The idea of race is a modern phenomenon. While the word itself emerged in Southern Europe in the late Middle Ages, the concept began to crystallize during the eighteenth century and reached maturity a century later. When the word ‘race’ was used for humans in earlier times, it meant a group of the same stock, tribe, people and even ‘nation.’ This broad and often indiscriminate use of the word does not mean that pre- and early modern Europeans did not employ some of its modern connotations, nor does it mean that non-Europeans did not use it. They definitely recognized various groups of people as having, for example, a common ancestry, an affinity to other groups, certain characteristic mental capacities and behavior features and specific physical features, which, they hypothesized, were the result of climate and geographical habitat. It was only in the eighteenth century, however, that the concept of race began to denote large groups of people sharing a common geographical habitat and a hereditary physical and mental makeup. It was generally believed at the time that almost every human being belonged to one of just a few such races.

Since the early 1940s the concept of race has been under heavy attack on the grounds of its scientific validity and even its presumed fallacy. The horrifying events of World War II, the Nazi destruction of European Jewry in particular, spurred the retreat from the race idea, but that was not the only reason. For some, it was a question of pure science. Among the weapons used in this delegitimization campaign were the findings of the new field of population genetics. Conducted with an unprecedented rigor and integrity, studies in this field demonstrated that genetic variation is more

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1 Rotem Kowner is gratefully acknowledging the financial support granted by the Israeli Academy of Science (ISF) for his part in the research for this chapter.
2 For the etymology of the word race see chapter 2 of the present volume.
3 For landmark studies challenging the validity of the concept of race, see, for example, Montagu, 1942; Lewontin, 1972; Wade, 1993. For even earlier changing concepts of race, at least in interwar Britain and the United States, see Barkan, 1992. It should also be noted that some Columbia University scholars criticized racial concepts from a historical point of view as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Cf. Winston, 2004: 4–5
common at the individual, rather than the group level, and that human traits are distributed along many lines that rarely, if ever, correspond to the traditional division of races. Many scholars currently accept the idea that the division of mankind into broad races has neither biological validity nor social justification. Conventions, nonetheless, die slowly. In the natural sciences, medicine and genetics in particular, many researchers still regard race as a valid independent variable. The vast majority of them, it should be qualified, do not assign a value judgment to race and certainly do not imply the existence of a racial hierarchy.

Many others, however, seem to oppose this approach and refer to it pejoratively as racialism—namely, a belief in the existence and significance of racial categories. Indeed, in the humanities and social sciences, at least, very few would use race as a variable today unless they deal with intergroup relations. The majority, instead, regard it as a social designation or as an obsolete legacy of a dark past. One of the scholars who have set the pace in this respect has been the sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe, who viewed race as “socially [rather than biologically] defined on the basis of physical criteria” more than forty years ago. Some scholars tend to reject even this seemingly progressive definition. In fact, a growing number of scholars deny the existence of any reality associated with race altogether. “There is no conceptual basis for race,” one of them has asserted recently, “except racism.”

Racism, this alleged survivor of the race idea, is a much newer concept and at the same time a far older phenomenon. Incredibly, the term appeared for the first time as late as 1933–34 in an unpublished manuscript written by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) and then in its English translation in 1938. A Jewish homosexual and liberal physician

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5 E.g., Bhopal, 1997; Kaplan and Bennett, 2003. For specific studies, see Risch, 2002; Wang, 2007; Lohmueller, 2008.
6 The term ‘racialism’ first appeared in the 1907 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and initially implied a meaning similar to that of present-day racism, namely, the “belief in the superiority of a particular race.”
7 See, however, the controversial work of the Canadian psychologist Philippe Rushton (1988, 1994, 1995) and the contentious book *The Bell Curve* for the impact of race in North America (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). For a critical review of and a rejoinder to this book, see Frazer, 1995.
8 Van den Berghe, 1967: 9. Sixteen years later, the same author slightly modified his definition and suggested that race is “a socially defined group which sees itself and is seen by others as being phenotypically different from other groups.” In Van den Berghe, 1983: 222.
9 Hirschman, 2004: 408.
10 See Hirschfeld, 1938: 5.