THE GENESIS OF SCIENTIFIC RACISM, INCLUDING SOME THOUGHTS ON SCHOLARLY WORKS PRODUCED IN THE YEARS 1774-1775

I

Many modern scholars believe that scientific racism is a discrete historical phenomenon, that its birth occurred somewhere around the last part of the eighteenth century, and that it became an important force in the middle of the nineteenth century (See Banton, 1967, p. 12; Poliakov, 1967, pp. 223-7; and Van den Berghe, 1967, pp. 11-18). Margaret Hodgen has also remarked (1964, p. 213) that racialism was virtually non-existent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

> 'In setting out upon an analysis of the problem of cultural diversity, as its solution was undertaken by sixteenth and seventeenth century inquiry, it should be said at once that "cultural" divisions were never associated with "racial" divisions. Any attempt to distinguish the "races" of mankind on either anatomical, physiological, or cultural grounds was relatively negligible. Racialism in the familiar nineteenth and twentieth century sense of the term was all but non-existent.'

But what was 'scientific racism?' Is there anything about scientific racism that makes it worthy of study for the sociologist and social historian?

I do not propose, myself, to give any definition of scientific racism, because I have not, as yet, evolved or produced a perfect one. I should rather beg the reader to ponder upon the following definition by Van den Berghe (1967, p. 11):

> 'Racism is any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences (whether real or imagined) between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or the absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such differences are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.'

For my part, I would delete from this definition the word 'invidious' and insert at the end 'or varieties,' so that the last part of the definition would read:

> '... hence that such differences are a legitimate basis of distinctions between groups socially defined as races or varieties.'

The sociologist and the social historian must ask themselves whether scientific racism has a distinctive identity, in other words, whether or not it is analytically separable from notions such as 'class', 'prejudice', or 'ethnocentrism'. Secondly, one must ask whether the concept of scientific racism is pertinent to the study of the history of the social sciences and the politics of the last two centuries. It is useful to consider certain approaches that have been made to the problem of scientific racism. Regretfully, one has to state that most of the approaches which I now list are simplistic, although none, bar Benedict's, is absolutely incorrect.

(1) Racism equals ethnocentrism. The supporters of this argument clearly do not see scientific racism as a discrete social phenomenon that has appeared during the last 200 years.

> '"Racism," asserts Dr. Benedict, "is essentially a pretentious way of saying that 'I' belong to the Best People. The formula 'I belong to the Elect' has a far longer history than modern racism. These are fighting words among the simplest naked savages"' (Cox, 1948, p. 478, quoting Benedict, Race Science and Politics, 1943, pp. 154-155).

As Cox correctly remarks, 'Ethnocentrism is a social constant in group association, hence it cannot explain variations in collective behavior' (ibid.). Benedict's error proceeds from her failure to develop a sociological approach. Identifying racism with ethnocentrism, she defines both as a dogma used by one ethnic group to justify persecution of another. She is engaged in a psychological investigation of beliefs.

(2) The Idealist approach. The historian of ideas is often more interested in constants which survive changes in the social climate than in the mere ephemera that are the social facts of any society at a fixed point in history. Arthur Lovejoy (1960) and J. C. Greene (1959) are both more interested in the intellectual pedigree of racist ideas than in their social background. The social scientist is also interested in the intellectual pedigree, but he is hardly willing to ignore the social background.

(3) The Vulgar Marxist approach. This approach can take two forms (See Van den Berghe, 1967, p. 17). First of all, racism is an epi-phenomenon of capitalism, an attempt to justify colonialist exploitation. Secondly, racism is a device employed by the ruling class to apply in their treatment of the working classes the axiom 'divide et impera'. Both of these statements are correct. They both describe social facts, but neither is a full explanation. One must explain why scientific racism did not appear with the first discovery and exploitation of non-European races. It is true that before the appearance of scientific racism the myth of Ham's curse was occasionally used as a justification of racial exploitation, but one must add a cautionary note:

> 'When the story of Ham's curse did become relatively common in the seventeenth century, it was utilized almost entirely as an explanation of color, rather than as justification for Negro slavery, and as such it was probably denied more often than affirmed' (Jordan, 1968, pp. 18-19).

