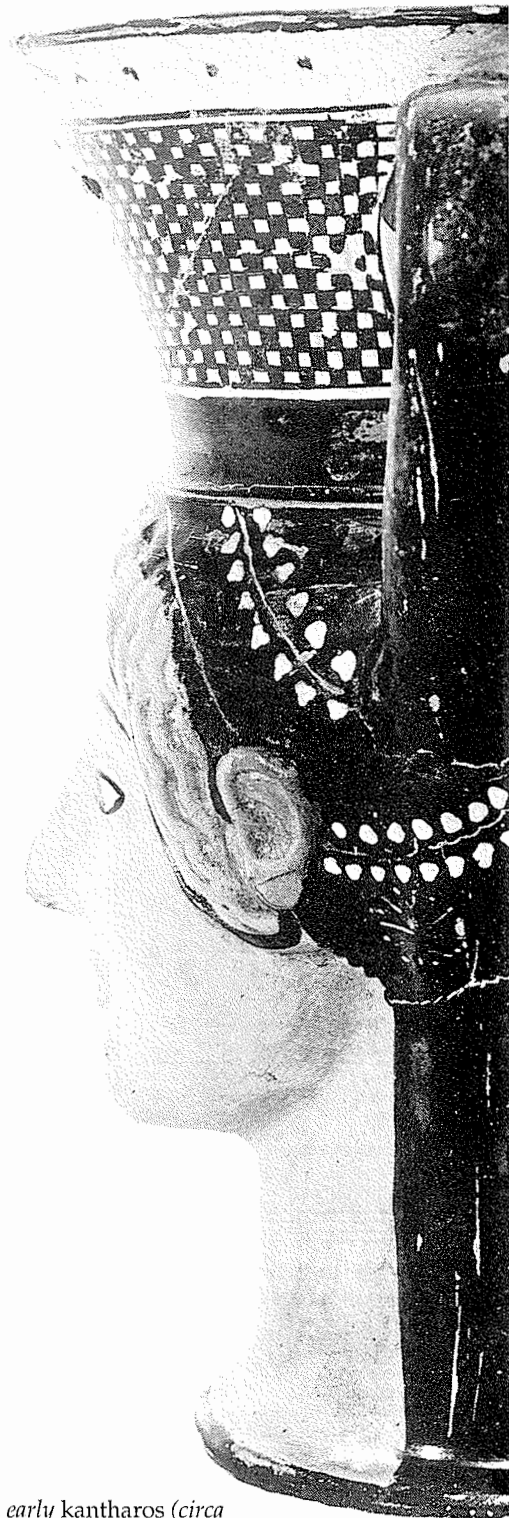


# THE IDIOCY OF RACE


BY IVAN HANNAFORD

*The Greeks referred to those who lived outside the realm of public life and politics as idiots—ἰδιῶται. In our unthinking acceptance of the idea of race, whose birth and development*

*Ivan Hannaford here chronicles, we in the modern age may be guilty of a kind of collective idiocy. Genuine public life—not to mention a genuine solution to racial problems—becomes impossible when a society allows race or ethnicity to displace citizenship as one's badge of identity.*



*An early kantharos (circa 510 B.C.) shows the Greeks' fascination with physical differences between the races, which they attributed not to innate qualities but to environment.*



*For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses, that is their passions and self-love, through which, every little payment appeareth a great grievance; but are destitute of those prospective glasses, namely moral and civil science, to see afar off the miseries that hang over them, and cannot without such payments be avoided.*

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

Fifty years have passed since Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), a classic work that still defines—and constrains—American thinking about race and politics. When the Carnegie Corporation commissioned the Swedish economist to analyze “the Negro problem,” the United States was looking with uncertainty toward the end of World War II. Especially among liberals, unease over the possible return of economic depression mingled with alarm over the success in a depressed Germany of Hitler’s racist ideology—with consequences whose terrible dimensions were by the early 1940s beginning to come clear. Myrdal was chosen from among a host of worthy contenders in part because he was an outsider; his homeland was assumed to have no history of imperialism, and it was thought that he would bring enough academic detachment to the subject to mobilize the considerable expertise then available in the social-science faculties of America’s leading universities. At these institutions, “race relations” had established itself, along with human relations and industrial relations, as a new and popular discipline during the 1920s and 1930s, even though few of its practitioners had ventured into the public realm.

The Carnegie Corporation was not to be disappointed.

Myrdal dutifully consulted with such great names of the academy as Ralph J. Bunche (who accompanied him on his dangerous travels into the South), Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Otto Kleineburg, Robert Linton, Robert Ezra Park, Edward Reuter, Louis Wirth, Ashley Montagu, Edward Shils, and Arnold Rose. With the additional help of more than 30 research assistants, he produced a manual for the eradication of racism in the United States.

Myrdal began by examining the ideas and mental constructs of ordinary people, not of intellectuals, historians, or political philosophers—an odd choice, in view of the considerable racial mischief the latter group had been up to for more than a century. “In a sense and to a degree present conditions and trends can be analyzed without consideration

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of their antecedents," Myrdal declared. His study was, he said, an analysis of morals, not an analysis in morals; not a historical description so much as an analytical *prescription* for future social and political action. Its aim was scientific investigation, purged of all possible bias so that a logical foundation could be laid for practical and political conclusions. The hope was that change, driven by education, and linked to social action in jobs and housing, would eliminate prejudice, reduce the practice of stereotyping, remove the causes of aggression and frustration, and create a sense of identity among those living anomic and unproductive lives. This was the social-engineering approach par excellence.

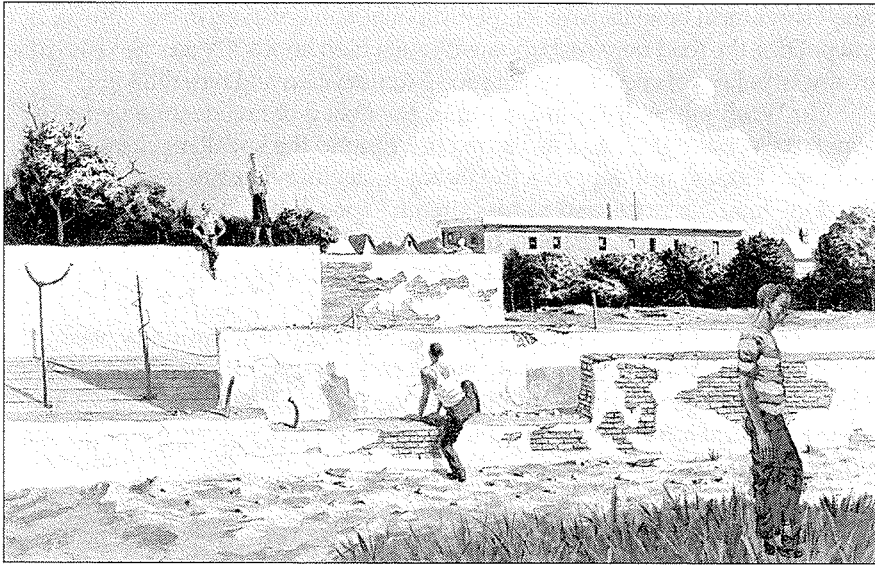
The Myrdal Report not only set the standard for public policy in the United States but also influenced the United Nations in the early 1950s (and later the British, who blithely transported the model across the Atlantic in the 1960s to deal with their "local difficulty" of immigration from the West Indies and Asia). There was a great fear that the eugenic principles and practices adopted throughout the developed world between 1904 and 1935, and implemented with such horrible effectiveness by the Nazis, might spread to the emerging countries of the underdeveloped world. If that were to happen, all that could be expected in the long run was continuous war between innumerable ethnic and racial groups. And so from the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) came a number of pronouncements written by leading intellectuals declaring that all men belonged to the same species and that most modern notions of race had no scientific basis, and repeating the call for education, understanding, and other palliative measures. The remedy for bad social engineering was to be, implausibly, good social engineering.

**M**ore than any other document, *An American Dilemma* helped establish a social-engineering approach as a global orthodoxy, and it is this approach that today prevents us from viewing the idea of race in any other way than through Hobbes's "notable multiplying glasses." It is true that Myrdal's case for rationalism in politics appealed to the American ideal of equality and went some way toward bringing about a wider understanding of the injustices of segregation. But in its inspiration and in the chief remedies it advocated, the report was fundamentally antipolitical. It encouraged the belief that the correct social operations, conceived and carried out by skilled "experts," social workers, and the like, could cure the body politic of its ills. Most destructively, it seemed to relieve citizens of the political obligation to rethink the meaning of the national community.

