

The Reception of the Origin of Races by Carleton Coon

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The Origin of Races by Carleton Coon was an exhaustive compilation of more than six hundred pages. The book presented a theory about the evolution of the human race from Homo erectus. His theory argued Homo sapiens originated from Homo erectus in five geographically distinct places and due to the environment and geographical conditions evolved at different times. As the white race reached the Homo sapiens categories earlier, they were at higher levels of civilization than others.

His theory of five races had a racial context that considered Europeans better than other races because they evolved early (Jackson, 2001). His theory of five races created much controversy among academics and the general population because his theory used intensive fossil studies to provide evidence to his theory. However, many sociologists and others argued that the book was escalating the segregation and racism in the US when people were trying to end the segregation. Many people suggested that the book was harmful to African Americans and the racists could use the arguments to validate their racism and promote discriminatory behaviors. The book was used to validate the racial discrimination in 1962 and before its publication. However, it might have created worse consequences for African Americans if it had been published in 1932 when Jim Crow and segregation were the norm. Hence the book had many social problems for people and disturbed many academics.

The academia was divided in their reception of the Origins of Races, but almost all agreed there were problems with the accuracy of the content. There were also problems with the scientific knowledge of evolution that the theory suggested based on studying the human skulls. According to Dobzhansky, the idea that humans evolved in five different places at different times suggests that evolution is "repeatable" which is improbable for a species. He criticizes Coon for assuming something "impossible" in human evolution. He argues that it is impossible for humans to remain one specie considering the five independent origin theories of Coon due to the "analogous selective pressures" (Dobzhansky et al., 1963). This kind of pressure would create five species instead of one across time and climate differences, which is why he does not consider it a good evolutionary theory. Montagu and Dobzhansky claim evolution is mostly based on natural selection, but the theory of Coon disregards the natural selection process of evolution (Dobzhansky et al., 1963). Another critic, Hulse considers the material interesting but unusual conclusion. He argues that if the races evolved due to climatic and geographic changes, there must be more than five evolutions as the climate in India, Syria, and France differ greatly from other places. Thus, many other critics have criticized biological references to genes, apart from considering the problems mentioned above in the texts. Humans are biologically and evolutionary and fall under a single species (Hulse, 1963). Therefore, it is unlikely that the evolution of the same organisms at different times and places with varied climatic and geographic changes. As the genes are susceptible to mutation and changes, they cannot survive and tolerate all

kinds of conditions to form the same species(Hulse, 1963; Oschinsky, 1963). Therefore, the evolutionary explanation of the Coon's book *The Origins of Races* is criticized by many for being inaccurate.

But the academics who praised Coon did not comment on the content and its meaning for scientific, biological, and anthropological society, they admired the hard work and the amount of information the book contained. Authors such as Mayr, Oschinsky, and Dobzhansky have admired the volume of research the author has put into this work and explained his theory with evidence from various sources. Most of the authors have found errors and some problems with the text and the conclusions that Coon draws with the evidence that he provides. For instance, Oschinsky argues he has perpetuated past errors while using the remains of skulls Leakey used for his works. He claims those skulls were damaged, but Leakey, as well as Coon, used them to explain and present a theory which they consider to be the fact. Furthermore, he criticizes that the used specimen for the "Origin of Races" at least some of them were of different species, but Coon has categorized them under the subspecies or of the races that he claims(Dobzhansky et al., 1963; Mayr, 1962; Oschinsky, 1963). But Ernst Mayr appreciates his evidence and "detailed analysis." Thus. The book was provocative and controversial in the academic circles.

In reply to all the controversies, Coon tried to defend himself and his comprehensive research in the replies to Montagu especially. But his reply was in large part accusation and mockery of the authority of Montagu instead of answering the questions that Montagu and other writers had asked. He also gave the names of the critics who had reviewed the book positively and considered it an asset. In answer to the widely raised question about the evolution of the same species in different climates and geography, he argued that it was because of the peripheral gene flow. However, it was answered that getting the same species with the peripheral gene flow is almost impossible because of the pressure and climatic changes. Consequently, Dobzhansky and Montagu answered him and explained their concerns about the book. However, the book remained controversial and criticized by many authors(Dobzhansky et al., 1963; Jackson, 2001).