For a hundred years colonialist debasement and exploitation existed without a suitable ideology. Even when an ideology appeared, it took eighty years before it was popularly utilized. I shall suggest later that the solutions to this problem may lie in the scientific debates and social conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

(4) The Romanticist approach. Theophile Simar (author of Etude Critique sur la formation de la doctrine des races, Brussels 1922), viewed racism as a product of romanticism. Romanticism endowed nations and groups with a personality and a will. Thus far, I think Simar is not incorrect. However, Simar pays much attention to the struggle between the bourgeoisie and aristocracy in sixteenth to nineteenth century France in the first one hundred pages of his study. Out of this struggle, according to Simar, came racism from romanticism.

In fact, racist ideas were formulated elsewhere earlier. A

product of colonial settlement, exploration, and exploitation, racism was a model which proved eminently adaptable to the dynamics of class warfare in Europe.

A valid account of scientific racism must relate both to social background and to scientific ideas, however difficult the task. Winthrop Jordan's book, White over Black (1968), a remarkable scholarly achievement, is the best attempt so far.

Scientific racism was a product of the Enlightenment era. Its origins lie in that series of myths which were developed by the natural philosophers of the eighteenth century to explain man's place in Nature. Certain of those myths were employed by those who sought to defend the system of slavery, which was based in mercantile capitalism, against the fury of the nascent abolitionist movement. In its early years, scientific racism was a defensive ideology, but myths, as social facts, have a power of their own, and in the latter years of the nineteenth century, racial determinism assumed an aggressive note.

II

Before commencing my main account of racism in the years 1774-75, I must add a few words concerning certain scientific notions. This brief account is little more than a glossary. Detailed accounts of these ideas are given by Greene and Lovejoy. The reader is also referred to Slotkin's sourcebook, Readings in Early Anthropology (1965).

The discoveries of Gallileo, Copernicus, and Newton, and the philosophy of Descartes, disturbed the peaceful world of Providence. 'Give me extension and movement and I will remake the world,' said Descartes, the first prophet of mechanistic Deism. John Ray, in his Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation, 1701, made a valiant attempt to defend the doctrine of final causes. The universe was seen as a perfect, unchanging, whole. In it existed every conceivable variety of thing. It was a plenum formarum, and nothing in its perfection was without purpose; even the rocks and stones had their uses. In the twelfth century Peter Abelard advanced the doctrine that Lovejoy calls 'the doctrine of sufficient reason', and that doctrine remained in currency for five hundred years. The doctrine was that everything was generated by some necessary cause 'for nothing comes into being except there be some due cause and reason antecedent to it' (Abelard). Such perfection was the expression of the goodness of the Creator. One consequence of these doctrines was that species were seen to be eternal. To talk of fresh creation or of extension would be to imply inadequacy in the Creator's plans.

This complex of ideas was attacked and eroded by mechanism as the eighteenth century progressed. Later on, the new geology, paleontology, and, finally, Darwinism, destroyed teleology, but it was a protracted battle, and Providence took long to surrender (See Gillispie, 1951). The mechanists saw God as somewhat distant; they believed in God, if at all, as a first cause, rather than in the doctrine of final causes. Their leaders included the 'wicked' Baron d'Holbach and the cowardly and charming Buffon, who questioned revelation but recanted at double speed when ordered so to do by the Sorbonne (1751).

Throughout the eighteenth century mechanism and final cause were engaged in a perpetual tug of war. Many eighteenth century works are inconsistent in their adherence to either. Furthermore, in view of the social pressures of the time, whether of Protestant conformism or of the Holy Inquisition and its zealous allies, the modern reader has often to read between the lines.

One idea often associated with the ideas of sufficient reason and plenitude was the doctrine which is commonly known as the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being. At the turn of the eighteenth century it was embellished by Leibniz and Spinoza. Later in the century it was popularised by Pope in his Essay on Man (1732-1734) and by Charles Bonnet in his Contemplation de la Nature (1763 and 1769). A continuous unbroken

chain stretched from the smallest inanimate object, through all forms of life, leading to man, culminating in the angels at the peak of creation. There were no gaps in the chain, because the creator had produced everything that could be produced. The chain was hierarchical, stretching from highest to lowest. The doctrine of La Grande Echelle des Etres flourished during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and declined during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, so soon after it reached its peak.