Long before the Myrdal Report was published, the young Walter Lippmann, in *A Preface to Politics* (1913), recognized that the advocates of applied social science had missed the point of the American dilemma—and indeed of all tragic human dilemmas. Lippmann held up the Chicago Vice Report of 1911 as an example of how studies of this kind can become abstract

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*The Walls (1955), by Hughie Lee-Smith.*

contestations, utterly removed from the realities of life. In the world of the social engineer, politics *qua* politics becomes an abstraction without substance, a counting of heads, and then a relapse into indifference. Or it can become a fanatical form of activity, a prairie fire of hot politics consuming everything reasonable in its path.

What Lippmann asked for in 1913, and did not get, was a new start for political thinking. He was not optimistic that documents such as the Chicago Vice Report would remove prostitution, sex, and lust from human affairs. On the contrary, the authors of such reports were too comfortable with a change of legal status. They lacked an understanding of the dynamic and passive forces and human impulses at the heart of the perceived "problem." Just as "white slavery" was not abolished in Chicago, so the Emancipation Proclamation (and for that matter the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act) did not eradicate all vestiges of chattel slavery in America. It may have broken the legal bond, but as Toni Morrison has shown so movingly in her novel, *Beloved*, the historical resonances of tragedy live on in the social bonds that shape, distort, and clarify our "rememories."

**T**hese "rememories" are part of the stuff from which a meaningful politics must be made. In his famous "I have a dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., took up the task of fashioning such a politics. But the sponsors of the notable civil-rights laws that followed, captive to the assumptions of social engineering, seemed to believe that a change of legal status would be enough. Ending Jim Crow and extending voting rights were great political achievements that helped bring black Americans into the political realm, but they were not matched by a continuing debate over the meaning of citizenship, with its rights, duties, and obligations. America's "race problem" was left to the ministrations of lawyers and bureaucrats and to rules and procedures (such as affirmative action) that com-

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bined short-term benefits with long-term political enervation. In the absence of a real politics, the road departed upon with such high hopes 30 years ago has led to an empty politics of endless interest-group remediation and race thinking.

In Washington, D.C., last summer I watched the reenactment of King's March on Washington, and as I stood listening to the speakers at the Lincoln Memorial I could not suppress the unhappy feeling that the political dimension that King had captured in his "dream" speech had, as Virgil wrote on a like occasion long ago, "passed into the moving air." All that remained, it seemed, was the shell of an orthodox race-relations policy that only exacerbates the state of civic entropy.

The Greeks taught us the importance of living as a community of citizens bound together by law. If we are to rise above our current condition—a natural society of ethnic groups cleaving only to kith and kin—Americans, as well as Bosnians and innumerable others, will need to act politically, rethinking the nature of citizenship and of the civic compact.

## II

In discussing the challenges of the 20th century, one is always tempted to rely upon the shibboleths of the modern era—the concepts of self-determination and mass democracy—and to ignore the more important historical foundations upon which such ideas rest. What I argue here—in the company of Hannah Arendt, Erich Voeglin, and Theophile Simard (the much-neglected secretary of the Belgian Academy of Sciences in the 1920s)—is that the principles and practices of antiquity cannot be ignored if we are to begin to understand the challenges that confront us in modern "ethnically determined" societies.

In 1970, Frank M. Snowden, Jr., a professor of classics at Howard University, published *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*, a study of the epigraphical, papyrological, numismatic, and archaeological evidence of the early encounters of Europeans and Ethiopians in the Mediterranean region. From painstaking study of the historical evidence, Snowden reached the conclusion that the Greeks and Romans did not, as is popularly supposed, possess racial attitudes such as we find in the modern world. That is to say, in ordering the form of state that emerged between 1000 B.C. and 300 B.C., they did not link skin color and other physical and physiognomical traits to assessments of a man's worth.

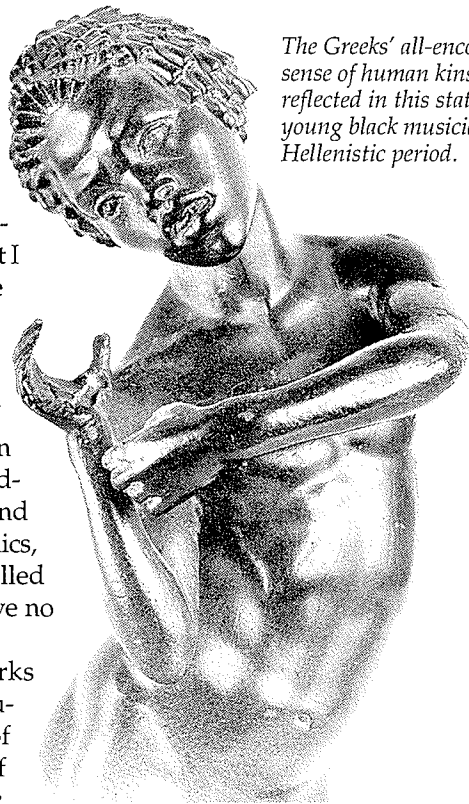
Snowden elaborated upon this in detached and scholarly style in later texts and articles, the foremost of which is his contribution to the Menil Foundation's three-volume *Image of the Black in Western Art* (1976–89), which surveys countless pieces of art from ancient Egypt to World War I. In his part of this vast collaborative study, Snowden writes that the frequency with which blacks appear in Greek art and the skill and care with which they are depicted "prompt the inference that the sentiment of the kinship of all men as expressed by Menander and later adapted by Terence—'I am a man; I consider nothing human foreign to me'—was not limited to philosopher or dramatist." The Greeks and Romans, Snowden showed, depicted Ethiopians very differently from the way the Rationalists, Romantics, and Utilitarians of the 18th and 19th centuries did. They seldom, if ever, referred to

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them except in terms of sharing a mortal existence and an awareness of the fragility and temporary nature of all life.

Taking my cue from Snowden, among others, I argue here, and in the book that I have just completed, that we in the modern world have largely abandoned *eunomics*, the ancient moral and civil science of being “well-lawed” bequeathed to us by Western civilization, and are all in bondage to the presuppositions and dispositions of modern eugenics, the pseudoscience of controlled birth and breeding, even if we no longer use that name.

In considering the works of the ancients, and particularly the mythologies of Hesiod, the *Politics* of Aristotle, Cicero’s *De Republica*, *De Legibus*, *De Officiis*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, *The Histories* of Polybius, and stretching even to the politics of Niccolo Machiavelli’s *Discourses* (as opposed to *The Prince*), we see a constant concern with the question of what it means to found, maintain, and sustain a polity capable of cultivating a civic disposition—the belief that what matters in a man, that what *makes* a man and distinguishes him from others, is his participation in political life. The civic disposition is what distinguishes men from brutes and from one another. Beginning with the Greeks philosophically and the Romans philodoxically there is a peculiar belief, albeit fiercely contested by some, that there was a novel and different way in which people could pass from one form of life and exchange it for another. Those who were naturally tied to the monotone of household (*oikia*) by virtue of kinship and the need to subsist could elevate themselves above the menial, boring realm of the *private* into something which, as Pliny the Younger says, extended the limits set to life by chance, and by their actions in a *public* sphere as citizens (another strange invention) leave a mark upon the course of existence.



*The Greeks' all-encompassing sense of human kinship is reflected in this statuette of a young black musician from the Hellenistic period.*

Beginning with Hesiod in the eighth century B.C., these thinkers recognized that the Phoenician, Hebrew, and Egyptian forms of governance, which relied upon households, families, tribes, estates, and administrative, religious, and military castes to maintain social order, were no longer adequate for organizing the extremely complicated activities of peoples of diverse and uncertain origins. People were now on the

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move physically and intellectually, and social organization had outgrown the limits of kin. Some other form of governance had to be seriously considered if daily life was to be secure and peaceable.

