

Racism and Social Darwinism

Wallace G. Mills Hist. 203 8 Racism & Social Darwinism

- in the 19th century, Europeans increasingly became preoccupied, even obsessed, with 'race'. There are several explanations:

(1) **the development of technology** (especially military technology) gave white Europeans a tremendous power superiority over other peoples; power does corrupt and bring arrogance. They came to regard 'race' as an explanation of the disparities. They began to attribute military and technological advantage and superiority to possession of a 'white skin' and 'race'.

(2) **the social sciences** (especially anthropology—social as well as physical—and sociology) were heavily influenced by biological sciences both in methods and by adopting analogies; thus, social scientists set out to classify different 'races' with a tendency to perceive of human beings in different sub-species or even different species.

- also there was a tendency to borrow heavily from the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin ('survival of the fittest' is a vulgarisation of a more complex theory); especially, they drew on the idea of struggle and survival as the natural mechanisms for maintaining and improving the 'stock'—i.e., genetic characteristics—of human beings. This was the origins of so-called 'scientific racism'.

(3) **exclusivist ideas of nationalism** contributed towards and drew from racist thinking; thus a homogeneous 'nation' (same language, physical characteristics, culture, etc.) constituted a 'race'; there were frequent references to the British 'race' or to the French and German 'races'.

- alternately, it was asserted that many of the homogeneous characteristics (not only physical characteristics but also moral, intellectual and 'spiritual' characteristics) were transmitted genetically and were thus racial; this could easily lead to a fixation on 'purity' of 'blood' and 'races'.

- for an example of mystical nationalism/racism, see the excerpt from [Houston Chamberlain's work](#) (all that mumbo-jumbo about the 'Teutons'); he was married to Richard Wagner's daughter. Wagner's bombastic operas embodied a great deal of Germanic racism and myth.

Consequences

(1) **Ranking**: this brought the idea not only that human beings could be classified into different 'races' but also that the 'races' could be ranked on a scale from higher to lower;

as criteria for this ranking, sometimes culture or technology was used, but in other cases, especially as the 'new imperialism' and the 'scramble for Africa' ensued, military power (brute strength) seemed to be the chief criterion for measuring ranking on the scale.

- i.e., proficiency in subjugating or even exterminating one's opponents is the measure of 'higher' races as compared to 'lower', 'more primitive' races. Someone who kills with a spear or bow and arrow is more primitive and belongs to a 'lower' race than someone who kills with machine guns and artillery. Of course, those who obliterate with atomic weapons must be a 'higher' race still! [Reductio ad absurdum]

(2) **Rejection of the idea of morality** as an important consideration in human affairs.

- thus, it was not 'right' but survivability or plain 'might' that counted. Nature, they argued, was amoral; the strong **should** and would inherit the earth. None of the namby-pamby stuff about the meek.

- if any people or 'race' could not defend its land, then it deserved to lose it; this was a terrific rationalisation for imperialism and the conquest of Africa [see also [Pearson's discussion of the Amerindians, p. 772](#)]. This included the idea of 'lebensraum' (living space) even though that term began to be used by Pan-Germans only in the 1890s in regard to central and eastern Europe.

(3) **Glorifying the benefits of competition and struggle**; social darwinists saw this operating internally as well as externally in a society; competition separated out the efficient and able domestically, at least, if laissez-faire policies were in place. Thus, it reinforced support for laissez-faire.

- they called for an end to 'interference' in the natural, 'survival of the fittest' struggle; they could not condone physical violence and destruction but certainly economic struggle could involve economic destruction of one's rivals.

- moreover, the prosperous and dominant should then produce children at high rates while the poor and unsuccessful, with fewer resources and opportunities, should be discouraged and unable to reproduce on as large a scale.

- however, this clashed with experience because fertility rates were declining among the upper social and economic classes but not in the lower classes; social darwinists often blamed the government, including policies which relieved unemployment and destitution, as the reason for this contrary outcome. Eventually, they began to argue that society and government should become actively involved to ensure that what they thought **should** happen actually did happen. The 'superior' elements of society should be encouraged or even

required to have lots of children while the inferior elements should be discouraged or even prohibited [see [Pearson's concerns about population and birth rates, pp. 773-4](#)].

- it also led to the idea of eugenics—biological engineering and selective breeding of humans. Eugenics tried to apply the knowledge and practices that had been developed for breeding of domestic animals to humans.

(4) **Idea that war is beneficial**; war (external struggle) was not only inevitable, but it was a necessary and beneficial activity, a 'good'.

- war benefited the different races by weeding out the weak and less fit thus allowing the strong, intelligent, etc. to reproduce. World War I would disprove this notion decisively [armed forces rejected anyone who fell below their minimum physical and mental standards and these rejected men never went to war at all; in battle, the active and energetic in the trenches were often the first killed]. Nevertheless, the idea of the benefits of war was accepted widely in the period before the war, and most fascists continued to believe it in the interwar period.

- war benefited humanity generally; inferior races were reduced or eliminated while superior races could expand and continue to develop. This belief involved a new definition of 'progress'— elimination of the weak and technologically less advanced and proliferation of the advanced and therefore 'strong'.

