

# The Claims of "Nordic" Race Superiority

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**Origin of the pernicious doctrine of "race superiority"—its subsequent development in Germany and its recent appearance in America as an alarmist warning against non-"Nordic" increase—Hypothesis disproved by modern science.**

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WHEN the immigrant wrote back to his people in Ireland that in America every man is just as good as his neighbor, if not better, he expressed in a typical Irishism a universal sentiment, which is undoubtedly as old as it is widespread. Every man feels in some way superior to his neighbour, whether because he is rich or poor, modest or proud, giant or pigmy, carnal or pious, quick-witted or plodding, for it is in every man's power and it is every man's custom to make a virtue of his special condition and characteristics. Moreover, in this task of marking "Superior Brand" on distinctive traits and qualities, the individual does not stop with himself, he exalts similarly his family, his town and his tribe, thus unconsciously creating a vicious circle by admiring what he has, because he has it.

What is true of individuals is equally true of nations. From the earliest times a given nation's feelings of superiority to its neighbors has been one of the most powerful forces influencing and molding the life of peoples. There is hardly a nation which has not suffered because at some time in its history it acted in the belief that this feeling was a fact. Furthermore, both the records of ancient civilization and the history of our more immediate past show us that the nations have followed an identical formula to justify this national arrogance. We see, in the first place, that a given people claims to have a monopoly of some desirable quality; then we find that it believes this quality to be particularly acceptable to God and by virtue thereof becomes "the chosen people"; and finally, with sanctimonious hypocrisy, the nation in question takes upon itself a mission to excuse its policy of territorial aggrandizement and all the acts of exploitation and oppression which such a policy entails. In the chronicles of every nation infected by this arrogance there is a story of misery, famine and bloodshed, often of complete ruin, all a direct consequence of this theory of superiority. The Greeks and Jews suffered from it; it spread like a plague to France, showed itself in England during the Victorian era, and broke out in Germany a few years ago in its most violent and fatal form. The tragedy of this disease lies not so much in the theory itself as in the fact that it has always been made to serve political purposes and hence has always affected most intimately the political history of virtually every nation in the world.

Lately, however, those who would exploit man's self-conceit for political ends have substituted a racial in place of the national unit of comparison. They speak now in terms of Semite, Mongol and Aryan, or Alpine, "Nordic" and Mediterranean; they interpret God's favoritism not through oracles and prophecies, but by means of cranial dimensions and basketry weaves; and, most important development of all, they no longer attempt to establish their unique qualities but arbitrarily assert their superiority and throw the burden of proof on the "inferior" races. It would seem to the student of history that in the course of civilization mankind has had delusions of chosen peoples and superior races to make it wary when another such theory is put on the market. But quite the contrary is true, and hence it becomes necessary to take notice of the most absurd claims of superiority for fear that the fanatical activity of a handful of believers may cause again irremediable harm.

## Evolution of the "Nordic" Theory.

One of the latest and undoubtedly one of the most absurd and pernicious applications of this "superiority" theory has made its appearance in the United States. The doctrine propounded is that the

white race is biologically superior to all the others and that a certain division of the white race, called "Nordic," is the acme of its excellencies. This theory, propagated in a passionate, melodramatic manner, is finding acceptance among the ignorant, and through them is already exerting an influence on such important practical problems of American life as immigration, eugenics and education. The theory is voiced by members of the legal profession posing as temporary anthropologists, by journalists transformed into ominous prophets, by professors seeking lecture fees and by that curious anomaly, the lady novelist, striving for distinction as a socio-literary critic.

Before we become panic-stricken with fear that the great blond race will disappear into the mysterious twilight zone to which its gods and its heroes are said to have passed in times remote, it may be profitable to examine the fundamental elements of the "Nordic" theory and to see what the anthropological and ethnic facts, which have only recently been brought to light, mean when they are interpreted in the hard, cold light of truth. The curtain for the first act of this romantic melodrama concerning our "Nordic" race rose about seventy years ago. At that time Comte Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), inspired by the great scientific discoveries of his time and anxious to warn his countrymen against hybridization through intermarriage or intermingling with the Germans, who were peacefully penetrating into France, wrote his "Essai sur l'Inegalite des Races Humaines" (Essay on the Inequality of the Races of Mankind). Although he announced that "if the Bible declares that mankind is descended from the same common stock, all that goes to prove the contrary is mere semblance, unworthy of consideration," the Count succeeded in interpreting the Scripture in such a way as to permit him to differ from the common notion that all men are alike, inasmuch as they are all descended from Adam. He proceeded to indicate "the moral and intellectual diversity of races" and came to two important conclusions: (1) That the white race is superior to all others, and (2) that to be great, every nation must be pure in stock. As to the comparative greatness of the numerous divisions of the white race, Gobineau offered no opinion except in so far as his examples were drawn from the ancient Mediterranean civilization. He writes, for example: "If Rome, in her decadence, had possessed soldiers and Senators like those of the time of Fabius, Scipio and Cato, would she have fallen prey to the barbarians of the North?"