**T**he Greeks in their academic philosophy distinguished very clearly between states that were *political*, or “nomocratic,” and states that existed in *ethos*, a state of barbarousness and viciousness. Later, Cicero exploited their formulation of the political state to the full in his treatise on the virtues of the Roman Republic and its laws, and centuries later the Greek idea of politics also inspired a number of the American revolutionaries. The political idea contained at least seven novel features:

- a constant repetition of the idea that *all* human beings have a common beginning, and share in the uncertainties of this life, especially in matters of sex, intellect, and property
- a great concern for immediacy—immortality comes only to those who have acted *pro bono publico*; no man, high or low, can be guaranteed immortality
- the identification of a general public arrangement, which published rules made by a category of people called citizens bound together by law, and not by heads of households acting privately on the sole basis of blood and kinship
- the resolution of difference by “speech gifted men” on the basis of sound critical argument about ends, with a commitment to balance, moderation, settlement, composition of difference, expression of doubt and uncertainty, and ample room for eccentricity
- the accommodation of difference by compromise
- the institutionalization of risk and the clear delineation in the mechanisms of governance of the limits of public and private action
- an emphasis upon articulate speech, argument, and discussion in a public place.

What was distinctive about these political communities, from the Greek *polis* to the American republic, was the notion that diverse peoples assembled together as citizens—not as administrators, generals, worshipers, subjects, or slaves—should be able to express opinions despite the unacceptability or inconvenience of those opinions, and that those temporarily and constitutionally charged with governance should be expected to listen intelligently, and to act in the best interest of the whole. Aristotle asks us not to confuse this nomocratic state with the democratic state, which is his sixth and worst form of private apolitical rule. Politics was about listening not to ignorant mobs but to “speech gifted men”—men in possession of *arete*, that elusive quality of excellence in knowledge of both *polis* and self that distinguished the true citizen from the barbarian and the corrupt backslider.

The Greeks insisted upon clear distinctions between the antitheses of the political and the natural (*nomos* and *physis*), the political and the barbarian, between political states and brutish or vicious states, between civic dispositions and slave dispositions, between justice and law, private and public, virtue and

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vice, liberty and license, citizenship and kinship, politics and war, republic and empire, and later between faith in all its forms and the *via politica* of Hellenistic Rome. In all that vast treasury of Western literature I see a marked absence of racial thought, unless of course we read it in from later racialized sources. There are instead distinctions relating to the political and to civic virtue that we find difficult to accommodate within our modern understanding of self-determination and mass democracy.

### III

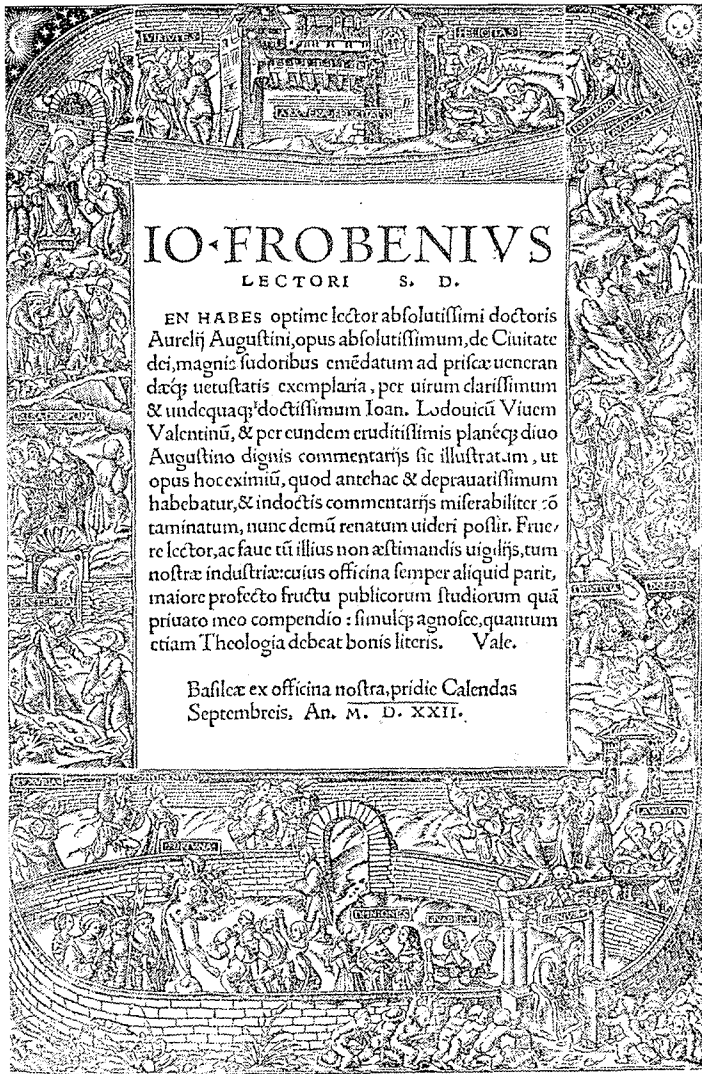
With the collapse of the city-state and the Roman Republic we enter a period from the first century A.D. to the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 A.D. when the peculiar activity that the Greeks and Romans called "politics" was called into question by the rise of faith and religion.

The first full-fledged assault on the political idea came from Josephus Flavius (37 A.D.–95 A.D.?), in *The Antiquities* and his later reply to his critics, *Against Apion*. A Jewish general who reluctantly took part in Judea's revolt against Rome (66–70 A.D.) and later became a Roman citizen, Josephus attacked Greek philosophy and politics as dishonest, unoriginal, and unhistorical. Scarcely a Greek is spared, from Pythagoras to Herodotus. Josephus highlights the superior skills of the Greeks' predecessors, the Chaldean, Egyptian, and Phoenician historiographers and genealogists—from whom, in his view, the Greeks had borrowed without acknowledgment. For these and other reasons, Josephus rejected Greek nomocracy in favor of a theocratic form of rule based upon the Mosaic Code and the Covenant.

Josephus saw politics as irrelevant or worse—an opportunity for aimless, purposeless chatter—and the laws that arose from it a denial of the unfailing Covenant that bound God to Man. Unlike the Greeks, Moses "left nothing to be done at the pleasure and disposal of the person himself." In place of the Greco-Roman concept of citizenship, which in principle would sweep all tribes, all clans, all peoples in a condition of enslavement into a state of civility, Josephus chose to stay with the single more certain God, who had created the world and all the peoples in it.

**T**he foundation of his theocracy he found in five stories that have since become pivotal to the understanding of race thinking in Western Europe: the Creation, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, the division of the world and the curse on Ham's posterity, and Moses' exhortation to his people in the wilderness. Josephus borrowed his account of the division of mankind, for example, from Berosus, a Chaldean priest of the third century B.C., and despite attacks on its truthfulness by the Catholic Church the account would pop up again and again in ensuing centuries. Much of Josephus's rendition accords with the standard version. When Noah's son, Ham, comes upon his father lying drunk and "naked in an unseemly manner," he laughingly calls others to see the spectacle. But Noah's other sons, Japheth and Shem, refuse to look, instead covering their father. "And when Noah was made sensible of what had been done," writes Josephus, "he prayed for prosperity to his other





A 16th-century edition of *The City of God*.

sons; but for Ham, he did not curse him, by reason of his nearness in blood, but cursed his posterity." But Josephus's gloss on the story has Noah's son Japhet inhabiting Europe; Shem the region of the Indian Ocean, Persia, Chaldea, and Armenia; and Ham the land of Africa, Egypt, and Libya. The inhabitants of Africa, in other words, are cursed.

The faith that Josephus expressed in his polemic was not intended to bridge the gap between faith and politics, between Jew and Gentile, Christian and Christian, or pagan Roman and barbarian. Nor, I hasten to add, can it be used as a confirmation of the vulgar notion, often expressed by the great scholars of the 19th century, that the origins of race thinking may be traced unequivocally to Hebrew teachings about a chosen people of pure blood. Josephus was interested not so much in establishing ethnic affinity as in separating true believers from unbelievers. It was a religious system with ample provision for the conversion of strangers. The issue, in short, was faith, not race.

The task of reinstating politics amid a bewildering variety of new faiths fell to a North African Christian from Soukh Aras in

western Algeria, Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.). Augustine wrote *The City of God* (circa 413–426 A.D.) only a few years after the Goths sacked Rome. The barbarians who had formerly dwelled on the fringes of classical civilization now occupied the epicenter of politics, and Augustine was compelled to search history for an explanation, as well as for an understanding of what could bridge the gap between the old civility and the new faith.