The book was received partly because of its inaccuracy and unanalyzed conclusions, and partly because of the racial component it offered. Many critics considered and argued the inaccuracy and lack of proper analysis of the used materials. It also contributed to the knowledge of physical anthropologists as much of the earlier chapters accurately presented the information and analysis of the materials. However, his theory and conclusions in later chapters were the reasons for dissent among the academic circles. As the book was driving conclusions and providing a new theory of the origins of races, it was interesting and attracted many people. But later due to not-so-compelling biological, and evolutionary arguments, it was read and gained popularity. Moreover, the racial context that the book was presenting was used by the white supremacist as another reason for the reception of the book(Jackson, 2001; Mayr, 1962; Mead, 1963). The white supremacist was using it to oppose the anti-segregation in [American society](#).

As the book suggested, the white race evolved before any other races, it had better civilization

compared to others, making the blacks or other races inferior to whites. Many people find the book problematic because of the claim it was making. Black people of America have always been discriminated against and considered inferior in the history of America. The “Origin of Races” was proving the long-held belief of the white people who were against assimilation and giving equal rights to black people. The notion that black people originated later than white people thus they needed to be taught the ways because the whites came before the blacks now better than them (Dobzhansky et al., 1963; Jackson, 2001; Oschinsky, 1963). This kind of ideology was harmful to the people of color as it provided scientific evidence to the long-held beliefs of the people of America. Many people had used this notion even before the publication of the book to discriminate against people of color. The book claimed the Black race was “200,000 years behind the white race” which also meant they were 200,000 years behind in their capabilities, learning, and skills (Dobzhansky et al., 1963; Hulse, 1963). Although it can be argued it was only a theory presented by a single person, for a segregated society where black people have always been discriminated such a theory could be brutal. However, it was published when many people and organizations sought equal rights for all American citizens.

Otherwise, if the book was published in the 1930s, it might have strengthened the unjust beliefs about [white supremacy](#) or the supremacy of some races. The presented theory was not only bad for the United States but the whole of Europe which was suffering from racism and fascism in the 1930s. For instance, Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy have used this theory to reach their goals of oppression. The perceived ideology of one race being better than others would have given these fascist leaders a legitimate reason to inflict discrimination and mass murders as it was happening in Germany. The ethnic cleansing of Jewish and minorities was a horrendous event of 1930s Nazi Germany and similar trends of suppressing ethnic minorities were seen all over Europe. To give a few examples, France under Francisco Franco, Germany under Hitler, Austria under Engelbert Dollfuss, Italy under Mussolini, and others are popular examples of fascism in Europe in the 1930s. This book and theory presented would have been used by these leaders for their political power and benefits (Morgan, 2003). Also, in the US, the [Jim Crow laws](#) were still intact and affected the lives of people with segregated social lives for black people and whites. A book confirming the inferiority of blacks would have created even more problems for black people. The schools, social life, means of transport, and the seats for the blacks were allocated. At those times such a theory might have validated slavery and social discrimination. Hence the ideology presented in the book would have created more problems for minorities, and political dissidents and the political leaders would have used it to gain political power and suppress oppositions by using such a theory. As it was happening in Europe with the rise of Fascism, minorities, and Jews people had suffered from discrimination and ethnic cleansing (Morgan, 2003). Therefore, it was a dangerous theory for the Fascist Europe of the 1930s. However, it was used in America by Putnam and another white supremacist to slow down the process of the civil rights movement and gain support from people even before the book was published (Dobzhansky et al., 1963; Hulse, 1963). Thus, this theory could have been used as a tool in the hands of heinous people in the 1930s.

To conclude, the “Origin of Races” by Coon created controversy over the science of evolution, the biological makeup of the human species, and the flow of genes, and created [social issues](#). The book and the author were criticized for not having compelling arguments and evidence to present a theory

of the evolution of human races. He was criticized for the content and accuracy of his argument. Although many admired the book for its informative and extensive research on fossils, their conclusions were considered simplistic and shortcuts without proper evidence. Moreover, it was an essential theory that might have created social issues if published a few years earlier but the author had not considered the consequences of the article when he wrote the book. The book was published at the time of the civil rights movement; it was used by white supremacists to advocate for segregation and discrimination. Therefore, the authors must be mindful of what they write and how they present it. Their ideas can create social problems if they are not written and conveyed properly with adequate proof and evidence.

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