The notion of the Great Chain of Being was not consistent with the notion of species, which was being developed by Linnaeus and the systematizers of the eighteenth century. Linnaeus viewed species as determinate bodies of morphologically similar beings. The classification of species was seen as a natural one, although orders and genuses were artificial concepts. Buffon (See odom, 1967, pp. 10-11) found the idea of determinate natural species inconsistent with the idea of continuity in the Great Chain of Being.

> 'Nature proceeds by unknown gradations, and consequently does not yield totally to divisions:' 'Species fade into species and often genus into genus by impreceptible nuances.'

Later Buffon modified his position and adopted his own notion of species, which was based on the criterion of mutual fertility. If two varieties of animal or plant produce fertile hybrids, they were of the same species. Species were held to be distinct from varieties, which were the subdivisions of species, often permanently distinct morphologically in minor details, but interfertile. Varieties were generally regarded as degenerations from the species prototype.

The notion of degeneration is crucial to the understanding of eighteenth century taxonomy. Through some comprehension of the taxonomy, one becomes aware that accounts of degeneration into varieties are not accounts of evolution of species, for such an error has frequently been made.

III

MAN'S PLACE IN NATURE

In 1735 Linnaeus, in the first edition of his Systema Naturae, classed man as part of the Class Quadrupaedia. Man was divided into four varieties according to colour: European, American, Asiatic, and African. Linnaeus's work was significant in that the author not only linked man to the animal creation but assigned him to a part of it. In Linnaeus's tenth edition, 1758, his pupil, Hoppius, is believed to have added the much-famed satyrs and Trogledytes, including Homo Sylvestris orang-utang. The ignorance of Europe's best informed naturalist indicates both the curiosity of the time and the gaps in human knowledge. Reports from the coasts of Africa by voyagers and slave traders, and also from the East Indies, and the opening of America, had led to some increase in knowledge, in errors, and in speculations concerning the varieties of mankind and of human cultures. Diverse reports had arrived concerning strange, man-like creatures. Some of these creatures we can, with hindsight, identify as chimpanzees, orang-utangs, and gorillas, but between 1760 and 1780, the evidence was sparse, the classifications unclear. In pictures and illustrations that were widely circulated, the manlike qualities of the anthropoid apes were greatly exaggerated (See Greene, 1959, p. 188). One can, therefore, forgive Lord Monboddo for his theory of the humanity of the orang-utang (Monboddo, 1774).

Round these accounts and classifications were built new theories concerning man's natural role. They were constricted, in the main, by the need to conform to the Biblical account. Man was of one species and of one origin. It was heresy to contradict the theory of monogenesis. It was possible to say that mankind had degenerated into

several varieties; it was not permissible to say that he was originally created as several distinct species. Just a few sceptics, fanatics, and eccentrics dared to counter orthodoxy and advance a polygenist argument.

The monogenist theory of the eighteenth century was dominated by environmentalism. This is well known to many as the doctrine advanced in Montesquieu's L'Esprit des Lois. The physical and moral constitution of the human species was affected by such factors as climate, ecology, diet, and mode of life. The role of climate was of peculiar importance. Climate accounted for the colour of the skin: the heat of the sun acted upon the skin, and caused it to darken. (Various mechanisms were suggested as the reason for the darkening of the skin, including the secretion of excess bile.) Climate also affected stature. Diet and mode of life had a subsidiary effect upon colour and physique. The degenerations from the original type which were induced by the environment were gradual. Changes took place over several generations, and the environmentalists were always hard put to explain how they could have taken place in the short span of years allowed by Biblical texts.