Augustine began with Josephus's account of the settlement of the earth, and from his intensive examination of the history of mankind from early to modern times concluded that the competing genealogies of the Hebrews, Phoenicians, Chaldeans, and Egyptians were so complicated and confused that it was not possible to give a certain account of any true origins. Augustine preferred to see his own work not as a historically *correct* account of the

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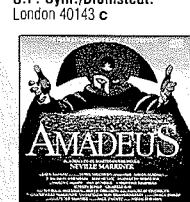
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beginning of mankind but as a foreshadowing of events: "So in this prophetic history some things are narrated which have no significance, but are, as it were, the framework to which significant things are attached."

For the purposes of our story the significant element in this framework was Augustine's reinterpretation in Christian terms of the biblical allegory of the settlement of the earth and its division into three parts by Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japhet. The version favored by Josephus and Berosus stressed the transgression of Ham and his banishment to the dark regions of Africa after the Deluge. Japhet and Shem occupied more propitious territories. Into this basic view were injected additional beliefs about good and evil, and about magic. Ham, the African, was a flaw in nature, a demon, irrevocably a blot on humanity.

Augustine rejected all these explanations of difference as fraudulent. He argued that all men are descended from Adam, and whoever is born of man is a rational mortal animal. "No matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in power, part or quality of his nature," Augustine declared, "no Christian can doubt that he springs from one protoplast." Augustine went on to argue that what a man looked like and where he came from were not the important considerations. He justified the inclusion of the Scythian, the Ethiopian, the Greek, the Jew, and the northern barbarian peoples, the invaders of the earthly *civitas*, within the ambit of a unified Christian civilization.

Augustine's assertion of the natural unity of mankind, and his rejection of any attempt to use the natural genealogies as justification for multiple religious and secular origins, left him with the immense philosophical problem of reconciling matters of faith with the pressing realities of the city of the flesh. One of those realities was that people were not associating in any kind of civil arrangement that allowed faith to coexist with politics.

Augustine resolved this difficulty in two ways. First, he proclaimed the alternative histories profane and heretical, and resisted all attempts to use the stories of the Deluge as justification for multiple religious and secular origins. The men in isolation, the clanless and hearthless—the remote African tribes, the barbarian war bands of Germany, the uncivil Britons—were not races as we understand them, Augustine insisted, but symbols of heresy against the Christian faith. They still could be brought into the household of God to become part of the body of the faithful in Christ. The device that Augustine used for entry into the faith was *conversion*, and the institutional overseer was the church based in Rome. It did not matter whether men were the sons of Noah, speech gifted or mute, barbarians, brutish or vicious, black or white—the focus of civic and religious participation was simultaneously widened to make all men eligible for membership in *communitas*, *christianitas*, and *humanitas* by faith through the taking of the sacrament.

Second, Augustine recognized that faith and membership in a Christian community would not by themselves overcome all the divisions of secular existence. Unlike Moses, Jesus, Josephus, and later Mohammad, Augustine did not insist that existence was simply concerned with the observance of the rules

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and precepts of faith found in sacred texts. On the contrary, his acceptance of the intervention of both church and state provided a syncretic (some would say a hypocritical) solution. It temporarily legitimized an agency established to provide moral guidance and pragmatic advice (the Catholic church) to rulers who had to rule and subjects who had to obey, and at the same time allowed it to coexist with incumbent rulers possessing many priorities other than those of faith. It addressed the problems of diversity that existed between the church and states, and between states, by retaining those important "political" elements of Greco-Roman experience in the practices of dialogue, conciliation, settlement, talk, argument, and discussion in and between church and state, and between the denizens of Western Europe and North Africa who were not of the faith.

This dichotomy between matters of faith and matters of politics, which Josephus had solved by disposing of politics and nomocracy in favor of theocracy, was resolved in *The City of God* (albeit as an incidental element) by giving encouragement and nurture to the antique Ciceronian notions of *citizenship*, of being "well-lawed," of cultivating a civic disposition within a *res publica* serving a *populus* bound together in a nexus of law. In this way the worst excesses of blind faith within the church would be tempered, while the tendency to tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy outside the church would be curbed. In short, Augustine built upon the political idea of extending the humanizing civilization of republican Rome, while allowing that civilization to exist within a system of faith. One need not be sacrificed to the other.

**T**his Augustinian compact between church and state in Western Europe was to last a millennium. It survived the Moors' invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 A.D. and laid the foundation for a contentious, but continuing, intellectual and religious dispute about the proper roles of church and state, and of faith and politics, among Christians, barbarians, Jews, and Muslims mediated by the Catholic Church. It was, to say the least, an uneasy and anxious arrangement that often erupted into persecution, cruelty, and war. The Moors marched into portions of Europe as far north as Tours, and Spain was occupied for almost 800 years. Christians wishing to expel the Moors or to occupy Jerusalem launched frequent crusades, while Moors launched jihads to extend the frontiers of Islam into Europe. Yet for all the excesses committed in the name of faith, the political tradition of Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine hindered and moderated the worst effects of religious zealotry for Christian, Jew, and Moor alike, and gave the migrant and the invader more than a toehold in a rich Western European civilization.

It was not until after 1200, when the dispute about faith was transmogrified into a dispute about genealogy and blood, that the persecutions effectively deprived the Jews and the Moors of their vestigial "citizenship" in *regnum* and *sacerdotium*. Moses Maimonides, born in 1135 in Cordoba, then at the center of the Muslim world, sought to respond to Christian and Islamic intolerance brought about by an upsurge of Islamic invasion. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, written after he had fled to Cairo to avoid persecution, Maimonides, the greatest teacher of the Hebrew world, set out in the language of Greek teaching and thinking his opposition to the system and method of Is-

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lamic theology. In his "Greeking in" of the Hebrew and Mutakallemim (orthodox Islamic) texts he established a compatibility between the scriptural account of Creation and Aristotle's teachings about nature, and thereby between the Christian and Hebrew faiths in Western Europe. On the basis of a close textual analysis of the Muslim texts he concluded that these texts were greatly mistaken concerning the corporeal and incorporeal nature of God. On these grounds Maimonides established allegorically that those who were beyond the methodological limits of mathematical science, logic, natural philosophy, and metaphysics, and had their backs to it in their faith, should not be given any mercy, and could be swept from the face of the earth:

Such are the extreme Turks that wander about in the north, the Kushites who live in the south, and those in our country who are like these. I consider these as irrational beings, and not as human beings; they are below mankind, but above monkeys, since they have the form and shape of man, a mental faculty above that of the monkey.

From the beginning of the 12th century, therefore, we have a justification for the extirpation of human beings on grounds of faith—albeit a perhaps unwitting one—and it revived an interest in all that Augustine had striven to suppress in *The City of God*: the mark of Cain, the Tower of Babel, and the pernicious legend of the banishment and the curse of Ham.

In 1492, the year of the "discovery of new worlds," Europe discovered another darker world—a world in which Maimonides' arguments about faith were turned against his own people. There had been a Jewish community in Spain for more than a thousand years, and it had made enormous contributions in service to the Spanish kings. Indeed, many of the Christian bishops were converted Jews. For the contribution they had made, the Jews managed to wrest some measure of religious protection and security from the Christian monarchs and grandees. In the early days the church had intervened to moderate attacks upon Jews, and a system of *ghettos* and *aljamos* (safe havens) was set up to ensure the protection and recognition of the right to worship. After Maimonides, the status of Jews as *castizos*—men having an honorable historical lineage—within a system of nomocratic tribunals of inquiry increasingly came into question. Did these people who were so close to the monarchs and the church, some of whom had converted to Christianity, really belong or not?

**B**y 1204, Pope Innocent III, who earlier in his reign had issued decrees protecting Jews from unjust treatment, was chastizing the king of Aragon for excessive tolerance. In 1209, Innocent sanctioned the destruction of the French city of Béziers, which was thought to house heretics who favored Jewish over Christian law, with the words, "Strike down; God will recognize his own." As the absolutist executive and administrative inquisitions began to press harder upon the question of identity, which in earlier times had not been considered worth asking, the desire to know exactly who and what people were intensified, and the Jews became subject to the worst effects of unrestrained faith and reason. After 1215, there was a social census which enabled every backslider in faith to be identified and assigned a mark

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to distinguish him as of “true” Christian lineage, a *converso* (one who had embraced the Christian faith by taking the sacrament), or a *marrano* (one who claimed to be a Christian, took the sacrament, and observed the faith publicly, but continued to be a Jew privately). Practicing Jews were required to wear a badge on their hats or bonnets.

