted to be in a whiter neighborhood. I knew which kids I'd have to fight on my way home from school because I was white; and which ones I'd have to fight because the teams I played ball on included friends who were black. This museum exhibit, though, went beyond my limited experience. It made distinctions that had never entered my world, distinctions reinforced by the solidity and clearcut lines of bronze. With 104 statues each claiming to portray a different racial type, the distinctions were minute indeed. These were lifesize statues set up on pedestals, so that even the different pygmies and representatives of other shorter peoples towered over me. With only

one exception, they were all dressed in clothes supposedly typical of their group. With the same exception, they were all doing some task or activity or relating to some product specific to their way of life. I could look at them carefully because they were, after all, objects. When I studied people on the street in my effort to understand adults or figure out the puzzle of race, they asked for something in return. They wanted to meet my eye or make me look away. They demanded acknowledgement or maybe respect or some recognition of their subjectivity. Here, there was no danger in anyone catching me looking, in offending them by my curiosity, in violating my mother's caution not to stare. This was a museum, and it brought the authority of science. According to the science of that exhibit, race meant some combination of biological and cultural attributes: physiognomy, anatomical structure, typical clothing and activities. People who looked different or lived differently were different in a fundamental way. It was a way of thinking about race and about creating categories of "others" that I later experienced most starkly in Guatemala. I remember before-and-after government posters, ostensibly promoting a campaign for hygienic products, soap or toothpaste. A Mayan family, photographed in traditional clothes, was labeled "Indio," a derisive term. Changed to Western-style dress, the same family in the "after" photo transformed their racial type and now were "Ladino." (It was the Spaniards, remember, not the natives, who never bathed.) The one statue in the exhibit that stood out was surrounded by no artifacts. Nor was it engaged in any task. It was all the more striking to a nine year-old because it had no clothes. It was naked, not only of accessories but of social context. It wasn't, however, just standing there passively, but was posed, reaching upward, triumphant or striving. This was "Nordic Man," the one familiar statue. When I could overcome my shame-tinged fascination with its nudity, it was the one statue I identified with. The others were curiosities, "others." This one was what I was supposed to be. Thinking back on it, having this statue stripped of any cultural attributes could only have been meant to universalize it. Nordic Man couldn't be defined by typical tasks or clothes. It was meant to represent endless possibilities. It was not only the statue the other ones led up to by how they were arranged, but the racial type intended as the culmination of history. My reading tells that this statue initially was named "American Man." Sometime in the early 1940s, perhaps with the mobilization for World War II, it apparently occurred to museum authorities that some Americans might not be of Northern European extraction. They changed the name but not the hierarchic layout. In the decades after my visit, protests forced additional changes. The exhibit was rearranged, its corporate sponsorship relinquished, the statues finally moved to a less prominent space. It is probably regarded now as an embarrassment. How our society thinks about race has changed. It is a concept that people still sometimes use to make sense of differences they see around them, but what it really means, or who fits in what category, is in constant flux. There is no inherent meaning nor scientifically valid underpinning to the concept. Our current gene-based biology finds greater genetic variation within so-called "races" than between individuals of different races. There are no boundaries that can be cast in bronze. The "Races of Mankind" exhibition is a product of an era that was fading even as the statues went up, but the aftereffects of which are with us still. It came out of colonialism and the sciences that were created to classify and rank the dominated peoples. Its roots were in public displays of exotic natives brought back to conquering countries and royal courts. It was part of early twentieth century racialism that tried to keep immigrants out of the country or in their preassigned social place, and that looked for racial or ethnic scapegoats in rough economic times. It was linked conceptually to eugenics and notions of racial purity and superiority. IQ tests were but the most familiar device this era spawned for measuring and stratifying people and justifying the elite's position to itself and any who might challenge it. The irony is that the science of the exhibit was so arrogant that its biases now appear blatant. It claimed to have used vast resources to scour the world and identify all the racial types: empirical research followed by hypothesis and then bronze. What really happened was something less ambitious but more revealing. The sculptor went off to places like Paris where individuals from various subjugated peoples worked in cafés or as personal servants to her friends, and used the leverage of her power and position to get them to pose. When she traveled to less cozy areas, she stayed with colonial

authorities and Great White Hunter-types and relied on them to select subjects for her sculpting. Where the models didn't seem typical enough, she altered their features to fit the racial guidelines she'd been given. When she didn't find them with the clothing or artifacts she expected, she added what she thought they should possess to be "authentic." As a nine year-old, I was impressed more with the science than the esthetics. The exhibit reinforced the message I was getting from adults: be wary of "others." "Stick with your own kind," as the marvelous lyrics but ambiguous moral of West Side Story put it. Fortunately, I never bought that message in its entirety, though I could never deny that it had a narrowing influence. My life has been enriched by being close to people who look different from me and live very differently from what I was used to and how I was raised. I am confident our society is better in all kinds of ways for its diversity and its renewal through continued influx. Because it is such a widespread social category, race continues to be a puzzle. But I've learned over the years that the issue has more to do with our socially-shaped vision and understanding, including our vision for the future, than with any clear demarcations among people. As a species we have a capacity, perhaps even an inclination to stereotype groups we don't know well. Our stereotype affects not only how we see and act toward them, but then how they behave toward us. If the "color question" was key to twentieth century United States as DuBois thought, with a broadened palette of skin tones it is still fundamental. Indeed it permeates public policy, whether the issue is housing, jailing, welfare or access to healthcare. As we engage in these debates, let's remember that race is a mental and social construct with real world (and historic New World) consequences. It is not at all fixed, as it were, in bronze. This article was adapted from a radio address.