The multi-talented George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, Superintendant of the Jardin du Roi, was a leading environmentalist and monogenist. He believed that dark colour in the skin was produced both by extreme cold and by extreme heat. However produced, it was a misfortune (See Buffon, 1791, pp. 203-207). This view of Buffon's was later (1787-1810) developed by Samuel Stanhope Smith, although like most environmentalists, Buffon did not believe that those who possessed 'inferior' cultures were eternally damned to servitude and savagery. Buffon was a propagator of an aesthetic racism, and used the climate theory to support his aesthetic:

> 'The most temperate climate lies between the 40th and 50th degree of latitude, and it produces the most handsome and beautiful men. It is from this climate that the genuine colour of mankind, and of the various degrees of beauty, ought to be derived. The two extremes are equally remote from truth and from beauty. The civilized countries, situated under this zone, are Georgia, Circassia, the Ukraine, Turkey in Europe, Hungary, the South of Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, and the northern part of Spain. The natives of these territories are the most handsome and most beautiful people in the world' (Buffon, 1791, pp. 203-207).

In 1774 John Hunter, (who was no relation of a famous surgeon of the period who was also called John Hunter), produced his Dissertatio Inauguralio. He defines species according to the fertility criterion:

> 'A class of animals of which the members procreate with each other and the offspring of which also procreate other animals, which are either like their class or afterwards become so.'

In the main, Hunter's dissertation is an orthodox and uninspired tract full of the cliches of the climate theory. At the end of his treatise, however, he appends some interesting remarks (pp. 389-394) concerning 'the varieties of mind'. He noted (p. 389) that 'the mental varieties seem equal to and sometimes greater than the bodily varieties of man'. Climate and custom interacting affected the mental faculties, just as they affected the physical faculties. At one point, Hunter nearly anticipates the cultural relativist position:

> 'Travellers have exaggerated the mental varieties far beyond the truth, who have denied good qualities to the inhabitants of other countries, because their

> mode of life, manner, and customs have been excessively different from their own. They have never considered, that when the Tartar tames his horse, or the Indian erects his wigwam, he exhibits the same ingenuity which an European general does in manoeuvering his army or Inigo Jones in building a palace'.

In 1775, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published the first edition of De Generis Humani Varietate. This work was a brilliant defence of the monogenist position. The human species had degenerated into disparate varieties, of which he lists four:

(1) European and Asian west of Ganges
(2) Asian east of Ganges and Australian
(3) African
(4(American, apart from the far north.

In his second edition (1781) Blumenbach was to distinguish between the Malayan and Mongolian, accordingly replacing his fourfold with a fivefold classification. In this edition, also, he introduced a new classificatory term, Caucasian. Blumenbach, who classified mankind in an order of its own, bimana, was no believer in the Great Chain of Being. Man, devoid of instincts, was protected by the 'developing germ' of reason, which was dependant upon society and education. He was distinguished further by his unique brain and his erect position. Even the fiercest nations of mankind possessed the power of speech. The hymen and menstrual flux were also possibly unique (See Blumenbach, 1775, pp. 82-90). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Blumenbach exhibited a healthy scepticism with regard to wild children, Albinos, and men with tails (See Blumenbach, 1775, pp. 129-145).

In the year 1774, which saw the publication of Hunter's Dissertatio Inauguralis and the preparation of Blumenbach's thesis, which was completed the next year, two major polygenist works appeared, the one by Henry Home, Lord Kames, a Scottish Judge of Sessions, the other by Edward Long, a former Jamaican judge and member of the Jamaican plantocracy.

The two works were alike insofar as they criticised certain flaws in the environmentalist case. In other respects they were very different. Long's work anticipated the racial determinism of the mid-nineteenth century. He seemed to care little for the Bible. Per contra, Kames's work was guilty, self-conscious heresy. It looked back to de La Peyrere's Praeadamitae (1655), not forward to Knox, Nott, and Hunt. In his Sketches of the History of Man (1774, Vol. 1, pp. 38-43), Kames notes that all evidence seems to indicate that the Creator had originally produced many pairs of the human race, that is to say, separate human species. But Moses said otherwise. 'Though we cannot doubt of the authority of Moses, yet his account of the creation of man is not a little puzzling, as it seems to contradict every one of the facts mentioned above'. An inspiration offered itself: mankind, formerly of one species, had been diversified by some great catastrophe, imposed by the Creator as punishment. This catastrophe was the fall of the tower of Babel:

> 'Thus, had not men wildly attempted to build a tower whose top might reach to heaven, all men would not only have spoken the same language, but would have made the same progress toward maturity of knowledge and civilization. That deplorable event reversed all nature: by scattering men over the face of all the earth, it deprived them of society, and rendered them savages. From that state of degeneracy, they have been emerging gradually. Some nations, stimulated by their own nature, or by their climate, have made a rapid progress; some have proceeded more slowly, and some continue savages ...' (Ibid.)