**T**he protections that remained for Jews in certain quarters of Europe vanished after the mid-14th century with the spread of the Black Death, which was widely blamed on the Spanish Jews. What was discovered in Spain between the rise of the Black Death and 1492 were new tests of belonging that no longer relied upon the contribution citizens made to the body politic. Especially after the onset of the Spanish Inquisition, which commenced in 1478 with the reluctant approval of Pope Sixtus IV, the investigators turned to the doubtful and confused criteria of astrological signs and portents divined from the shape of the face, the characteristics of the body, the tests of language proven by reference to the Hamittic heresy, and the purity of blood (*limpieza*).

With the final defeat of the Moors at Granada in 1492, the political nexus was completely broken. The external threat was gone, the Spanish monarchs were established, the intervention of the Roman church was minimized, and absolutism was ascendant. The Jews and the Moors had no one left to speak on their behalf, and they had no status as citizens. Some 300,000 Jews were expelled from Spain with only three months’ notice, leaving behind a country that bears their mark to this very day. They at least were able to resettle in significant numbers under the protection of the papacy and the Orthodox church—the bulk of them in Constantinople itself, the rest in various places in Europe. The fate that befell the Moors, which is largely ignored by Western history, was even more horrendous. In 1502 the *moriscos*, who had inhabited Iberia for almost 800 years and had contributed so much to Western civilization, were likewise stripped of all they possessed and banished to North Africa. Only a fraction of the million or so expelled ever reached their unwanted destination. Most were picked off, plundered, and killed as they made their way to Gibraltar.

**I**t is one of the great ironies of history that the Spanish reached a very different conclusion when they pondered the identities and genealogies of the peoples they discovered in Africa, the Americas, and the East Indies. At first, arguments derived from Maimonides prevailed. The conquest and enslavement of the Indians was seen as just because these alien people were naturally inferior. They were without law, property, and civilization, and, like the Jews and Moors, could be forcibly converted, enslaved, or extirpated.

These ideas were formally contested by Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), a missionary and historian, at a formal proceeding of theologians held at Valladolid in 1550–51 to discuss how a just conquest was to be conducted. Las Casas, who had lived in the West Indies, rejected outright the arguments of his chief opponent, Juan Gines de Sepulveda, that the Indians were by nature inferior on the grounds that Sepulveda, like most lawyers and academics (then and now), had misinterpreted the Aristotelian theory of slavery and na-

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ture in the *Politics*. Las Casas won the argument with a declaration that was widely circulated in Spain:

All the people of the world are men . . . all have understanding and volition, all have the five external senses and the four interior senses, and are moved by the objects of these, take satisfaction in goodness and feel pleasure with happy and delicious things, all regret and abhor evil.

These findings were incorporated into the laws of church and state in South America, but that is not to say that the colonization, enslavement, persecution, and cruelty there were any less severe than they were elsewhere. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1570s the worst aspects of the doctrine of purity of blood, which had been used to expel the Jews and Moors from Spain, were tempered and mitigated abroad. Henceforth, neither the practice of chattel slavery nor the doctrine of race would gain much ground in South America—though alas they would flourish elsewhere in the New World and in Europe.

## IV

The word *race* reached Scotland in the middle of the 14th century, and was used to denote someone running in a *raiss*—literally a test of speed or course—to the king. Although its precise origins are unclear, it is probably derived from the Spanish *raza*, the Portuguese *raca*, the Italian *razza*, and the French *race*, and has some tenuous connection with the Arabic *ras*, meaning chief, head, or beginning. Whatever the origin, it is clear that it did not in the beginning have the meaning it has today. It was not until John Foxe, the English clergymen who wrote the *Book of Martyrs* (1563), referred to “a race and order of kings and bishops” in 1570 that there is any faint resemblance to the idea of race as we in the modern world think of it.

Between 1570 and 1813, a radical change in the meaning of race took place, and it materially affected the way human beings saw themselves. Instead of symbolizing their experience in terms of their membership in a *polis* and *res publica* in the Greco-Roman sense and the sacramental entry into the body of the faithful in Christ in the Augustinian sense, European writers began to explain right ordering and governance in an entirely different way.

One cause of this change was the revival of the heretic legend of Noah and the division of the world as told by Berosus and Josephus. In his *Commentary upon the Works of Diverse Authors Spoken of in Antiquity* (1498), a Dominican friar named Juan Nanni (Annius of Viterbo) reprinted “missing” volumes of Berosus and other early writers, attractively and fraudulently refurbishing the legend for popular consumption. Church intellectuals assailed this story, and even showed that Annius had engaged in forgery. All to no avail. Indeed, the story that Annius told was so powerful—and its spread so strongly abetted by the rise of literacy and the release from church strictures that accompanied Lutheranism—that even today we remember it better than the original. It came along at a crucial time, when the learned men of Europe were struggling to

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absorb the implications of discoveries and new contacts not only in the New World and Africa but in places such as Iceland, Russia, and Finland. In the hands of English natural philosophers and French rationalists the revived story of Ham's transgression and curse was transformed into a stock account that explained the ancient division of the world and therefore the bizarre discoveries of the explorers. Of course, the story's biblical origins were sheared off and it was covered with the trappings of science. It served as a useful vehicle for bridging into the idea that man was a member of a vast—and vastly differentiated—animal kingdom, and that therefore he could be understood more accurately through the new natural histories than through the teachings of the Greek and Roman philosophers.

The rise of race thinking between the age of discovery and the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 was driven by many developments, but two writers stand out as major contributors. The first is Germany's Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840), widely considered the father of anthropology. In *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775), Blumenbach synthesized the earlier attempts of François Bernier, Georges Buffon, and Carolus Linnaeus to explain the discoveries of the 16th- and 17th-century explorers and scientists according to rational laws and scientific method. Blumenbach disposed of the notion that the



Johann Blumenbach

world was divisible into three distinct parts and reasserted the Aristotelian notion that *all* men, including wild men and brutes (those who know no political community and live in a barbarous condition) belonged to a single species, *homo sapiens*. He set about doing so by carefully scrutinizing the evidence using the best available scientific methods.

**B**lumenbach strongly resisted the claims of "caprice mongers" who, faced with the demise of the convenient Noachic account of division, now sought to establish out of "skin-and-bones" anthropology a physiological relationship between the orangutan and the Negro. Closely examining anatomical and other evidence concerning the four recently discovered "wild men" who were being held up as possible "missing links"—the so-called Hessian boy, Zell girl, Champagne girl, and Peter the Wild Boy of Hamelin—he showed that the four unfortunates were indeed members of



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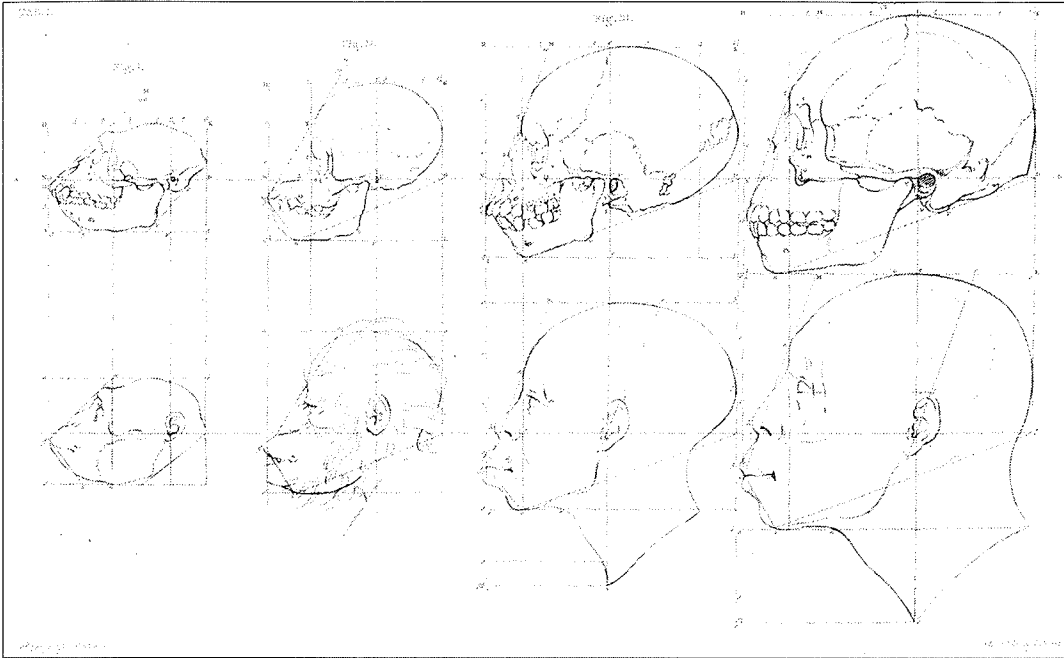
the human species.

