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“Utterly Submerged” or Fighting the Tide Replacement Anxiety in the Tribal Twenties

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Among the more disturbing images to emerge from the four-year Trumpian ascendancy was that of torch-bearing white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting first “You will not replace us” and then, more pointedly, “Jews will not replace us.” These angry marchers were voicing the fear that demographic shifts, abetted by Semitic or other “dark forces,” were eroding white dominance and, if left unchecked, would lead to “white genocide.”

They were not alone. The fear of being replaced is so inbred among today’s white supremacists that it has spawned a mantra known as the “Fourteen Words.” “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson has blessed this racist fearmongering with a political gloss, affirming that white voters are indeed being replaced thanks not to Jews but to the Democratic Party, which he says is “trying to replace the current electorate — the voters now casting ballots — with new people, more obedient voters from the Third World.”

It’s a voting-rights question. In a democracy, one person equals one vote. If you change the population, you dilute the political power of the people who live there. So every time they import a new voter, I become disenfranchised as a current voter.

Let’s pass over the fact that adding people to the voting rolls in no way disenfranchises, much less replaces, people who are already on them; and observe only how Mr. Carlson’s fuzzy math lends a supposed intellectual cachet to the white supremacist apprehension, and to the belief that replacement is happening by design. In 2011 this concern about being pushed aside had found a more rigorous intellectual voice in French scholar Renaud Camus. His book *The Great Replacement* fed white Europeans’ alarm that the people they had colonized over the centuries were now engaged in a reverse colonization of the European homelands.

But the history of replacement anxiety stretches back much further than 2011. In the United States, it flourished with a special fierceness in the interwar period that immigration scholar John Higham called the Tribal Twenties. In this paper, examining that decade’s fears of the New Immigration, that is immigration mostly from southern and eastern Europe, I analyze racist nativism as an existential “grievance tale” whose logic evades moral argument and that may best be understood not as an “alt right” reading of history but as an anguished *cri de coeur* at the loss of status.

The American 1920s is often seen as the heyday of backwoods racism, known for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and an epidemic of lynching. That characterization is not unfair. But the 1920s also saw the rise of so-called “scientific racism,” promoted by Ivy League educated intellectuals like Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard. In their books *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), they argued that white civilization was being swamped by floods of non-Nordic immigrants who threatened not just the established political structure but the purity of “protoplasm” itself. Anti-immigrationists saw themselves as defending both the existing class structure and the genetic heritage of a race that had attained global dominance by refusing to mix its blood with “inferior” others. Grant, Stoddard, and others I’ll mention supported the Immigration Restriction League and were vocal proponents of eugenics, that is, improvement through good breeding, as the salvation of the race.

Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*, was published in 1916 and reprinted seven times over the next twenty years, serving as “the unofficial handbook of racism after the war” (Roderick Nash 1971: 69). It was popular in Germany, and Hitler is said to have called it “his Bible.” The typology it popularized, adapted from economist William Z. Ripley’s *The Races of Europe* (1899), replaced the Victorian stages of savage, barbarian, and civilized with a geographical division of the European population into Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean “strains.” These strains were marked by distinctive skin, hair, and eye color, and by distinctive cranial proportions; eugenicist researchers in this period were obsessed with measuring the shape of human heads.

The Nordic strain—light hair, blue eyes, long head—was Grant’s *Homo europeus*, the “white man par excellence.” Alpines were seen as inferior to Nordics, and Mediterraneans were the Nordics’ polar opposites, being seen as expressive and prone to the “herd instinct” (William McDougall 1921: 83-87). Thus Nordic dominance was defined as a *natural* arrangement. Since Mediterraneans had an “instinctive tendency” toward submission, it was fitting that their brute strength be harnessed by those with greater resolution, initiative, enterprise, determination – in a word, “character.”

The subtleties of Grant’s classification were doubtless of minor relevance to his “Nordic” readers. What concerned them was the book’s alarmist thesis – the notion that, in the planet’s great racial competition, the “great race,” the white race, was being insidiously supplanted by hordes of the colored. “Colored” meant not only the volcanic and fearfully fertile blacks, but also the two “lesser” races of Europe, the Alpine and Mediterranean (Wilbur Abbott 1925) who had been washing up on America’s shores since the 1890s. The villainous mechanism here was “the mere force of breeding,” which with tragic logic was assuring the rise of the “fecund” and the inevitable decline of the slow-breeding Nordic. If not blocked by legislation, arithmetic itself would ensure white extinction.

