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How Evolution was used to Support Scientific Racism

Lindsay Pressman

The concept of race was non-existent prior to the period of European and American imperialism. Race is not a biological concept. It is merely a social construction that was established in order to justify the subordination and subjugation that aligned with imperialist policies. The United States was not founded on democratic principles; rather, it was established on the principles of scientific racism- the manipulation of scientific evidence to prove the inferiority of those that are phenotypically different. Scientific principles, such as social Darwinism, the eugenics movement, and the creation of intelligence testing, were utilized to support racist beliefs in a time when rapidly advancing scientific knowledge was regarded as prestigious, truthful, and irrefutable. Through the application of weak research methodologies, lacking reliability and consumed with bias, any evidence contradicting societal preconceived racist convictions was manipulated or suppressed. Scientific racism provided a justification for the longstanding domination of “others” (who were deemed intrinsically inferior as a result), as well as for the political and economic advantages that followed.

The idea of social Darwinism was a product of Herbert Spencer’s loosely based interpretation of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Spencer introduced a new perspective on this theory, coining the term “survival of the fittest.” Spencer believed that species have an innate tendency to strive for self-preservation, which leads to competition and, ultimately, a winner whose strength indicates they are best suited for survival. “If biological organisms evolved gradually by eliminating those individuals’ least fitted for survival, it was thought, then social organisms must evolve at the same geological rate and by the same process of elimination” (Taylor 1981:451). When applied to imperialist societies, this concept asserts that

groups who are more economically, technologically, or politically advanced than neighboring groups will naturally dominate and conquer. The successful vanquishing of one society by another is a demonstration of natural selection in action. White Anglo-Saxons used this theory to promote and validate their superiority, classifying their successes as natural and inevitable, rather than as a result of their desire to subjugate others.

The theory of evolution states that there are inherent limitations on species improvement and that species eventually encounter a predetermined point they are unable to progress beyond. This concept was applied in Social Darwinism to prevent social mobility, leading to the belief that a group or species' position in society is fixed, or has minimal capacity for improvement. However, this theoretical limitation has never stopped a species from continuing to strive to improve through competition, a central concept of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Social Darwinism asserts that racial conflict is a natural means of evolutionary progress. The persistent, unavoidable, and "natural" struggle for societal improvement through conquest or competition is embodied in this conflict between racial groups. The principles of social Darwinism would therefore label the loser of a battle as unfit, or inferior. In 1884, Harvard Dean Nathaniel Shaler claimed that "blacks" were becoming extinct; this became a popular argument used to demonstrate black inferiority as a result of natural order (Taylor 1981:451).

The idea of racial domination was sustained through social Darwinist principles, but the act was perpetuated by the political and economic gains the dominant groups received as a result. The ceaseless control of "inferior" races was necessary in order to maintain the dominant group's survival and success. The practices, policies, and institutions of the dominant group supported their belief of the racial inferiority of other groups. By attributing the failures of the subjugated group to their innate lack of ability and inherent inferiority, the dominant group is able to

morally justify their desire to subjugate others through actions that are often in opposition to the democratic principles their society claims to be founded upon.

The concept of instinctive disgust in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was used to support scientific racism. Under Darwin's theory, members of a species will have an inherent feeling of repulsion towards, and a tendency to avoid, anything that could be harmful or a threat to their survival. Scientists promoting scientific racism used this theory to validate implicit abhorrence towards these "inferior" beings, claiming it must be due to evolutionary means. By presenting "inferior" beings as something of deleterious nature to the dominant group, and even a threat to their survival, white \_\_\_ were able to provide a scientific basis for the practice of racial exclusion. This mindset negates the idea that this racial hatred could be learned or that it is derived from environmental factors, and instead presents it as something natural and biological (Darwin 1872:253-277)

Nordicism and Anthroposociology theories introduced the distinction of clear races in the \_\_\_i.e. early 1900s\_\_\_. Nordicism presented the idea that civilization itself, including the political and social order, is based on race. Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, one of the most influential of the Nordacists, published *Essay on the Inequality of the Races*, in which he declared his acceptance of the division of races into "white," "black," and "yellow" (1853-1855). This led to the development of Nordist supremacy- the belief that the "Aryans," or "whites," "were the only ones capable of creative thinking and civilization building" (Jackson & Weidman 005:70). Following this ideology, the downfall of any civilization could be attributed to interbreeding among races. Vacher de Lapouge was the founder of Anthroposociology. He used head shape, as well as a range of socially desirable characteristics, as a marker to divide individuals into separate races. Lapouge supported the argument that the mixing of races is detrimental to a

society and deemed the only solution to this “racial crisis” to be the elimination of inferior races. This theory represented an extreme form of scientific racism.