- in short, war was glorified as an invigorating and purifying activity [see [Pearson, p. 773 & Bernhardt, pp. 776-7](#)]. It also appealed to Romantic sensibilities; war was awful (in the literal meaning) and terrible, but it was 'good' in the long term. To participate was to partake of 'Nature' on the most fundamental and profound level.

(5) **Social policies were called into question**; social darwinism could bring contradictory reactions to social policies:

- on the one hand, some social reformers argued that inadequate attention to education, slum conditions and physical deprivation by governments and society was contributing to intellectual and physical deterioration of some members of the nation. They argued that the nation could not afford to waste its human resources by allowing so many of its members to grow up stunted both mentally and physically. [In Britain in both the South African War and World War I, this problem became topical because army recruiters found that many volunteers were not fit enough to be accepted— up to 40% in some slum areas!] As a result, these social darwinists advocated social reforms to deal with the problems.

- on the other hand, others argued that social welfare measures were preserving inferior racial stock and encouraging them to reproduce. They pointed to the demographics; the poor (i.e., 'the inferior') had many children while the well-to-do ('the superior') were having fewer children— the opposite of what should happen.
 - proponents of this second view raised the question of eugenics; should society take steps to discourage or prohibit procreation and reproduction of the inferior (however defined) and vice versa?
 - in Canada and the U. S., proponents of these kind of views tended to focus on immigration policies. In both countries, there were anti-Asian legislation and barriers to immigration at least partly based on social darwinist views. In British Columbia, there were serious riots and public pressure induced the legislature to pass laws against Indians from Asia.
 - among the imperial federationists in Canada (many of whom were social darwinists), there was a great deal of concern about immigration from southern, eastern and central Europe from which an increasing proportion of immigrants were coming in the last two decades before 1914. These immigrants were regarded as greatly 'inferior' to 'British', 'Germanic' or 'Nordic' 'races', and therefore, they threatened to reduce the quality of the 'racial stock' in Canada.
 - there are amusing sidelights to this social darwinism; Charles Kellogg was a social darwinist and a zealot for 'moral purity'. He thought that eggs and meat stimulated the sexual appetites and urges. Thus, his invention of corn flakes was an attempt to find a quick and easy cereal substitute for bacon and eggs. He hoped this switch in diet would help young men to preserve their 'moral purity' more easily. The concern for 'moral purity' was certainly partly religious (Kellogg was active in the YMCA which was a religious organisation at that time), but it was also related to his concern to maintain and even raise the quality of racial stock among young American men. Only the 'pure' could father healthy, sturdy children.

Prevalence of Racism

- racism in our sense of the term was relatively limited and rare in the 18th century. Rousseau even went to the opposite extreme in his 'cult of the noble savage' ideas; 'primitive' people were better because they lived closer to nature and were uncorrupted by civilised vices.
- racism grew strongly and steadily in 19th century to reach a high point in the 1890-1914 period.
- almost all areas of western societies were affected (perhaps infected). Racism

provided a great rationalisation for the 'new' imperialism of the late 19th century; it could embody a veneer of paternalism—the 'white man's burden' or 'the civilising mission'—but usually was just naked brutality.

- an example of the growth of racism can be seen among Christian missionaries. Early in the 19th century, they tended to believe that any 'superiority' of whites was the result of Christianity and that once other peoples converted, they would quickly catch up and be completely equal; by the late 19th century, many (of course not all) missionaries felt that the 'inferiority' (shown by tardiness in adopting Christianity) was inherent and therefore 'racial'.

- it was not just European societies either; 1890-1914 is the high point of Jim Crowism in the U.S. Not only was the Ku Klux Klan active (it was anti-Semitic as well as anti-Black), but this was also when the formal segregation policies and the suppression of blacks were being implemented in the South. **De facto** segregation and discrimination were also the rule in the North.

- the treatment of blacks in Nova Scotia and Ontario (never that great anyway) shows a sharp deterioration in the same period. **De facto** segregation was extended in the schools; residential segregation had always existed.

- at the same time in British Columbia, a violent anti-Asiatic racism grew more intolerant; there were several serious race riots in the decade and a half before 1914.

- almost everything said or written at the time was at least tinged and often riddled with racism.

Anti-Semitism

- anti-Semitism is a special case of racism and was, of course, a long-standing tradition in 'Christian' Europe.

- however, prior to the last half of the 19th century, it was not usually based on 'racial' grounds; rather, the prejudice and discrimination were based on religious and cultural grounds. Thus, Jews could usually escape the effects by converting to Christianity.

- also, from the time of the Renaissance and especially during the 18th century, overt persecution had lessened in some parts of Europe (Netherlands, Britain, France, some parts of Germany, and Austria). As a result, a number of very prominent families and individuals had found opportunities in the arts and business although varying degrees of discrimination remained.

- social discrimination was very widespread—perhaps less in England. However, even

in England, the rules of Parliament were not altered to allow Jews to sit as members until Disraeli (the son of a converted Jew) achieved that in the 1860s.

