

What Is a Race?

By FRANZ BOAS.

Editor's Note.—In presenting this article, "The Nation" (N.Y.), announces that it is the first of a series on the Nordic Myth, to be followed by others in discussion of race relations and race superiority. Franz Boas, the author of the present article, was a co-worker with the late J. A. T. of the S. P. of C., a research worker and accomplished ethnologist whose field lay especially among the various tribes of B. C. Indians.

THE intensity of race consciousness in our country is not entirely due to the presence in large numbers of various non-European races, for even a hasty review of the attitude of many European nations reveals a phenomenal growth of the feeling of racial antagonisms. The belief in organic difference between the European and the Negro or the European and the Chinese has come to appear as so fundamental that social and political relations are determined by it. We no longer demand any careful examination of the reasons for the feeling of difference, but accept it as an instinctive, unavoidable effect of the contact of different races.

The theory that mental traits are determined by race is old. In earlier times it was not clearly differentiated from the assumption of an immediate influence of environment upon body and mind. In the eighteenth century we hear of the belief that the type represented by the nobility is organically superior to the type represented by the commoners. In the nineteenth century the theory of the racial determination of mental traits made rapid headway. It was a convenient prop for supporting slavery and was, therefore, used as the strongest argument against the aims of the Abolitionists. But aside from this students of the history of civilization became impressed with the evident differences of mental behavior in large divisions of mankind. Gustav Klemm in his "Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit" discusses at length the aptitudes of different racial types. Carus tried to explain the history of nations on the basis of their organic character, but the whole problem received its principal impetus by the publication of Comte de Gobineau's "L'Inegalite des Races Humaines." In the course of time the arguments by which he tried to prove the superiority of the blond North European type over all other European groups made a deep impression, and since that time the conviction has grown apace that fundamental, organically determined psychical differences exist between human races and even between closely allied groups. It is only necessary to mention books like Stewart Houston Chamberlain's "Foundations of Nineteenth Century Civilization," or those of Woltmann, Lapouge, or Hans Gunther, and in our own country the much-read propaganda by Madison Grant, "The Passing of the Great Race," to indicate the general character of the growth of this movement.

On the other hand an equally voluminous literature has developed, intended to maintain the irrelevancy of racial affiliation in cultural and mental life. Much of this literature is due to an effort to combat the anti-Semitic drift of our times.

Quite aside from this discussion certain ethnologists have based their work on the assumption of an essential sameness of the mental life of all races. Inquiries into the development of civilization like those of Theodor Waitz, E. B. Tylor, Herbert Spencer, or Adolf Bastian were conducted without any regard to racial affiliations, but dealt with mankind as a whole and emphasize the unity of mental behavior of man.

Whatever the outcome of scientific discussion may be the existence of racial antagonisms among ourselves cannot be denied. The inquiry should be directed toward an investigation of the conditions under which they have grown up and of the soundness of the arguments supporting racial discrimination.

It is generally assumed that race consciousness

and race antagonism are instinctive, that is to say, organically determined. It is fairly obvious that for individuals this rule does not hold good. The numerous cases of racial mixture between whites and all other races show clearly that there is no fundamental racial antipathy that would prevent the closest and most intimate relations between individuals of the most diverse races. Furthermore it is important to note that race antagonism is not by any means a universal trait of mankind. While it is very pronounced among Anglo-Saxons, it is weak among most of the people of Romance tongue. The present French policy of treating the African Negroes as Frenchmen has for its basis a theoretical denial of essential racial differences and is possible only on account of the lack of a strong, widespread feeling of race antagonism. The weakness of race consciousness among people speaking Romance languages is shown also by the social conditions in many South American countries.

Still more striking is the attitude of Mohammedans, among whom racial affiliations count very little as against religious unity. A convincing proof of this attitude in early times is the description of inter-racial relations in Arabian literature. A study of the behavior of children shows also that while a consciousness of race difference may be present, it does not include necessarily any feeling of racial antagonism. As the child grows up the dividing line between the races is impressed upon it, and in this way the race consciousness develops until it becomes a purely automatic reaction which evokes the same intensity of feeling as the so-called instinctive reactions. Nevertheless the two are fundamentally distinct. If racial antagonism were instinctive it would appear among all members of mankind, not necessarily in earliest youth, but certainly at the time of adolescence. If on the other hand, it is a behavior that is developed as a social pattern it will be present only where this pattern prevails and will become more automatic and therefore emotionally stronger the more pronounced the social pattern. It is also instructive to see that in the castes of India the same kind of antagonism and feeling of repugnance develops without being everywhere founded on racial differences.