When Grant suggests that universal suffrage discriminates against “the man qualified by birth, education, and integrity,” when he announces that “a majority must of necessity be inferior to a picked minority” (Grant 1916: 5), we hear a nostalgic evocation of John Adams’s ideal – a

stable government run by “the rich, the well-born, and the able.” If the darker races were threatening to outbreed their betters, there was a concomitant threat coming from the darker classes, and Grant reflected the ideology of his social stratum that the underbreeding that was leading to “race suicide” was also abetting the spread of proletarian “immorality.” In his chilling phrasing, “Efforts to indiscriminately preserve babies among the lower classes often result in serious injury to the race” (Grant 1916: 44).

Like his fellow eugenicists, Grant was convinced that interbreeding was also disastrous. Arguing for the expansion of anti-miscegenation laws, he wrote,

When it becomes thoroughly understood that the children of mixed marriages between contrasted races belong to the lower type, the importance of transmitting in unimpaired purity the blood inheritance of ages will be appreciated at its full value, and to bring half-breeds into the world will be regarded as a social and racial crime of the first magnitude (ibid.: 56).

Among Grant’s rivals for the attention of a race-troubled America were his fellow lawyers Charles W. Gould and Lothrop Stoddard. Gould’s *America, a Family Matter* (1922), traced the baneful effects of “hybridization” throughout ancient history, and defended “the importance of keeping the strain pure” as the “fundamental rule” of self-preservation. The volume’s epigraph neatly summarized its message: “A mongrel people never attains real prosperity” (Gould 1922: 1-27).

Far more important than Gould—more influential, really, than Grant himself—was the Harvard-educated historian and Ku Klux Klan member Lothrop Stoddard. Stoddard too was terrified of “mongrelization,” believing that it led to “degeneracy of blood” (1920, 116), and he was especially hostile to the Latin American “zambo” or “negro-Indian” mix, “universally adjudged the worst of matings” (128). Condemning the pincer movement of black and red – “dark” peoples and Bolsheviks – he groaned that the colored races’ “extreme fecundity” was aggravated by the slow-breeding whites, whose misguided liberal management of colonial populations had offset the beneficial effects of disease, tribal warfare, and famine. In his view, the contemporary world was facing a “revolt against civilization,” mounted by legions of the “uncivilizable” Under-Man, including “congenital barbarians” like Asians, Africans, and American Indians (Stoddard 1922: 5-25). Stoddard’s term “Under-Man,” by the way, was adopted by the Nazis as the appropriate label (*Untermensch*) for Germany’s undesirables.

It’s important to remember, especially perhaps at a conference on anti-intellectualism, that this eugenics-fueled xenophobia was sustained not by the knuckle-dragging rednecks of liberal demonology but by East Coast patricians with impeccable credentials. Madison Grant, the toast of New York society and an obsessive joiner of the city’s prestigious clubs, did his undergraduate work at Yale and his law degree at Columbia. Fellow Yale graduates included Charles Gould and Henry Pratt Fairfield, author of *The Melting Pot Mistake* (1926). Lothrop

Stoddard took a bachelor's and doctoral degree from Harvard. Among other "nervous Nordic" alumni of that institution were geographer Ellsworth Huntington (who taught at Yale); and the nation's preeminent eugenicist, Harvard biologist Charles Davenport.

Far from being the crackpot concern of a marginalized cadre, then, the fear of mongrelization was endemic throughout polite society. Franz Boas, the nation's most famous anthropologist, ridiculed Grant's book as "fanciful" and "dangerous," but this was a minority view. America's racist worldview was invented, taught, and promulgated at the country's premier citadels of higher learning. This is one significant difference between the tony nativism of the 1920s and the more violent versions we are experiencing today.

One other wrinkle, illustrating how these patricians' books came to be coin of the realm. With the exception of Fairfield's *Melting Pot Mistake*, all of the anxious manifestos of the eugenics movement were brought out by a single New York publisher, the century-old firm of Charles Scribner's Sons.

Anyone familiar with American modernism will recognize Scribner's as the firm that made the reputations of the novelists Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe. If you're a literature groupie, you may also remember that this trio owed its fame to Scribner's "genius" editor Maxwell Perkins. What you may not know is that Perkins also shepherded into prominence the works of Grant, Stoddard, and Huntington. He edited seven of Stoddard's books. This is worth remembering, because it helps to cement the association between Ivy League credentials, "scientific racism," and patrician anxiety.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald suggests the tenor of that anxiety, by putting it in the mouth of the character Tom Buchanan. In speaking of "this man Goddard" and in misquoting the title of Stoddard's most famous book, Buchanan gives memorable expression to the image of inundation that so appealed to the nervous Nordic sensibility. Here is the relevant passage from Fitzgerald's book:

"Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?...[I]t's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."

