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*The Rise of Modern Racism(s):  
White Supremacy and Antisemitism  
in the Eighteenth and  
Nineteenth Centuries*

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**W**hen Europeans of the late medieval and early modern periods invoked the will of God to support the view that differences between Christians and Jews or between Europeans and Africans were ineradicable, they were embracing a racist doctrine. The curses on Jews for the killing of Christ and on blacks for the sins of Ham could serve as supernaturalist equivalents of biological determinism for those seeking to deny humanity to a stigmatized group. But the highest religious and temporal authorities generally avoided sanctioning this form of ethnic predestination. Because of their deviation from Christian universalism, these notions lacked the systematic exposition and promulgation that would give them substantial ideological authority. As a set of folk beliefs or popular myths they could create distance enough to dull the sensibilities of slave traders or enflame the passions of mobs bent on killing Jews. But the churches, for the most part, persisted in affirming that Jews and blacks had souls to be saved and were thus the legitimate targets of evangelization. Furthermore, it was not clear that blacks were cursed at all, since the divine malediction in Genesis fell on

Canaan rather than his brother Cush, generally thought to be the ancestor of Africans.

The orthodox Christian belief in the unity of mankind, based on the Bible's account of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of all humans, was a powerful obstacle to the development of a coherent and persuasive ideological racism. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a few venturesome free spirits like Giordano Bruno and Christopher Marlowe included among their heretical speculations the theory that mankind had three ancestors, and that Adam was the forefather of the Jews only. In 1655 the Frenchman Isaac de la Peyrère, a Protestant of Jewish descent, provided the first full exposition of the theory that Adam was not the first man but only the first Jew. The theory of polygenesis, or multiple human origins, challenged the orthodox doctrine of a single creation and "one blood" for all of humanity and could be applied in an extremely racist fashion. If Adam and Eve were to be thought of as simply white rather than specifically Jewish, and if the pre-Adamites were considered black and inferior (somewhere between the descendants of Adam and the beasts of the field created earlier), Africans could be even more effectively dehumanized than through the invocation of the Hamitic curse. Such doctrines might find some oblique support in Scripture (whence, for example, came the people in the Land of Nod among whom Cain found a wife?), but they remained difficult to reconcile with the orthodox reading of the book of Genesis. The theory of polygenesis would thrive only when the power of biblical literalism declined.<sup>1</sup>

The modern concept of races as basic human types classified by physical characteristics (primarily skin color)

was not invented until the eighteenth century. The term for “race” in Western European languages did have relevant antecedent meanings associated with animal husbandry and aristocratic lineages. The recognition of superior breeds of horses and dogs obviously foreshadowed the biological ranking of human beings with differing physical traits. Heredity was commonly associated with blood, and titled families were thought to manifest their royal or noble blood through recurring somatic characteristics. In 1611 a Spanish dictionary included among the definitions of *raza* an honorific use—“a caste or quality of authentic horses”—and a pejorative one, as referring to a lineage that included Jewish or Moorish ancestors. The “blood libels” against Jews that began in the Middle Ages were rooted in a belief that blood could convey sacred or magical properties. The notion, implicit in these accusations, that Christian blood differed from Jewish was clearly affirmed in the sixteenth-century Spanish conception of *limpieza de sangre*. But the fact that different varieties of animals of the same species could interbreed, as could all humans, meant that such pre-modern hereditarianism did not threaten the orthodox belief in the essential unity of humankind. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and beyond, the term “race” or its equivalent was also frequently used to refer to nations or peoples—as in “the English race” or “the French race.” Whenever and wherever it was used, however, the term implied that “races” had stable and presumably unchangeable characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that there was a single pan-European or “white” race was slow to develop and did not crystallize until the eighteenth century. Direct encounters with Afri-

cans had of course made Europeans aware of their own light pigmentation, but in other contexts whiteness, as opposed to national and religious affiliations, was not a conscious identity or seen as a source of specific inherited traits. At a time when social inequality based on birth was the general rule among Europeans themselves, color-coded racism had little scope for autonomous development. In the New World, where European pigmentation could be readily compared to that of black slaves or copper-toned Indians, color soon became one—but only one—of several salient identities. In the North American colonies, according to Winthrop Jordan, “the terms *Christian*, *free*, *English*, and *white* were for many years employed indiscriminately as metonyms.”<sup>3</sup>