Numerous attempts have been made to give a scientific status to the feeling of racial difference and particularly to the claim of Nordic superiority. In these attempts use is made of historical data, of descriptions of national character and of psychological tests to which individuals of different races have been subjected. In none of these discussions, however, do we find a concise and definite answer to the question of what constitutes a race.

Unfortunately the concept of race is not at all clear. The terminology adopted by our immigration authorities has added greatly to the confusion because they designate people speaking different languages and of different political association as races without any regard to their biological characteristics.

When we speak of innate characteristics of races we mean by the term race a group of people descended from a common ancestry and for this reason alike in anatomical form. Likeness does not mean identity. In no species or variety of animals or plants are all individuals strictly of the same form. Differences in size and form are ever present and variability within certain limits is one of the prime characteristics of organic nature. Individuals of the same variety are not identical and a variety derived from the same ancestry will always embrace many distinctive individual forms. A whole racial group can never be described by a few descriptive terms, because there will always be many individuals of deviating types. It is our impression that the Swede is blond, blue eyed, tall, and longheaded; but many Swedes do not conform to this description. When these variations are sufficiently pronounced

ed we are very much inclined to consider the extreme variants as types of which the population is composed and to believe that the rather indifferent but frequent middle group originates from an intermixture of the two extreme types. When practical questions are involved this view is useful. The physician who distinguishes between the asthenic and eusthenic type or between other constitutional types is confronted by a practical problem. His classification of types does not imply that the individuals of different constitution are distinct types which intermingled and from which the middle type of indifferent constitution developed. In the same way the occurrence of long heads and short heads in Sweden does not prove by itself that we must have a mixture of two fundamental types. The extreme forms may as well be interpreted as variants of a single ancestral type.

On the other hand extensive migrations have occurred since very early times the world over and mixtures of distinct types have been common. The period of isolation in which the differentiation of local types developed must lie in a very remote time. The present conditions show gradual transitions between types inhabiting adjoining areas, due largely to intermixture. Local types exhibit everywhere similar degrees of variability, so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the characteristics of the earlier purer types that developed by isolation.

Unless the component races are fundamentally distinct, the attempt to isolate in an old stable population distinctive racial types determined by descriptive characteristics is, therefore, an almost insoluble task. We cannot assign one individual to one race, another to another, because we do not know the degree of variability found in the ancestral isolated race, and on account of the long-continued mixture the characteristics of the parental races will appear in varying combinations in each individual. All attempts to establish among members of the same social group correlations between mental character and bodily form have failed.

When we speak of racial heredity we mean certain characteristics in which all members of a race partake. The white skin-color of the European and the dark skin-color of the Negro are racial hereditary traits, because they belong to all the members of each race. On account of the great variability of forms fundamental differences between various races are not always found. Size and complexity of the brain, stature, head form, physiological functions and mental reactions vary enormously in each race, and many features that are found in one race are also found among individuals belong to other races. Thus it happens that to judge by the size of his brain or by his physiological or mental functions an individual may as well belong to one race as to another. In such cases it is obviously impossible to speak of hereditary racial characteristics because the traits characterizing any individual occur in a number of human races.

The importance of this observation becomes still clearer when we consider the individuals not only as members of a race as a whole but as descendants of a certain ancestral group. The racial type is what is called by biologists a phenotype, that is to say, an assembly of individuals that belong to quite distinctive line of descent. The phenotype, however may be subdivided into a number of genotypes, or groups of individuals having a common ancestry. In other words, we must consider the whole race as constituted of a large number of family lines. When we have a population that has been inbred for a very long time, such as certain village communities in Europe or small isolated tribes of primitive people, the whole community may represent, more or less strictly speaking, one genotype, because they are all descended from the same ancestral group and every