In a somewhat more rational vein, Kames (Vol. I, p. 5) criticized Buffon's use of the fertility criterion in the definition of species. Could Buffon explain the production of fertile hybrids by sheep and goats? Elsewhere (pp. 10-14) he criticizes environmentalist theory, and its main proponent in natural philosophy, Buffon. 'There have been four complete generations of Negroes in Pennsylvania without any visible change of colour...'

> 'If the European complexion be proof against a hot climate for a thousand years, I pronounce that it will never yield to climate. In the suburbs of Cochin, a town in Malabar, there is a colony of industrious Jews of the same complexion as they have in Europe. They pretend that they were established there during the atrocity of Babylon: it is unquestionable that they have been many ages in that country'. (Ibid., p. 13).

Although Kames was impelled by his consideration of the physical character of the Negro to consider him a separate species, he viewed the Negro's 'inferiority of understanding' as a product of environmental deprivation:

> 'A man never ripens in judgment nor in prudence but by exercising these powers. At home the negroes have little occasion to exercise either of them: they live upon fruits and roots, which grow without culture; they need little clothing; and they erect houses without trouble or art. Abroad, they are miserable slaves, having no encouragement to think or act'. (Ibid., pp. 31-32).

Kames's essentially benign polygenesis contrasts sharply with the malign utterances of Jamaica's historian, Edward Long.

MERCANTILE CAPITALISM, SLAVERY, AND RACISM: THE WORK OF EDWARD LONG

In retrospect it seems inevitable and tidy that Edward Long's History of Jamaica, a work that in so many ways foreshadowed and so greatly influenced later scientific racism, should have appeared when it did (1774) and from so appropriate a source. Edward Long had recently come to England from Jamaica, where he had been a planter and a judge. His family were prominent citizens of the island:

> 'Also connected with Jamaica were the Longs. Charles Long, at his death, left property in Suffolk, a house in Bloomsbury, London, and total property in Jamaica comprising 14,000 acres. He enjoyed a very great income, by far the largest of any Jamaican proprietor of that period, and was accordingly entitled to live in splendor. His grandson, a Jamaican planter, wrote a well-known history of the island'. (Williams, 1944, p. 89).

Jamaica, the great sugar island was the hub of the system of mercantile capitalism which Britain dominated through her naval strength and control of the Asiento. The slave trade made Britain 'great' and the port of Liverpool burgeoned from its profits (See Williams, 1944, pp. 29-106). In the year 1771, 190 British ships transported 47,000 slaves. Furthermore, 'The Importation into Jamaica from 1700 to 1786 was 610,000, and it has been estimated that the total import of slaves into all the British colonies between 1680 and 1786 was over two million'. (Ibid., p. 33).

I do not propose to enter into the controversy concerning the merits or evils of Anglo-American as compared with Latin American slavery (summarized in Foner and Genovese, 1969). I think it would

be generally agreed that Jamaica was one of the most vicious, if not the most vicious, of the slave-owning colonies, having an advanced plantation system, controlled by a powerful planter interest, many of whom lived as rich, ostentatious absentees in Britain.

At the time Long wrote his history, the island was still most prosperous, but storm clouds were looming. The Liverpool traders were beginning to lose money (Williams, 1944, p. 38). The abolitionists under Granville Sharp were launching their first major attack. Two years earlier, they had obtained a decision from Lord Mansfield, in the course of which he had remarked that the case, which involved one James Somersett, a slave who was about to be returned by his owner to Jamaica, was one which was not 'allowed or approved by the Law of England.' The decision in no way affected the slave trade, but it greatly perturbed Long (See Long, 1772).