By the early seventeenth century you had to be black to be a slave in the American colonies, but it was legal and religious status rather than physical type that actually determined who was in bondage and who was not. In every New World slave society, some proportion of the population of African descent was acknowledged to be free or semifree. In early- to mid-seventeenth-century Virginia, for example, blacks might be slaves, indentured servants, or freemen, depending on the circumstances of their arrival in the colony and, in some cases, on whether or not they were Christians. Blacks frequently sued for their freedom on the grounds that they had been wrongly enslaved.<sup>4</sup> Slaves on plantations might be treated as grossly inferior to their masters, but white indentured servants were not treated much differently, at least on a day-to-day basis. When they bargained for cargoes on the Guinea Coast of Africa, Europeans were forced to treat the indigenous rulers or entrepre-

neurs with whom they dealt as equals. The black servants who were imported into England and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were automatically at the bottom of society, but they were not a separate caste below the white lower class. Intermarriage among white and black servants occurred in both countries. In Britain it was more or less taken for granted, but in France it became a matter of official concern and led to restrictions on the bringing of black slaves back from the colonies to serve in French households. (In 1778 the French government enacted a formal ban on intermarriage, but the law was not enforced.)<sup>5</sup>

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the status of Jews in Europe improved somewhat (their readmission to England and France was perhaps the strongest indication of this relative tolerance), although religiously based antisemitism remained endemic. The entrepreneurial Jews of central Europe were able to widen their economic opportunities by shifting from moneylending to general commerce. A fortunate few acquired great wealth and influence as “Court Jews”—financial advisers and money-raisers for the Hapsburg emperor and for the lesser rulers and bishops of the German-speaking principalities. “The most conspicuous characteristic of the economic life of Jews in the period,” according to David Sorkin, “was . . . the incidence of destitution at one extreme and the accumulation of great wealth at the other.”<sup>6</sup> The impoverished greatly outnumbered the wealthy. “Up to the end of the eighteenth century,” writes Peter Pulzer, “the great majority of Jews of the German states lived lives that were marginal to the economy and the rest of society, engaged in

peddling or begging at a near destitution level. Above them was a smaller middle stratum of small-scale merchants, cattle-dealers, tavern-keepers, rabbis, teachers, and doctors. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Because of the marginal and relatively fixed position of western and central European Jewry, a “Jewish question” had not yet emerged, and outbreaks of virulent and aggressive antisemitism, such as pogroms and accusations of ritual murder, were fairly rare. There was as yet no clear conception of a Jewish race with innate characteristics that made them a despised and eternal Other for non-Jewish Europeans.

The scientific thought of the Enlightenment was a precondition for the growth of a modern racism based on physical typology. In 1735, the great Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus included humans as a species within the primate genus and then attempted to divide that species into varieties. This early stab at the scientific classification of human types included some mythical and “monstrous” creatures; but the durable heart of the schema was the differentiation Linnaeus made among Europeans, American Indians, Asians, and Africans. Although he did not explicitly rank them, Linnaeus’s descriptions of the races clearly indicated his preferences. Europeans he described as “acute, inventive. . . . Governed by laws.” Blacks, on the other hand, were “crafty, indolent, negligent. . . . Governed by caprice.”<sup>8</sup>

The most authoritative classification of the races produced by the Enlightenment was Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, published in 1776. Rightly deemed the father of physical anthropology, Blumenbach had no doubt that all humans belonged to a single species and that they had a common remote ancestry. He



also recognized that his categories were abstractions or ideal types rather than discrete units. “*Innumerable varieties of mankind run into each other by insensible degrees,*” he wrote. His fivefold division into Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays was a reasonable deduction from what was then known about the dominant physical types on each of the continents or regions of the known world, and his description of each race stressed purely somatic characteristics rather than intellectual or moral traits. He went out of his way to refute the common claim that Africans were “nearer the apes than other men.” But as a white European he could not escape ethnocentric bias. He was the first to trace the white race to the Caucasus, and he did so because of the reputed beauty of its inhabitants. He then went on to hypothesize that those he dubbed “Caucasians” were the original human race from which the others had diverged or degenerated. They were, he affirmed, “the most handsome and becoming,” having “the most beautiful form of the skull.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever their intentions, Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and other eighteenth-century ethnologists opened the way to a secular or scientific racism by considering human beings part of the animal kingdom rather than viewing them in biblical terms as children of God endowed with spiritual capacities denied to other creatures. Earlier versions of “the great chain of being” extending from God to the most humble of his creations had posited an unbridgeable gap between the human and the nonhuman that was now being closed.<sup>10</sup> The efforts to demote Africans from human to ape or half-ape status that Blumenbach sought to discredit revealed how a purely naturalistic chain of being could be

employed to deny full humanity to non-Caucasians. But as Blumenbach's degeneration theory suggested, eighteenth-century ethnological thinkers did not for the most part question the notion that humanity had a common origin and that the variations currently observed must have been environmentally induced. The comte de Buffon, the greatest of Enlightenment naturalists, expressed the prevailing view when he attributed variations in skin color to the effects of climate in the various regions of the world inhabited by the distinct races. To Buffon, it seemed obvious that the contrast of black and white pigmentation could be attributed mainly to the differing effects of sun and temperature in Africa and Europe.<sup>11</sup>

