

CHAPTER TWELVE

PROGRESSIVISM, RACE, AND EMANCIPATION

PROGRESSIVISM

The rise of American sociology was intimately connected with the general movement towards social reform. The Darwinian controversy prompted many liberal theologians to attempt to reconcile their beliefs with the latest scientific discoveries, which seemed to gain validity with time. Industrialization was accompanied by fears of the consequences of the growing rationality and decline of some aspects of religious behaviour on the part of the working class. To the more liberal churches it seemed futile in the case of the lower classes to minister to the soul when their conditions of life were not conducive to any interest other than material survival. Therefore, Hofstadter concluded, 'alarmed by the violence of labor conflict . . . [degrading] living conditions, and troubled by the failure of the churches to win an adequate following among urban workers', the progressive churches became a social force 'to make a contribution to solving the new moral problems of industrialism.'¹ By looking after their material as well as spiritual needs the churches acted in terms of classic self-preservation.

The Christian message was given an increasingly social interpretation. Inspired by Christian socialism in Britain, the social gospel movement was intimately connected to the sociology of the period, partly through common objectives and methods in the realm of social reform, partly through a common ethical and moralistic basis, and partly through individuals, since many early sociologists had some ministerial background. On the one hand, then, sociology retained the religious, moralistic message in its teaching, and, on the other, it was legitimized as a discipline through its connections with Christianity. Like sociology, the social gospel movement attempted to chart a course midway between socialism and extreme individualism. Ironically but quite logically, the social Darwinist William Sumner resisted both.

Paradoxically, Sumner, the one sociologist against whom all the liberal sociologists were in reaction, opposed state intervention because he recognized that the state is essentially an instrument of political power that social classes employ to advance their own special interests. The benefits accruing from government intervention were distributed predominantly to members of the social class in control of the state, while the burdens rested disproportionately with members of other classes.² Sumner's conservative perspective held a nugget of radicalism.

THORSTEIN VEBLÉN

'People where they are not known, are generally honour'd according to their Cloaths and other Accoutrements they have about them; from the richness of them we judge of their Wealth'.³

-- Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1723)

¹ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 18.

² Roscoe C. Hinkle and Gisela J. Hinkle, *The Development of Modern Sociology: Its Nature and Growth in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1974), 13.

³ Bernard Mandeville, 'Remark M', *The Fable of the Bees*, Philip Harth (ed.) London: Penguin 1989, 152.

The acerbic Progressive era economist and social critic, Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), reflects the late-nineteenth century framework of ‘instincts’ as fundamental to human life, but as variously shaped and over-determined by social institutions. Veblen recognized clearly that labourers were in a state of revolt, if not revolution. He agreed with many contemporary socialists that American workers were not becoming progressively worse off in any real sense. He also did not believe that workers’ unrest was a simple matter of the gap between the rich and the poor growing wider so that the poor seemed *comparatively* worse off even if, by absolute standards, they were better off than ever. This was the argument of many Marxists; but it was not Veblen’s chief point. To understand Veblen and see how his argument had resonance in the twentieth century, it is necessary to consider first his theory of instincts and emulation.

Instincts of Work and Emulation

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen argued that there was an instinctual basis for human behaviour. Nevertheless, instincts operated differently in the animal and human worlds. Among simpler organisms, Veblen argued, an instinct could be conceived as a combination of an internal drive (something the organism was driven to satisfy) plus the predetermined behaviour to accomplish the end or satisfy the drive. Insofar as a migratory bird had an instinct to fly south in the autumn, it experienced both an internal ‘drive’ to migrate and had programmed into it the behaviours necessary to accomplish this end. It was not a learned behaviour but an instinctual behaviour.

Human instincts, however, were of a different character. Veblen accepted the notion that humans had instincts, but no human instinct operated in the absence of social influence. Certainly humans had drives, biological necessities that needed to be satisfied; however, for anything other than the simplest biological reflexes, humans did not possess, genetically, the programmed actions that would satisfy the drive. Instead, humans had a relatively large measure of choice, of alternative means to satisfy their drives. Various cultures could prescribe different but biologically appropriate actions and socialize offspring to follow these distinct rules of behaviour.

Initially, humanity lived in a peaceable culture in solidarity with their fellows and in competition with nature. In this humble, non-aggressive, and indolent stage, certain fundamental psychological characteristics were selected, including truthfulness, equity, sympathy, and the instinct of creative workmanship. From this early beginning, society passed into a second, predatory phase. The initial human traits, developed over a long historical time, were repressed or diminished through a selection process consistent with the new social structure. The principal struggle was no longer with nature but with other individuals. In the context of the predatory, competitive culture, successful individuals required a different temperament. The predatory character is ‘free from scruple, from sympathy, honesty and regard for life’ and is characterized by ‘ferocity, self-seeking, clannishness, and disingenuousness’. Among the three main genetic types Veblen recognized from the European physiological archetypes, it was among the dolichocephalic-blond type that the predatory character was most fully developed.⁴

The predatory culture persisted in modern capitalism, where the interests of the individual were ‘best served by shrewd trading and unscrupulous management’. These traits

⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: New American Library, 1953 [1899]), 151–2.

were increasingly anachronistic in a world where the collective interest required ‘honesty, diligence, peacefulness, good-will, [and] an absence of self-seeking’.⁵ The modern character had equally an anti-social, predatory side, and a creative, productive side. The era of competition had shaken primitive humanity out of its indolence and lethargy, and infused the human character with energy and ambition. Simultaneously, however, anti-social traits shaped the character of the big capitalist, involved in ownership and acquisition. In the past the capitalist was an active participant in the creation of wealth. The industrial sphere selected the most positive combination of the old, peaceable traits and the creative impulses of the competitive age. By the late nineteenth century, however, industry was under the shadow of mismanagement by bankers and financiers for whom business was merely a way to make money, not a means of improving life for the community. Increasingly, the capitalist was becoming a parasite on industry, focusing exclusively on making profit through financial dealings. They dominated the economic and social scene, and increasingly influenced politics directly.