Within the species of *genus humanorum* Blumenbach distinguished five varieties of mankind determined by climate, pigmentation, and skull size. He called them Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, Malay, and Caucasian (a term he coined to describe the European division, and which he derived from the name of the peoples who occupied the southern slopes of the Georgian region). Blumenbach went to great lengths to make clear that these divisions, or varieties, were simply useful classes for analyzing the incredible diversity within the unity of mankind. "For although there seems to be so great a difference between widely separate nations. . .," he declared, "you see that all do so run into one another, and that one variety of mankind does so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them."

Blumenbach insisted that three rules had to be followed in considering evidence of the variety of mankind: 1) that the human species stands alone; 2) that no "fact" should be admitted without a supporting document, that is, anatomical data; 3) that no natural scientist should pass from one explanation to another without heeding intermediate terms and shadings. Where there were doubts about such matters as the comparability of skulls and bone structures, Blumenbach thought that almost always they could be resolved by pressing harder on Newtonian method in the examination of the evidence available rather than by falling back on hearsay evidence or the legend of Noah.

**Y**et Blumenbach did leave a door ajar. Where doubts about how to account for differences did remain, he suggested, an explanation could be found in a curious energy he called the *nisus formativus* (formative force). In *On the Formative Force and its Influence on Generation and Reproduction* (1780) and *On the Force of Nutrition* (1781), he portrayed this force not as a cause—ultimate causes were hidden and beyond his purview—but as a perpetual and invariable *effect* of the stimuli of natural life. It responded, in other words, to things such as climate and mode of life, and altered human beings accordingly. Immanuel Kant had already discussed this energy or "life force" in his lectures at Jena in 1765–66. Kant had set out a method for the study of what was enduring in human nature and attempted to place humankind in an ethical context in creation rather than in the purely physiological context that Blumenbach and the physical anthropologists were considering in their work.

This "life force" itself became a kind of formative force in the emergence of Romanticism in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807–08), for example, Kant's pupil, Johann Fichte, argued that the life force was realized through personal quality in blood. Fichte held that Germany's incomparable advantages in geography, climate, and biology showed that the German race had been "naturally elected" by God to greatness. Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) saw nature as a single living organism working toward self-consciousness in the human intellect. Johann von Goethe (1749–1832) recast the life force, seeing personal identities derived from the state and nation revealed in the *volklid* (folk songs) and poetry of past peoples. Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's revolt against the inhibitions and constraints of past politics, advocated a return to nature, and emphasized the role of drama and lyric poetry in his notion of *Sturm*



A 1791 study of human and animal facial angles by Petrus Camper, a Dutch anatomist. Camper warned against drawing any but physiological inferences—and was ignored by later race “scientists.”

und Drang (storm and stress)—a term taken from descriptions of the American Revolution and attached to Germany’s literary ferment.

One of the first thinkers to ponder the idea of hidden causes was Gotthold Lessing (1729–81), a dramatist, philosopher, and critic. An admirer of the new natural science, he nevertheless pointed out that the emerging skin-and-bones anthropology left unexplored the wondrous world of the aesthetic, the cultural, and the artistic. Chafing, like other German writers and intellectuals, under the domination of French influences—such as Jean Racine and Pierre Corneille—Lessing was inspired to develop a new understanding of art and culture.

In his preface to *Laokoon* (1766), an extended work of literary criticism, Lessing argued that, thanks to these French influences, German literature had embraced false concepts of beauty and ugliness. In attempting to chart a new aesthetic, he began with the proposition that there were certain things that aroused acute feelings of repugnance and disgust—scars, harelips, the absence of eyebrows—though they offended neither touch nor any other common sense. Such reactions, he insisted, could only be understood as manifestations of an “inward sensation” of beauty and ugliness. From there, it was but a short step to show that this “inward sensation” varied among different peoples: “Everyone knows how filthy the Hottentots are and how many things they consider beautiful and elegant and sacred which with us awaken disgust and aversion.”

Thus while Blumenbach used the idea of a formative force to illustrate

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the unity of species, and to explain residual hidden causes, Lessing's work suggested that there were interesting ways beyond the material realm in which the spiritual and intellectual, the dramatic and artistic, could be used to give integrity and authenticity to a changing world. Lessing advanced the idea that the world's major religions each generated a distinct "noble character," and he depicted Christianity as a living force that had existed before the textual record of it in the New Testament. This force had been encumbered by the antique constitutional arrangements of church and state. The Protestant Reformation, in his view, was a return to a purely spiritual primeval Christianity—an idea that would loom large in Romantic racial thought thereafter.

Lessing provided a foundation for a Germanic literature independent of the rationalism of French aesthetic forms and tastes. It established a philosophy, a science, a history, and a practice that were distinctively different. From Kant, Fichte, Hume, Coleridge, and Wordsworth came the Romantic idea that nobility and noble character, and the psychic and physical expression of it, could be distinguished in the structures and features of the face and in facial expressions. The Romantic writers thought that the individual "races" that displayed certain superior physiognomical characteristics—notably the German, French, and English—were somehow descended from ancient noble peoples of different geographical origins. The lesser races, often seen as "species," were thought to possess innate dispositions in *blood* that distinguished them in character from their superiors.

Challenging the old idea that civilization is the product of political life, the Romantic idea proposed that the cultures of ordinary people, working through the operation of personal psychic quality and blood, were the motive force in civilization. The advance of civilization depended upon the liberation of these people's innate racial, cultural, or political energies. To minister to the unbound *volk*, a pure spiritual Christianity would be required, one liberated from the shackles of biblical exegesis and the corrupt Catholic Church. What a man was could be discerned in purity of Christian soul and purity of blood. The state was a manifestation of both.

Still, Enlightenment ideas of race remained contained within a set of "political" ideas that drew upon classical sources. Race was not yet all. The final leap was largely the work of the era's second influential race theorist, Bartold Niebuhr (1776–1831). A Prussian diplomat and historian, Niebuhr was credited by Comte Arthur de Gobineau, France's chief 19th-century advocate of Northern white superiority, with providing to those who were searching for the causes of Europe's midcentury upheavals "an analytical tool of marvelous delicacy."

Niebuhr's unique contribution, beginning with his *Lectures on Ancient Ethnography and Geography* in 1813, was to set aside conventional historical methods in the study of Rome and use the kind of literary comparison and criticism advocated by Lessing. No longer would history be a dry gathering of facts; now much would depend upon the interpretation of texts. Niebuhr gave pre-eminence, for the first time, to a synthesis of ethnography, chorography (mapping technique), narrative history, and philology in

the understanding of European origins. In its emphasis on politics, he argued, all previous history had overlooked "the dark shades in character." He found a new past of nobility and spirituality in aspects of Greek and Roman literature that were not political.

In his three-volume *History of Rome* (1811–32), which greatly influenced generations of English historians, Niebuhr depicted Rome's history not as a conflict between classes or religions, not as a history of politics properly and constitutionally conducted under Aristotelian or Ciceronian tenets, but as a history of racial conflict between Romans and Etruscans. "The order of the history of the world," he wrote, was "to fuse the numberless original races together, and to exterminate such as cannot be amalgamated." He judged that Rome had done more to carry this mixture forward than any other empire. In a complicated rendering of German

racial history, he argued that those Germans who had resisted Rome had nevertheless benefited from Rome's dominion:

It was not by the forms which our ancestors . . . imported from thence and from classical ground, that the noble peculiarities of our national genius, peculiarities for which nothing can compensate, were smothered; but secondhand artificial spiritless Frenchified forms and tastes and ideas . . . these are the things that for a long time have made us lukewarm and unnatural. And so, while the nations look back on the Romans as holding a place among their progenitors, we too have no slight personal interest in their story.

This reinterpretation of the history of Rome set the stage for the racialization of history. It gave enormous impetus to the search for the "authen-



With works such as Richard Wagner's acclaimed opera, *Götterdämmerung* (1874), Romantic artists of the 19th century forged new German, Anglo-Saxon, and French race mythologies.