The eugenics movement played a prominent role in providing a basis for scientific racism. Developed by Francis Galton (1822-1911), eugenics is the theory of innate character qualities and the conviction that nature, not nurture, determines hereditary ability. This ideology completely disregarded the influence of an individual’s environment, and declared poverty, criminality, and laziness to be heritable traits associated with certain racial groups, claiming “races vary intellectually and morally just as they do physically” (Taylor 1981:452-453). This led to the idea that the human race could be improved through selective breeding, providing an even stronger foundation for acts of racial domination and belief in the intrinsic inferiority or superiority of certain racial groups. Through the use of pedigrees, Galton “reasoned that if ability was determined by heredity, a famous man’s closest male relatives were the most likely to exhibit exceptional abilities, with this characteristic diluting out with hereditary distance.” (Gillham 2001:87-88)

Galton’s approach set the stage for the science of biometrics, which focused on biological traits that could be directly measured and calculated. In 1869, Galton published the book *Hereditary Genius*, in which he revealed his findings that mental abilities are inherited, and used these data in order to rank the geniuses of men. These questionable findings suggested the possibility of breeding a superior race of people. Galton believed that Negroes were at least two grades below Anglo-Saxons in mental ability. He was motivated to help guide society towards achieving this superior race by promoting breeding between superior groups, and discouraging any genetic mixing with the inferior races, even going so far as to seek out government intervention.

According to Darwin's theory of evolution, species members seek certain traits in their mates, those that will ultimately pass down the most favorable and advantageous features to their offspring. This purposeful mating concept was manipulated by scientists to support scientific racism, and utilized to promote racial exclusion. The dominant group ("whites"), those more "fit", were said to be innately healthier than those inferior ("blacks"). "Blacks" were said to be of poor health, with higher rates of tuberculosis and venereal diseases, and low intellectual ability. Therefore, members of the "white race" were opposed to having sex with members of the "black race" because they did not want the "inferior or tainted" genes of the "blacks" to be inherited by the offspring.

As the eugenics movement progressed, specific character qualities began to be attributed to certain racial groups, and to the physical traits associated with that race. For example, "blacks" were attributed with criminalistic tendencies, laziness, and feeble-mindedness. Any deviation from expected, inherent behavior was considered a temporary state, simply due to an individual's "gentleman ability" (Taylor 1981:457). In those cases, the individual's intrinsic nature is merely being veiled and its return is inevitable. Therefore, people must be treated, not based on their current behavior, but based on their predisposed innate nature and temperament. Lynch mobs were used as evidence of black inferiority, claiming they were a direct result of the raping of "white" women by "black" men. The rape of "white" women was precipitated by a combination of the inherent rapist tendencies of "blacks" and their overwhelming desire for "white" women (whose blood had the potential to move them up in society.)

In the early twentieth century, eugenics saw increasing popularity in the United States. Madison Grant was an avid Nordist supremacist, and strongly opposed the idea that the environment could influence heredity. He believed the United States was in danger of being

consumed by the inferior, “unfit” races, and proposed two solutions: man “can breed from the best, or he can eliminate the worst by segregation or sterilization.” (Jackson & Weidman 2005:73) Among the many publications supporting heredity as immune from environmental influences, was Arthur Eastabrook’s *The Jukes in 1915*. In this work Eastabrook disputed the ideas presented in Richard L. Dugdale’s 1874 *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*. Dugdale’s work, based on the observation of an impoverished family, the Jukes, presented the concept that by providing environmental influences such as education and medical care, maladaptive hereditary tendencies could be reversed. Similar to Grant and other followers of Nordicism and Anthroposociology, Eastabrook maintained that the achievement of a superior society required the eugenic segregation and sterilization of inferior races.

Eugenics policies began to circulate across the United States, taking two approaches: positive and negative eugenics. Positive eugenics involved the encouragement of the members of the superior, “fit”, “white” race to produce a large number of children; and advocating for eugenics education, focusing on the promotion of attaining a pure and superior race. Unfortunately, negative genetics was often more publicized as the ideal approach. This approach involves the elimination of inferior types through practices such as sterilization, immigration legislation, and laws preventing the intermarriage of races. Negative eugenics led to the implementation of acts such as The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and The 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, both methods of restricting immigration to the United States of races deemed inferior.

