

'Races' do not exist

STEVE JONES is one of Britain's leading geneticists and best popularisers of science.

His current TV series and accompanying book on human genetics, *In the Blood*, has drawn fire from tabloid papers.

The *Daily Express* denounced Jones as "politically correct" and a "multi-racial liberal" for claiming there is no "meaningful difference" between "races".

Yet the series is absolutely right to insist "race" is not a scientific concept at all.

Humans have around 60,000 active genes—the molecules in all our cells that play an important role in shaping our biological make up.

Of these around six—one hundredth of 1 percent—relate to skin colour, and have no bearing whatever on behaviour, character or anything else.

The most striking biological fact about humans, in contrast to many other species, is their uniformity.

"Humans", Jones has written, "have to accept the fact that they belong to a tediously uniform species."

The difference between individuals of the same "race" is far, far greater than that between so called races.

And by far the biggest genetic variation between humans is in fact within black Africans, rather than between "races".

The absurdity of dividing humanity into "races" on the basis of skin colour is best seen by looking at other, often greater, differences between people.

Why focus on drawing up divisions on the few genes that relate to the relatively unimportant feature of skin colour?

Fact

Which blood group you belong to is a real biological difference.

If you are, say, blood group O then you can have a transfusion from anyone whatever colour their skin may be.

But if you get a transfusion from someone with the wrong blood group who happens to share the same skin colour the result will be fatal.

We could create divisions based on average height, or hair type or eye colour.

You could end up with Scandinavians and the Masai of Kenya as one "race" and the Bambuti "pygmies" of the African rain forest and some southern Europeans in another.

Every new attempt to construct pure racial divisions between people fails in the face of biological fact.

A recent example is the gene for the blood disorder sickle cell anaemia—often claimed as only a "black" gene.

Yet in recent weeks, to many scientists' astonishment, it has been found in white women. The same gene also exists among people around the Portuguese town of Coruche and a similar genetic variant exists in Cyprus.

The gene, which protects against malaria, could have evolved inde-

'Race is an ideological category inseparable from racism. You cannot fight racism by taking over its concepts'

pendently in various parts of the world, or it could have spread from one source in Africa through earlier migration.

Human beings are relatively uniform, but with wide and interesting variations. The variations cannot be reduced, however, to any notion of "races".

Race is a political and ideological notion, not a scientific one. Steve Jones has written, "A race as defined by skin colour is no more a biological entity than is a nation."

Both evolved into important, and "common sense", parts of the prevailing ideology in tandem with the development of capitalism and the slavery, imperialism and nationalism it brought.

Mistakenly some blacks reacting against racism have developed equally mistaken theories about race, claiming "blacks" are superior to "whites".

Race is an ideological category inseparable from racism. You cannot fight racism by taking over its concepts.

Trap

Unfortunately Steve Jones himself falls into a similar trap in his disappointing new book and TV series.

He is undoubtedly an excellent scientist and a committed anti-racist. But nearly all the quotes, examples and arguments in this article are from his excellent book written three years ago, *The Language of the Genes*.

In his new book and TV series he makes unwarranted concessions to unscientific notions of "race". He does the same in other areas too, such as the idea that "crime" is genetically based.

"I see nothing wrong in using the word 'race' to describe differences between people," he now writes.

He seems to have abandoned his earlier insistence on scientific objectivity.

Jones should re-read his own earlier books. Human races are a political and ideological concept, not a scientific or biological one.

by PAUL MCGARR