In the Introduction to his History of Jamaica, Long defends the institution of 'servitude' against its detractors, particularly Messrs. Sharp and Godwyn. 'Wherever circumstances make it inevitable, "servitude" is a happy institution, provided only that the slave-owners are truly free men'.

The gist of Long's argument concerning the Negro is contained in some thirty pages of the second volume of his history (Long, 1774, Vol. II, Book III, Chap. 1, pp. 351-379). First of all, he remarks that the colour of the Negro skin is not affected by change of climate. He remarks upon their 'covering of wool, like the bestial fleece, instead of hair,' some bodily peculiarities, including 'the general large size of the female nipples, as if adapted by nature to the peculiar conformations of their children's mouths', 'the black colour of the lice which infest their bodies' (p. 352), and 'their bestial or fetid smell' (p. 382). The Negro, according to Long, is not merely physically revolting, but mentally much the inferior of the white man:

> 'In general, they are void of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science. They have no plan or system of morality among them. Their barbarity to their children debases their nature even below that of brutes. They have no moral sensations, no taste but for women, gormandizing and drinking to excess, no wish but to be idle. Their children, from the tenderest years, are suffered to deliver themselves up to all that nature suggests to them'.

After such invective, Long's conclusion (p. 356), is anti-climactic:

> 'When we reflect on the nature of these men, and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude that they are a different species of the same genus?'

Having established that the Negro is a distinct species, Long decided that he must establish the Negro's place in Nature. He expounds the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being and the principle of continuity. The Negro, according to Long (pp. 356-370) occupies a place in the chain between the orang and the rest of humanity. In order to cover any gaps in the chain, Long, having dehumanized the Negro, equips the orang with human attributes:

> 'For my own part, I conceive that probability favours the opinion, that human organs were not given him for nothing: that this race have some language by which their meaning is communicated... nor for what hitherto appears, do they seem at all inferior in the intellectual faculties to many of the Negro race, with some of whom, it is credible that they have the most intimate connexion and consanguinity.

> The amorous intercourse between them may be frequent; Negroes themselves bear testimony that such intercourses actually happen; and it is certain that both races agree perfectly well in lasciviousness of disposition'.

It is interesting to note that the links of the Great Chain of Being were stretched in similar fashion by the authors of Personal Slavery Established by the Suffrages of Custom and Right Reason, Being a Full Answer to the Gloomy and Visionary Reveries of All the Fanatical and Enthusiastical Writers on that Subject, an anonymous work, which appeared in Philadelphia in 1773 (the year before the publication of Long's book), and which was, as its title implies, directed against the abolitionist movement. My attention was drawn to the latter work by Winthrop Jordan, who remarked how apt a tool was the Great Chain of Being for the scientific racist who sought to defend slavery against fresh attacks:

> '...the popularity of the concept of the Chain in the eighteenth century derived in large measure from its capacity to universalize the principle of hierarchy. It was no accident that the Chain of Being should have been most popular at a time when the hierarchical arrangement of society was being challenged. No 'idea', no matter how abstract or intricately structured, exists in isolation from the society in which it flourishes' (1968, p. 228).

The concept of the Great Chain of Being disappeared in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But Long's ideas survived that disappearance. His description of the peculiarities of the Negro, his tenor of argument, is repeated in parrot fashion by many later racists, including the American School, Knox and Hunt.

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to do that most difficult of things, to describe the genesis of a myth. And scientific racism most certainly is a myth.

It offered a resolution of two paradoxes in natural and moral philosophy: the antithesis of the evident disparity between human physiques and cultures of different peoples and the old belief in the unity of the human species under God; and the paradox of Mankind, newly perceived to be part of the animal creation, yet thought to be unique in its possession of a soul and the developed power of reason. Further, it resolved from some the conflict between the doctrine of Natural Rights and the existence of slavery in a society of free men. The pressures of the nascent abolitionist movement upon the defenders of slavery may have acted as a catalyst.

Once established, the myth of scientific racism grew at first slowly, and then flourished, creating a momentum of its own. It was to affect not just an intellectual elite, but an administrative and a literary elite. In the end it was to act as a corrupting agent upon popular movements.

Andrew P. Lyons.

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