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tic" origins of the noble Germanic peoples in the kith and kin of the fifth century—a search carried out by artists and writers as much as by scientists. There arose a vision of Europe once occupied by primitive peoples of innocence and purity, untainted by Roman politics—the Aryans, Celts, and Teutons—who were thought to have shared a common origin. They constituted an alternative past, "Another Rome." To root the new industrial civilization of the 19th century in this alternative history, European intellectuals—a cast of characters ranging from Thomas Carlyle to the Brothers Grimm—now began to reconstruct the histories of different racial types, building on a bewildering variety of shaky monogenist, polygenist, transformist, creationist, vestigialist, environmentalist, and evolutionist authorities. It is from this muddy trough that we continue to drink today.

During the period before the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, there were at least 10 contending hypotheses of race and ethnicity in Europe and the United States. Each was incompatible with the others, yet *all* persist to some degree in the analytical frameworks we continue to embrace in the closing years of the 20th century. The one that has held pride of place since the publication of Herbert Spencer's *Proper Sphere of Government* (1842) and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) argues that everything in nature has its laws, that the fit will survive, and that evolution is as much characteristic of political and economic life as it is of the natural world of flora and fauna. Ergo, laissez-faire. As Spencer put it:

The belief, not only of the socialists but also of those so-called liberals who are diligently preparing the way for them is that by due skill an ill working humanity may be framed into well-working institutions. It is a delusion. The defective natures of citizens will show themselves in the bad acting of whatever social structure they are arranged into. There is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts.

The movement inspired by Darwin and Spencer provided a logical basis for decrying all those aspects of the Greco-Roman polity and Christian civilization that were out of step with the new industrial civilization. It permitted "society" to be viewed as a natural entity in a state of war in the classic Hobbesian sense. Power in the hands of the correct classes or races, scientifically applied, would lead inevitably to progressive ends.

Thus, beginning in the middle of the 19th century all aspects of legal right, feeling, justice, treaty, compromise, settlement, conciliation, arbitration—the essential components of political society—were eclipsed by a doctrine of natural forces. The priorities now were biological necessity and managerial efficiency. It was not a big step from there to the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps.

**I**nto this maelstrom stepped Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). His contemporaries in Europe—eminent scientists, historians, philosophers, musicians, and artists—had argued for the existence of communities of blood, language, religion, and interest based upon a relationship between land and environment. They had developed from Gobineau and Darwin a naturalistic and evolutionary history in which they attempted to construct an

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idea of race from the synthesis of heredity, biology, genius, and will impelled by the Hobbesian right of conquest. The analogies they used were biological, physiological, and psychological, and their notions of state, especially among those who wished to make the idea of state coterminous with nation and race, more natural than political.

**I**n 1886, Nietzsche published *Beyond Good and Evil*, an interpretation of his earlier *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–84). Nietzsche expressed revulsion against the deceit practiced by exponents of modern education and culture on the question of origins. It was not so much that the “plebian counterfeiters” who put forward these views were right or wrong, but that there was a general lack of understanding of the fact that, following the Niebuhrian acquisition of the sixth sense of history, *every* culture, every past, and every taste had been opened up to intensive scrutiny. “We ourselves are a kind of chaos,” he wrote.

In that chaos, in which individual man was nothing more than a collection of limbs, assorted bits and pieces, large ears on thin shaky stalks, “present man”—the man of entertainment and happiness—was part of a great physiological process expressing itself in the concepts of civilization, humanization, and progress. “Evolving man” was locked into a process driven by increasing democratization toward a leveling and mediocratization. In the next century this would create the conditions necessary for the birth of human beings of “the most dangerous and attractive quality” and a future nobility of dazzling human potential.

Unlike his contemporaries, Heinrich von Sybel and Heinrich von Treitschke, whom he called “wretched historians,” Nietzsche had no time for searches into the European past for evidence of racial origins in art, literature, and poetry. Those who sought their origins in race and nation and justified their title to rule in those terms were, Nietzsche declared, pathologically estranged from other men, anti-Semitic “screamers,” victims of a debilitating “nerve fever.” Nietzsche saw that the state could not live without the fully developed personality and the self-sufficiency of the individual, and yet the scientific and political principles upon which the new industrial civilization was being constructed had paralyzed myth and had created a class of barbaric slaves bent on vengeance.

**B**ut in rejecting nationalism and anti-Semitism, Nietzsche also turned away from the antique Aristotelian and Augustinian formulations of politics and religion. He discovered a new art of metaphysical culture in a primordial artistic drive that predated Niebuhr’s critical history. He abandoned the biblical exegesis upon which the five stories of Creation were based, and went instead to the *Zend Avesta*, the scripture of Zarathustra, the seventh-century B.C. founder of the Persian faith of Zoroastrianism. Nietzsche found the solution to his problem in the twin propositions that God had died and that the antique model of the Greco-Roman state had totally disintegrated. Man was on his own, and the only truth was that created by the human mind. All past politics, philosophy, justice, and civilization were mere deceptions. To overcome the terror

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of existence, self-determining man had to will forward something suprapolitical on the grand scale.

Nietzsche concluded that classical formulations of political life were all fruitless. What could not be settled and reconciled in the agora by debate, compromise, and law could only be mastered by the Will to Power—self overcoming—and a successor to God in the beauty and shadow of the entirely self-sufficient noble personality, the Overman. Nietzsche kicked over the traces of classical political theory and postulated a future *Macht Stat* (a “made” state dependent on the Will to Power) in which there would be a compulsion to large-scale superpolitics—a fight for the dominion of the earth in “a war of and for minds.” The deceptions of polity would be expunged by noble Overmen manipulating the conditions of mass democracy, statelessness, and normlessness now in existence with all the power at their command.

It did not take Nietzsche’s contemporaries long to misunderstand him. His strictures against nationalism, anti-Semitism, and race thinking for the most part went unheeded. His emphasis upon the idea that human beings, as successors to God, belonged to something noble was used to prove that the key physical motive power that bound person to person in a “folk” state was the fact of race, aided by the fact of natural selection, as expressed in the language of war.

One of those who most misunderstood Nietzsche was Houston Chamberlain (1855–1927), a British-born writer who married the composer Richard Wagner’s daughter and settled in Germany. Chamberlain’s *Origins of the 19th Century* (1899) is generally considered an influence on Adolf Hitler’s ideas in *Mein Kampf* (1924), and Chamberlain himself is usually dismissed as a madman by modern scholars. But he was a respected intellectual in his day, writing squarely in the company of many distinguished anthropologists and biologists peddling the eugenic and biometric line during the years between 1883 and 1914. The first edition of his book, which nobody could possibly understand without a life of deep immersion in the classics, sold 60,000 copies. If it was rubbish, as many well-intentioned people have since argued, it was rubbish that thousands of intellectuals in Germany, Britain, and the United States wanted to hear, and, alas, continue to propagate in watered-down versions.

In *The Origins of the 19th Century* Chamberlain put forward a complicated explanation of history that enlisted the confused biological views of the time in the service of the power state. Much like his predecessors, he believed that formative forces resided in certain wandering “folk”—the Romans, Germans, Celts, and Slavs. These isolated folk peoples broke the political ring and made their initial entry into recorded history in 146 B.C., when Rome coldly set aside moral considerations and destroyed Carthage. This, in Chamberlain’s view, was the first blow for natural selection and inbreeding—the dynamic forces that create races. The second appearance of the folk in history came with the challenge to Rome and Greece by the barbarian peoples in the fifth century A.D. The third appearance came with the Reformation, the “Teutonic” event, Chamberlain said, that created modern civi-

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lization. In this great turning point in history, the political ways of Rome were progressively replaced by the connection of anthropology and science to a new spiritual barbarian Christian brotherhood purged of all ignoble Roman (Catholic) characteristics.

Upon this slippery historical foundation, Chamberlain's intellectual inheritors built a massive racial edifice. Between 1883 and 1914, people became obsessed with race and ethnicity as *the* key to the understanding of all history. Race management came to seem the only solution to the problems afflicting the world. The eugenicists saw the Teutonic race state as the great bulwark against the "swamping" of the Teutons by impure peoples and against the mixture and "miscegenation" from which all the ills of the world were supposed to flow. By the same token, the management of the breeding variables within the race state would breed in the "good" qualities and, in time, through the processes of public health and sanitation "cleanse" the folk state of imbecility, feeble-mindedness, and physical disability.

The eugenicists were not at all a fringe movement. Indeed, eugenics became part of progressive-minded conventional wisdom, shared by the likes of H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. By the late 1920s roughly half the American states passed laws allowing state prisons and other institutions to sterilize inmates who were epileptic, insane, or "feebleminded."