Although Gobineau's book was almost immediately translated in America to be used as an argument for slavery, it had little influence on the thought of the day. Not until the biologists, August Weismann and Gregor Mendel, formulated their theories of heredity, not until the discovery of "primitive man" offered a basis for the most imposing superstructures of speculation did the idea of racial inequality fire overwrought and egoistic imaginations. The Weismann doctrine is based upon the idea that every individual is composed of two independent types of tissues, the germ-plasm and the somatoplasm. It holds that the germ-plasm consists of the generating cells, which reproduce themselves and pass on unchanged from generation to generation, each time building new bodies out of somatoplasm as temporary containers for this precious fluid. The argument that found most favor in the eyes of the propagators of the superior race prejudice is that the individual today is essentially the same as his unknown ancestors of the neo-monkey era, since the vital qualities he had at the beginning were passed on by the germplasm, while the characteristics he acquired in each generation were lost at his death with the disintegration of his body.

Among the individuals who combined the supposition of Gobineau with the speculations of Weismann was a renegade Englishman named Houston

Stewart Chamberlain, whose book, "Die Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts" (The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century) raised the old "chosen people" delusion to a height of magnificent absurdity which it had never before attained. Chamberlain simply and systematically classified all virtues and abilities under the heading "Teuton" and all vices and failings under that of "non-Teuton." After that one could see at a glance the superiority of the northern blond giant over the dark, stubby southerner. The Kaiser is said to have bought 30,000 copies of the book to be distributed where it would do the most good. That the distribution was thoroughly efficient may be gathered by the loud and numerous echoes of these absurdities throughout Europe and America.

## Alarmist Doctrine in United States.

This statistical race ecstasy was fostered in Germany to give an appearance of scientific support to the position of the junkers and to bolster up the belief in the divine right of kings. But it was presented in America as a prophylactic against an imminent danger to mankind. In the books of Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard and others, all the virtues which Chamberlain had monopolized for the Teuton were ascribed to the "Nordic," and the incense which Chamberlain, Witmann and Wirth burned before the idol of their own making was transferred to a shrine less bespattered by the venom of the World War.

It is significant that the authors of these publications devoted to self-admiration exhibit similar mental characteristics and qualifications and employ the same technique in setting down their dogmatic dicta. They are sentimentalists blinded by fear, staggering under a prejudice and wholly lacking in any basis of scientific knowledge. Consciously or not, they base this fantastic farrago of cephalic indices, skull sutures, brain weights, intelligence tests and cultural stages on the very earliest and most antiquated ethnological postulates and shun the later investigations and the demonstrated conclusions of such anthropologists, physiologists, biologists and psychologists as Ripley, Boas, Lowie, Dixon, Spencer, Haeckel, Lamarek, Pavlov, Cunningham, Stockard, Guyer, Smith, Griffith, Weigert and Woodworth—to mention only a few of the most noted in each field. The situation has no parallel in science; it is as if some radio amateur, troubled by a nightmare, had studied the lightning experiments and accepted the conclusions of Benjamin Franklin and on the basis of that knowledge had published books and magazine articles alarming the public with his hysterical dread of the dangers of electricity.

At its best this amateur anthropology is a carefully reasoned plea in support of preconceived notions; the author never admits that his main thesis is not established and, in the present state of scholarship, is not capable of establishment, that his arguments rest on debatable assumptions and his determinations on most questionable evidence. The average product, however, is usually far below this level. In the main these volumes are monstrous statistical romances given a certain plausibility by the tone of solemn dogmatism, the use of quasi-authentic traditions and the show of pseudo-scientific method. As Professor Boas once put it: "Books of this type try to bolster up their unscientific theories by an amateurish appeal to misunderstood discoveries relating to heredity and to give in this manner a scientific guise to their dogmatic statements which misleads the public."

A Main Street President has pondered on the awful spectacle of a dying race thus presented; Congressional committees have summoned and still summon the authors who voice this alarmist theory to ask their counsel on pressing problems and pending problems and pending legislation; sensational magazines publish articles in which the patriotism

(Continued on page 3)