But an environmental explanation for the variations did not prevent naturalists like Linnaeus or Buffon from ranking the races. Buffon, for example, assumed that Europeans were intellectually superior to Africans. He attributed their greater ingenuity to the difficulty of raising food on barren soil. The ease with which Africans could provision themselves made them "large, plump, and well made but . . . simple and stupid."<sup>12</sup> Characteristics induced by climate and customs were not likely to change unless the environment was radically altered, and no one knew how long it would take for the effect of a new milieu to reverse the "degeneration" caused by climate or other physical conditions. Some racial environmentalists in the early American republic fully expected imported Africans to turn white in the more temperate climate to which they were now exposed, but the process seemed to be taking a very long time.<sup>13</sup> There was little doubt among whites on either side of the Atlantic that Africans were currently less "beautiful" than whites,

more barbarous in their habits, and probably less intelligent. Hence, for most practical purposes, they were members of an inferior race. The possibility of uplifting them was not foreclosed, but in the meantime there was no reason to think of them as cultural and intellectual equals or as potential compatriots.

The purely aesthetic aspect of eighteenth-century racial attitudes deserves more attention than it has received. In *Outline of the History of Humanity*, published in 1798, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners correlated physical beauty with intelligence in his ranking of human types. "Fair" people were superior in both respects, while the "darker, colored peoples," he deemed both "ugly" and at best "semi-civilized."<sup>14</sup> In his *Notes on Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson reflected the most sophisticated European ethnology of the day when he made blacks the equal of whites in their innate moral sense and gave only a tentative endorsement to the popular belief in their intellectual inferiority. But he had no doubts whatever that they were the uglier race.<sup>15</sup> Both Jefferson and Charles White, a British surgeon who wrote in 1799 on the differences among men and animals, were particularly impressed with the fact that only white women could blush. Furthermore, asked White, "[w]here, except on the bosom of the European woman, [shall we find] two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermilion?"<sup>16</sup>

The neoclassical conceptions of beauty that prevailed in eighteenth-century Europe and America were based primarily on Greek and Roman statuary. The milky whiteness of marble and the facial features and bodily form of the Apollos and Venuses that were coming to light during the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created a standard from which Africans were bound to deviate. The Dutch sociologist Harry Hoetink has attributed to nations or ethnic groups “somatic norm images” or stereotypes of the beautiful that influence their attitudes toward people they perceive as physically different from themselves.<sup>17</sup> But these images are themselves cultural constructions that change over time. Because of the classical revival, Europeans of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries valued extreme paleness, as well as the facial features and physiques thought to have characterized the ancient Greeks and Romans.

While critical to these aesthetic judgments about human types, skin color was not the be-all and end-all. The common admiration for the appearance of North American Indians was based on an appreciation of the physiques of young warriors. Before they became “redskins” in the late eighteenth century, their tawny complexions were either ignored or attributed to artifice rather than nature.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the most denigrated of all races encountered by Europeans before the nineteenth century—the Khoikhoi or “Hottentots” of southern Africa—were not black or even dark brown but yellowish tan in pigmentation. They were viewed as the lowest of the low both because their nomadic, nonagricultural way of life was considered highly uncivilized and because in physique and physiognomy they were perceived as deviating more from the European somatic norm than did other (and much darker skinned) Africans.<sup>19</sup> What such reactions reveal is that the predominating belief in the unity of mankind and in the environmental sources of physical divergences

among groups of human beings did not preclude an aesthetic revulsion against some non-Europeans as ugly, if not monstrous, in appearance. A heightened emphasis on the physical, as opposed to the inner or hidden sources of human character, was also evident in the greater attention to what was thought to be the “ugliness” of the typical Jew.<sup>20</sup> Aesthetic prejudice may have been more central to the negative assessments of non-Europeans and Jews in the eighteenth century than the tentative and ambiguous verdict of science about their intellectual capacities.

Although the racial typologies of the eighteenth century established a framework for the full-blown biological racism of the nineteenth, much of the ethnological thought of the Enlightenment was without immediate practical application. Before the mid-nineteenth century, as Michael Adas has shown, Europeans did not generally regard their penetration and dominance of other parts of the globe as the result of their innate biological superiority. They saw it rather as the fruit of acquired cultural and technological advantages. In the specific case of British India, he notes that British officials remained convinced that their colonial subjects were capable of being fully civilized long after social discrimination against Indians and half-castes had developed in the late eighteenth century. He concludes from such evidence that “popular racism can arise with little or no validation from the writing of social theorists and other intellectuals.”<sup>21</sup>

The obverse of this proposition is also true, as the case of Voltaire illustrates. An intellectual can be a theoretical racist without contributing significantly to the growth of popular prejudice or actual discrimination. By quoting