The phrase "utterly submerged" is Fitzgerald's, but the anxiety it suggests was endemic in this period, and frequently expressed with the same metaphor. Stoddard describes a world in which "the rising flood of color finds itself walled in by white dikes debarring it from many a promised land which it would fain deluge with its dusky waves"; the embattled levee image is picked up later in the volume, where he describes the "supreme phase of the colored peril" as Asian competition for "white" jobs at the "inner dikes" (Stoddard 1921: 9, 251). The outer dikes here protect the colonized world, where native populations grumble at empire; the inner dikes protect the Nordic homelands, settled by whites and now "deluged by the truly alien hordes"

(263) from southern and eastern Europe. And even though this new dark tide “could not measure up to the colonial stock *which it displaced*” (263), it so severely upset the cultural balance that “we today flounder in a veritable Serbonian bog, painfully trying to regain the solid ground on which our grandsires confidently stood” (264).

The “flooding” image became standard in 1920s racist terminology. In her study *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, Nancy MacLean notes that the second Ku Klux Klan, no less than Tom Buchanan, was terrified of being “submerged in a sea of sensuality and sewage” (cited in MacLean 1994: 113). Steps must be taken, warned Charles Davenport, “to dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm” (Davenport 1910: 32). Madison Grant, observing the “swarms of Polish Jews” in polyglot New York, called the city a *cloaca gentium*, or “sewer of races” (Grant 1916: 81). Stoddard laments the capacity of cheap colored labor to “swamp the whole white world” (271). Even the nativist disdain for “the melting pot mistake” (the title of a 1926 book by Henry Fairchild) reflected the fear of submergence in a miscegenized stew. As Stoddard put it, because “each race type...is a stubbornly persistent entity...the melting pot may mix, but it does not melt”(165).

Why the rising tide? Why did flooding become Stoddard’s preferred metaphor for describing unwanted immigration? And why did that metaphor resonate so strongly with his white audience?

It may have had something to do with the weather. Stoddard’s generation had several times in recent memory witnessed the devastating power of water. He was a child during the Johnstown Flood of 1889 and a teenager in 1900 when Galveston, Texas, endured a storm surge that killed thousands of people, in an event that remains the single deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. Thirteen years later, rain left Dayton, Ohio under twenty feet of water. Two years after that, as Stoddard was researching his book, Galveston was hit again, with a storm that killed 400 and caused \$30 million worth of damage. So when *The Rising Tide of Color* appeared, memories of killer floods were still fresh.

But deeper trepidations were probably also at play. In analyzing the effect of the “utterly submerged” image, one might begin with the fact that it evokes a fear of drowning. Stoddard evokes this fear explicitly at the end of a chapter showing how World War I had destroyed “white solidarity” and ensured the victory of the “little dark man” (199). “The white world today,” he writes, “stands at the crossroads of life and death...Time presses, and drift is fatal. The tide ebbs. The swimmer must put forth strong strokes to reach the shore. Else—swift oblivion in the dark ocean” (197).

The fear of submergence may also have been culturally “certified” by remembrance of the West’s most famous drowning story: the Genesis tale of the deluge. Stoddard does not mention this, but in a sense he doesn’t have to. In the American 1920s, as his fellow Klansmen were carrying the Bible in one hand and a noose in the other, the image of a world overrun by dark waters would not have had to be spelled out to hint at annihilation. Stoddard may have been hinting at it himself in that purple phrase “would fain deluge with their dusky waves.”

But there was more going on here than a fear of drowning. Let me look a little more closely at the metaphor to see what additional anxieties Stoddard was tapping into.

First, note that he depicts the threat to white supremacy not as a threat of individuals approaching Ellis Island, but as an inchoate wave, without individuality and without agency. In his 1983 essay “The Prose of Counterinsurgency,” Ranajit Guha notes that when colonial writers described peasant rebellions against the British Raj, they depicted them as natural phenomena. “They break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history” (337). The agency of individual actors—or of their collective activity—is metaphorically obliterated. In his invocation of tides, waves, and floods, Stoddard is employing the same technique. To someone who saw the dusky races as less than human, this was no doubt a congenial move.

But the tide is not only suffocating; it is also dirty, that is, impure. I want to nod here briefly to the late Mary Douglas, whose 1966 book *Purity and Danger* has taught generations of anthropology students that “There is no such thing as absolute dirt.” Rather, dirt is that which “offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment.” Our “pollution behavior,” our attempt to avoid impurity, is “the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.” Or, in her most famous one-liner, dirt is “matter out of place.”

Douglas was attempting to define why cultures permit the consumption of certain foods while stigmatizing others. I want to suggest that, with a dash of poetic license, her take on pollution might serve as a lens through which to understand the eugenicists’ terror of contamination. In the most famous chapter of her book, “The Abominations of Leviticus,” she argues that the Hebrew classification of edible and inedible foods is an attempt to keep species in their proper place: “Those species are unclean,” she writes, “which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world.” So too with regard to bestiality: It is a perversion because it unites what is meant to be kept apart. The Hebrew word *tebhel*, she says, usually translated as “perversion,” actually means “mixing” or “confusion.”