Perhaps the intellectual capstone of the eugenics movement was Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* (1916). In his introduction to the volume, Henry Fairfield Osborn, a fellow zoologist and president of the American Museum of Natural History, argued that Grant had finally swept away competing theories—even Herbert Spencer's. The influence in history of environment, education, politics, and government were now shown to be only fleeting. There was nothing but race. "Race implies heredity, and heredity implies all the moral, social, and intellectual characteristics and traits which are the springs of politics and government," Osborn wrote. The correct scientific approach was to treat history as heredity writ large. The race was on.

## V

The volatile ideas of race were thus latecomers to Western experience, their rise occurring in proportion to the decline of the idea of politics. With very few exceptions, most of the writers on the subject of race from 1813 to our time have preferred to avoid or escape political reality and to reject out of hand the antique idea of the *coexistent* state created politically by its citizens. In place of the political state, the proponents of the natural state have substituted, or superimposed, a notion of state that concerns itself with human beings either as pieces of biological material categorically fixed by the physical or social fact of ethnicity or, in the case of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, as producers, consumers, and distributors. In recent times we have seen the dramatic collapse in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of the Marxist-Leninist version of the natural economic state, which at one time



was supposed to have eliminated all social and racial conflict. It may be that in the aftermath of the Thatcher-Reagan era we are witnessing a similar collapse of Adam Smith's version of the natural economic state, brought about by the spread of private license, viciousness, agoraphobia, corruption, and civic entropy.

At the same time that these momentous changes are occurring, however, the concept of state in which categories are fixed by the physical or social facts of race and ethnicity is rapidly gaining ground. In Western political regimes we see the transmogrification of civil and political communities into "no go" areas as ethnic regions, ethnic streets, and ethnic neighborhoods challenge—often in the name of democracy, freedom, and self-determination—the authorities, laws, and conventions of the coexistent political state. And, as Donald Horowitz in his massive *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985) and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) in his aptly titled *Pandemonium* (1993) have noted, the forces released from Pandora's occidental box during the past two centuries are now sweeping virtually unhindered in the name of "democracy" across Central and Eastern Europe into Southeast Asia. Everywhere there is a fever for the *coterminous* arrangement of state, nation, and race—the *volkstaat*.

We see the worst excesses of this model ostentatiously paraded in the breakaway Afrikaner *volk* groups of the South African Republic, which is struggling to reestablish politics within the framework of a coexistent state; and we see it in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, where all attempts to resuscitate politics have so far failed. Surveying the 38 ethnic wars already raging



*A long way from the Greeks: Physical racial characteristics are linked in this poster with things that are alien and sinful, as well as seductive.*

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around the world, it seems a faint hope that new ones will not be ignited in the many countries that have emerged from the old Soviet Union and its borderlands.

Does science have nothing to tell us about race? The problem here is that the lessons of science have been mistaken for lessons of politics. In their 1936 book, *We Europeans*, Julian Huxley and Alfred C. Haddon took a new and late tack, exposing the science upon which the eugenic race state was based, demonstrating that it was fallacious even to use the word race. They also challenged the 19th-century belief that language was a criterion for race. No Celtic race or Aryan race could be adduced from the fact that people nowadays speak certain languages. The same skepticism, they argued, should be applied to art, institutions, gestures, habits, traditions, dress, and nations as criteria of race: "None of these can serve as any criterion of racial affinity between peoples."

But Huxley and Haddon's appeal, like UNESCO's appeal after all had been lost in the nightmare of Hitler's corporate race-hygiene war, was not to the values of the political state and classical political thinking. Rather, they argued for a more scientific explanation of how the pseudoscientific racists had got it all wrong, and for a more rational and "scientific" politics that might get it all right in a better-educated world.

What my history has attempted to show is that, for all its well-meaning intent, the palliative race-relations approach embodied in Myrdal's *American Dilemma* has outlived its purpose. Not only has it failed miserably to prevent the balkanization of America into a collection of distinctive ethnic societies but it has also accelerated the process by which the natural resentments of narrow tribal, religious, and social units are perceived to be due to ethnicity, and to no other factor. Even as I write, a new, more "correct" derivative of the orthodoxy is imposing itself upon the literature and language of Western politics, an orthodoxy that vainly seeks to end racial discrimination by identifying pernicious language wherever it appears, in the home, the factory, the school, even the university, and eradicating it entirely from the conversation of humankind. Such efforts only distract us from the more important tension between the political and the apolitical.

As racial and ethnic tensions increase, it becomes important to reject the idea that race and ethnicity are inevitable premodern remnants irremedially visiting themselves upon the modern state like some syphilitic affliction. Race and ethnicity are phenomena invented in very recent times. As we have seen, the appellation *race* was not adopted until the 14th century, and did not come to have its modern connotation until the late 18th century. It was only after 1813 that race and ethnicity became organizing ideas of real significance. The 18th- and 19th-century ideologies of self-determination spawned the idea that a nation can be legitimate only if it is comprised of peoples who are ethnically or racially compatible, and that a state can be a state only if it succors the binding idea of *kith and kin* in nation and race. Such an idea is anathema to the concept of the political state comprised of good citizens living in a community under the rule of law, and

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it is folly to believe that reliance upon any aspect of its pernicious doctrine will release us from its bondage.

**T**here is, however, something to be learned from the genetic discoveries of Francis Crick and James Watson and their successors. In *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Blind Watchmaker* (1988), Richard Dawkins, a distinguished zoologist at Oxford University, argues that the basic unit of natural selection is the gene and that the predominant quality in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness. Genes are the survivors; the bodies they inhabit are survival machines and individuals mere fleeting presences: "In a few generations the most you can hope for is a large number of descendants, each one of whom bears only a tiny portion of you—a few genes—even if a few bear your surname as well."

Whatever we may feel about this bleak analysis (and there is a fierce theological controversy about it), it deprives racial and ethnic concepts of their pride of place in the larger scheme of life. Where once it was possible to conceive of an existence in which individuals, nations, or races competed



*A broad vision of politics, long since narrowed, inspired the civil-rights marchers of 1965.*

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in a struggle for the “survival of the fittest,” it now appears that if there is any competition it is among submicroscopic genes. As Dawkins argues, all that biological life is then is statistical probability on a colossal scale operating cumulatively over eons by slow and gradual degrees. In this blind, unconscious process the races, as we call them, are little more than gigantic gene pools, ever-shifting chance variables that we have barely begun to understand, and about which we must reserve judgment.

Dawkins observes that existence in this scientific metaphor has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. It was a similar vision of existence (*physis*) that horrified the ancient Greeks, and from which they sought release in the activities of politics, law, and citizenship. It reminds us that humans have not inhabited this planet for any great length of time, and that the span of years allocated to each one of us, whoever we are, wherever we live, whatever the size of our nose, whatever the color of our skin, whatever the current state of our bank balance, is short and very fragile. Faced with the terror and horror of existence and the fleeting presence of life, we have a human choice: Either we rely upon the fictitious unities of race and nation whipped up by the philologists, anthropologists, historians, and social scientists of the 19th century, and invent cunning new ideological forms of governance to create new unities; or we face up now to the immense difficulties of constructing a more realistic political way from the ingredients we have at our disposal.

What we face is not strictly an American dilemma. Nor is it confined to Bosnia and a few other “hot spots.” And yet it is to America that one turns for solutions. Today, some 250 million human beings live and work in countries that are not their place of birth, and those numbers will vastly increase in the future. In preparing for this future, we need to restore lost confidence in the efficacy of domestic and international politics. Only then can we avert the terrible excesses that invariably follow when managers and soldiers, bereft of political guidance, are left to confront anarchy and chaos.

There is no prescriptive remedy that an “expert” can give for the recreation of politics. Yet continuing to choose race as the organizing principle of our public life is clearly the path to tragedy; in conceiving of our collective identity and destiny we must reach higher. Before World War I, Lord Acton warned that we should assiduously attend to our past and to our politics, and to our perceptions of political, national, and international boundaries, lest in our passion for symmetry we “relapse into a condition corresponding to that of men renouncing intercourse with their fellow men.”

The conquest of space may have replaced the conquest of the wilderness as the great social adventure of America; it remains to be seen whether, as the most important player in world global politics, the United States can respond to the greatest challenge of all—the creation of a secular, demystified politics that embraces all citizens, and which secures and maintains their future safety and security in a dangerous world of accelerating apolitical change. *Dum spiro, spero*—while I breathe, I hope.