The development and implementation of intelligence testing in the early twentieth century significantly advanced and supported the ideals of scientific racism. Lewis Terman modified the Binet-Simon scale, originally designed to prove genealogical factors were eminent

in the determination of intellectual ability, and developed the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale (what we know today as the IQ Test). The establishment of this standardized, quantifiable test gave eugenics more standing as a true “hard” science. This IQ test was believed to be an objective, impartial test that would validate many of the propositions of social Darwinism. Disregarding its bias towards the more educated and cultured Anglo-Saxon “whites”, the results of this assessment were used to confirm “whites” worth and superiority. The tests were used to justify the racial oppression and exclusion of “blacks”, based on the new and “scientific” proof of their inferiority. “IQ tests thus became ideological weapons in the campaign to label certain persons so as to better exploit them.” (Dennis 1995:247) By using what they deemed to be objective measures, they provided instant truth to their results, and anyone who refuted these “hard” scientific facts were simply incorrect.

Scientific racism was developed during a time of rapid advancement of and respect for science. This led individuals to perceive any claim made by a somewhat established or credible scientist to immediately become an undeniable fact, regardless of whether or not the evidence used to support these claims was reliable, valid, and unbiased. “Those arguments which could claim scientific sanction were not open to further attack. The scientific and the true were indistinguishable.” (Taylor 1981:451) The methodologies and techniques used to gauge the rank, intelligence and abilities of different “races” did not have to be objective or impartial, they just had to be labeled as scientific in the public eye.

As noted above, the methodologies and techniques used by scientists to prove the inferiority of “blacks” were poor, and the results were often manipulated or suppressed when they fail to align with their preconceived bias convictions. One of the common character traits associated with “blacks” was laziness. In 1913 Dr. Ulrich B. Phillips of University of Michigan



defended this attribution by comparing cotton production among blacks and whites before and after emancipation. He compared the declining cotton production among the “blacks” of Mississippi to the increasing cotton production among the “whites” of Oklahoma and Texas. Phillips used this evidence to prove the inherent laziness of “blacks”, while completely disregarding the land conditions at the time, especially the overused land of Mississippi. (Taylor 1981:457) When results of intelligence or abilities testing did not align with what was expected, or preferred, they were simply not published and were suppressed. Census reports indicated low levels of insanity and suicide among “blacks”, which scientists attributed to “blacks” not having enough brains to go insane and being too good-natured to commit suicide. However, when the suicide rates later increased, the scientists modified their explanation claiming that the minds of black people were weak and unable handle stress. “The “scientific facts,” whatever they happened to be, were manipulated by biased investigators to demonstrate their preconceived and unshakeable convictions.” (Taylor 1981:459)

*The Bell Curve*, written by Herrnstein and Murray in 1994, echoed the assertion of fixed IQs among “blacks” and “whites.” The authors contend that genetics not only shapes individual characteristics; “culture, intellect, and knowledge are racially determined, fixed, and hence not subject to devices of social reconstruction.” (Dennis 1995:249) Herrnstein and Murray believed that negative traits of an individual’s behavior are predetermined, therefore unchangeable. This idea encouraged opposition to compensatory education or government intervention, finding efforts for equal opportunity to be a waste of time and resources. If these compensatory actions were administered, Herrnstein and Murray designated them to be destined to fail. They felt that since the inferiority of “blacks” was of genetic predisposition, and therefore fixed, giving them social consideration would be futile.

There are myriad examples of when the position of “blacks” in society (socially, politically, and economically) has been attributed to their disposition rather than their situation. Scientific racism caused the dominant group (“whites”) to feel superior, and all the privileges (opportunity, education, respect) associated with “whiteness” to feel earned and natural. “Blacks” were believed to have a genetic predisposition for criminality based on the principles of scientific racism. In truth, criminality results from poverty and degradation, all factors “blacks” became subject to because they were labeled as biologically and socially inferior. They are victims of the system, continuously being placed in situations that are precursors of criminality. They are then blamed as individuals, with a dispositional assignment for their failures. “Whites” are blind to their own privilege and unearned advantages, having been normalized by a society established on imperialism and racism. As a result, the negative circumstances and system in which “blacks” are placed is ignored, and what is actually the fault of inequalities of resources, opportunities, and success is assigned instead as dispositional blame on individuals.

Race was developed by imperialist nations seeking a justification for the domination and subjugation of others. Social Darwinism, the eugenics movement, and intelligence testing all played a significant role in the advancement of scientific racism. Evolution was used to support scientific racism in order to give these declarations of inferiority “scientific” backing and provide validation for racial domination and exclusion. This type of scientific thinking was of a closed nature, which took no consideration of any evidence in conflict with proposed theories. The impartial and bias aspects of the methodologies and techniques used in research were ignored, and when results failed to align with preconceived biases, they were often manipulated or suppressed. This intentional ignorance was able to perpetuate because of the overpowering trust people had in science, making any “scientific” claim immediately truthful and indisputable.

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