- in eastern Europe Jews were severely repressed and frequently persecuted.
- pogroms with lynching, rape and murder, as well as destruction of property, were recurring events, often with government acquiescence and even encouragement. It was often used as a way to divert hostility from the government.
- increasingly in the 19th C, anti-Semitism was linked to racism, especially in Germany although it tended to be general with the rise of racism [for an example of this racist anti-Semitism see Houston Chamberlain's writing]; however, some of its most virulent and vicious forms emerged in Austria in the 1890s to 1914 era where it influenced a young Adolf Hitler among others. [It appears to be still powerful there; there was not only the Kurt Waldheim reaction a few years ago, but a recent public opinion study found surprisingly high levels of anti-Semitism.]
- it was in the 1890s that the notorious and persistent forgery called ***The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*** was written, usually credited to the Tsarist secret police.

[It was charged at his trial that Jim Keegstra had cited this forgery in his class as proof of an international Jewish conspiracy. The pamphlet has been a staple of anti-Semites ever since the 1890s. This period was when the Zionist movement began and that may have been the basis for constructing the claim that there was a conspiracy to take over the world. However, the objective of the Zionist movement was to encourage Jews to migrate to Palestine and eventually found a Jewish state there; the movement never had anything to do with such a preposterous ambition as taking over the world. Also, the movement was not very secret! Not too many people outside Jewish communities knew much about Zionism, but that was because they didn't know much about Jews, not because the movement was secretive.]

- however, anti-Semitism appears in the writing of a great many, perhaps most, people of the era.

- it was a very significant factor in the spectacular 'Dreyfus Affair' in France (we'll discuss this in more detail in [lecture '10 Militarism'](#)).

- anti-Semitism remained widespread in Canada until after World War II and was especially out-spoken in Quebec during the 1930s and 40s. During that period, nationalism/separatism in Quebec was linked to ultramontanism and through that to anti-Semitism. However, treatment was no worse in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada and perhaps even better as so many Jews choose to settle in Montreal. Of course, that link of Quebec nationalism with ultramontanism has largely been lost since 1945.

- as recent historical work has shown, many of the top officials in External Affairs from the inter-war period well into the post-1945 period were dedicated anti-Semites. This helps to explain the abominable record of Canada in refusing to accept Jewish refugees in the 1930s and 40s. Even though horror at the Nazi atrocities in the Holocaust had undermined public support for exclusion of Jews, many of these officials continued to try to keep out as many Jews as they could in the post-war period as well [see the recent book, ***None is too Many***].

- as late as 1968, the Waegwoltic Club in Halifax still excluded Jews and Blacks! I doubt that it was alone in doing this.

- unfortunately, anti-Semitism is not dead. Three men—Jim Keegstra, Ernst Zundel and Malcolm Ross—have gained a great deal of notoriety in recent years in Canada because of their anti-Semitism.

- nor is racism. Philip Rushton, a psychology professor at the Univ. of Western Ontario, has become notorious for his views on race. He used results from standardised tests to assert that there are significant 'racial' differences in intelligence as shown by the scores. (A couple of American academics made similar claims about different 'cognitive abilities' of 'racial' groups in their book, ***The Bell Curve***.)

- unlike most such theories, Rushton's places Asians, not Caucasians, at the top of his list; Caucasians are second while blacks still rank very low. Rushton goes on to assert that this ranking also correlates with levels of sexual activity with Asians having much lower propensity while blacks have high propensity (I'm not sure how he measured or tried to prove this). This is simply a recrudescence of 19th C racism.

- in the 19th C, eager physical anthropologists set out to show the physical aspect of race by measuring people (heads, arms, legs, torsos, etc.; yes, even penises). The assumption was that some 'races' (whites were almost always ranked at the top) were more highly evolved than others; thus, some 'races' would show more similarities with non-human species, especially the great apes.

- e.g., they expected to show that the ratio of cranial capacity to total body volume was higher for 'higher' races and lower, closer to the apes for 'lower' races. Or they expected to see if arms were longer and legs shorter in relation to torso as was the case of apes.

- what did they find? Variation within human groups ('races') is much greater than variation between group averages. There were tall Zulu and short Zulu and there were tall Englishmen and short Englishmen; however, the difference between average or median Zulu and average or median Englishmen were small and/or insignificant!

- it was the same with most aspects they measured. Size differences between groups seems to be diminishing further as diets become more similar; e.g., as diets change in Japan, children are getting taller than their parents, just as happened in western societies.

- curiously, on one physical trait—amount of body hair—it is Caucasians who are most like apes among humans.

- in fact, physical differences are all superficial: texture of hair, skin pigmentation, amount of body hair, etc. Beneath the skin, differences are virtually non-existent; differences in blood types are distributed among all human populations; there are **no** racial differences in blood. DNA testing has confirmed that genetic differences are tiny. Compared to most other species (dogs, horses, cows, etc.) the degree of similarity among humans is amazing. There is truly only **one** race, the human race. The significant differences among humans are cultural (and thus learned), not biological (and thus 'racial').