I am not suggesting that Stoddard and company had this in mind when they railed against the mixing of races. But the Biblical repugnance at confusion, and at “impure” categories, is perfectly consonant with a worldview in which the planet is divided into assigned territories and in which crossing territorial boundaries—either through immigration or through mixed marriages—is considered an assault on the “general scheme of the world.” In Madison Grant’s hysterical phrasing, what New York’s “sewer of races” was bringing about was “amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors” (1916, 81). “To bring half-breeds into the world,” he insisted, should be regarded as “a social and racial crime of the first magnitude.”

The eugenicist paradigm of the 1920s had baleful impacts on social policy. In the areas of population control, education, and immigration, the discriminations of the Eugenics Records Office (founded by Charles Davenport) were used to justify a social engineering program aimed

at reducing American “feeble-mindedness” by limiting the breeding population of the nation’s many “morons.”

To those who are interested in learning how that project was advanced by leading psychologists, I would recommend Stephen Jay Gould’s superb analysis of craniometry and IQ testing in his 1981 book *The Mismeasure of Man*. Here let me just fast forward to the most egregious effects of the eugenics mania. After the testing of World War I Army recruits revealed a low level of general intelligence, eugenics champions claimed that, under the dual impress of immigration and race-mixing, the national germ plasm was degenerating. And, once the cause of feeble-mindedness had been determined to be genetic, in Gould’s words, “the cure seemed simple enough: don’t allow native morons to breed and keep foreign ones out” (Gould 1981: 164-65).

To reduce the breeding of “morons,” several states enacted anti-marriage and sterilization laws, and in a famous 1927 opinion, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., upheld one such law that had permitted the sterilization of three female generations of a single Virginia family: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough,” he wrote. Charles Davenport argued that, if young people could not be persuaded to “marry intelligently,” then society must protect itself; “as it claims the right to deprive the murderer of his life, so also it may annihilate the hideous serpent of hopelessly vicious protoplasm” (Davenport 1910: 34). Madison Grant agreed. Disgusted as much by “sentimentalism” as by interbreeding, he denounced charity organizations which were rescuing “social failures” and proposed their immediate “selection,” segregation, and sterilization. This “practical, merciful, and inevitable solution,” he wrote, “can be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased, and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types (Grant 1916: 46-47).

There are obvious similarities between the eugenics-fueled xenophobia of the 1920s and the fear of white extinction being expressed today. But let me end by mentioning one way in which these two varieties of paranoid racism were quite different.

Scientific racists like Grant and Stoddard and Davenport were inveighing against broad and impersonal demographic shifts—historical processes that were seen as dangerous because leaders blinded by sentiment were too weak to control them. But nobody said the sentimentalists were creating the shifts. Today’s aggrieved whites, on the other hand, speak constantly about actors behind the scenes who are rearranging the relative power of the races. The Tribal Twenties sentiment might be characterized as a historical anxiety, while replacement theory today depends on believing that it is nefarious hidden masters, not demographic trends, that are working to destroy white hegemony. It is the belief in these hidden social engineers that entitles us to call “the Great Replacement” a conspiracy theory.

Not surprisingly, in the more virulent versions of this theory, the engineers are the West’s congenital whipping boy, the cunning Jewish “race.” To Grant, Jews were merely one of many ethnic groups whose mounting numbers threatened Nordics with extinction. To today’s white

supremacists, Jews are the masterminds of that extinction. In a disturbing study of white power musicians, Kirsten Dyck notes that the band Nordic Thunder has denounced the melting pot as a theory “devised by the Zionist pigs to destroy the white man” (205). One of the white power movement’s favorite acronyms, ZOG, stands for “Zionist Occupied Government.” And it seems to have become somewhat of an article of faith that the Hungarian Jewish financier George Soros is actually the Devil.

One final thought. Given what extinction anxiety led to in the 1920s, we might do well to be on guard about a repetition of the “race betterment” cancer in our century. I have not yet heard overt rumblings of the “genetic improvement” line. But when marchers in Virginia fear replacement by Jews and Tucker Carlson warns against “obedient” foreigners, we may want to see these signs as red flags. Are we on the road to a resuscitation of eugenics? I don’t know. But like Tom Buchanan, although for an opposite reason, I’m getting to be a terrible pessimist about these things. As I survey the political landscape in the wake of Trumpism, I think of Bob Dylan’s grimly foreboding lyric: “It’s not dark yet. But it’s getting there.”