The difference between the model industrialist and the parasitical financier, Veblen suggested, resulted from the manifestation of two different drives. The main contradiction in modern society, he believed, was derived from the coexistence of two distinct instincts (or sentiments)—workmanship and emulation. Among the instinctive drives that humans inherited was an important instinct of workmanship—a fundamental drive towards creativity, efficiency, and accomplishment. The modern industrialist embodied this drive. Workmanship was rooted in an even more basic human instinct, curiosity.⁶ For Veblen, this instinct of curiosity lies at the root of all human progress.⁷ Driven by the instincts of curiosity and workmanship, human thought creates technologies that are appropriate for the given state of knowledge of a culture. Once created, these technologies shape the beliefs and actions of people in society. People become habituated—socialized—into this set of beliefs and actions, which becomes second nature; the beliefs and actions are assumed to be natural and are followed more or less automatically by people.

This tendency for society to reproduce itself—to pass on unchanged from one generation to the next—is contradicted by the fundamental human drive to create. So no human society stands still, and progress is inevitable. Veblen’s theory reflected the nineteenth-century doctrine of automatic progress, which he believed was rooted in a fundamental, biological human drive. Unfortunately, modern industrial society was stripping many people of the opportunity to express their creativity and workmanship in their employment and perverting creativity among a minority of business leaders, whose interests were confined to financial manipulations. These were the parasitical financiers, driven by the instinct for emulation. As sociologist C. Wright Mills commented at mid-century, America was split between those groups of people who performed necessary and productive work, among whom the dominant sentiment was useful craftsmanship and productive work, and the modern businessman, whose sentiments were pecuniary (concerned with money-making) and predatory.⁸ In his *Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904), Veblen warned that investment solely for the purpose of profit-making expanded the role of speculation and ignored the social implications of making short-term economic decisions based on what was immediately profitable. The result was a tendency to economic dislocation

⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁶ David Seckler, *Thorstein Veblen and the Institutionalists* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1975), 58.

⁷ Ibid., 58–63.

⁸ C. Wright Mills, ‘Introduction’ to Veblen, *Leisure Class*, xii.

and unemployment, and the control of production in the interests of the financiers who sacrificed the consumers as well as the long-term interests of the economic system.

While economic and social conditions stifled the instinct of workmanship, the instinct for emulation was being strengthened throughout the society. Although the American working class was better off than ever before, their discontent was rooted in a biological drive found in all humans: the tendency to make invidious comparisons with one's fellows. An invidious comparison is one that tends to look enviously or jealously at the accomplishments or acquisitions of others.⁹ What Veblen called the drive for emulation was one of the most important motivations shaping human actions. People judge themselves in comparison to others, and, more importantly, argued Veblen, they strive to be seen and thought of as being *better than* their neighbours.

In earlier societies, people would be personally known to their neighbours and their social standing would also be well known. An individual might strive to be recognized, for example, as a better hunter. In a feudal society, someone might base her or his claim for being better than another on the basis of aristocratic birth. In industrial capitalism, however, a person's worth is measured by how much money he or she has.

As a social evolutionist, Veblen argued that in what we would now call hunting and gathering societies (in his terms, savage cultures), the most basic distinction was between women's and men's work. Men's work (hunting) was more prestigious because it had an element of exploit as opposed to drudgery. Even at that early stage of society, employments were invidiously compared: exploit was honourable and noble; other employments that imply subservience or submission were dishonourable, 'debasing, ignoble'.¹⁰

At a later stage of social evolution, when technology had been developed to a sufficiently high degree, not all members of society were required to participate in securing the necessary means of subsistence. There was, in fact, a surplus, which could support a few highly privileged individuals and, later, privileged 'leisure class', which existed in what he termed a predatory culture. It wasn't that the leisure class didn't work. In particular, they monopolized the right to slaughter, whether it was hunting animals or killing people in warfare. These exploits were defined as honorific while working with your hands was designated odious.

Conspicuous Consumption

The social evolution that had led to the emergence of a predatory culture and a leisure class was to be understood by the development of private property. The earliest form of ownership, Veblen claimed, was the ownership of women and of the products of their industry, and thence proceeded more generally to the ownership of things.¹¹ At the root of private property, however, was the instinct for emulation, and the accumulation of wealth became the foundation of a person's social reputation.¹² The elite possessed 'old money', inherited from

⁹ Emulation may be particularly pronounced in the military. In Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22* (1955), Colonel Cathcart 'could measure his own progress only in relationship to others.... The fact that there were thousands of men his own age and older who had not even attained the rank of major enlivened him with foppish delight in his own remarkable worth; on the other hand, the fact that there were men of his own age and younger who were already generals contaminated him with an agonizing sense of failure and made him gnaw at his fingernails with an unappeasable anxiety.' (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 192.

¹⁰ Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

established, wealthy families, which was ‘better than new money’. Alongside the established elite, with the ascendancy of industrial capitalism had grown a *nouveaux riche* stratum, upwardly mobile, brash, aggressive and, in the eyes of the self-proclaimed cultured, crass and ostentatious in their taste. The most visible in the 1920s were Hollywood starlets and producers, mirrored in the twenty-first century by popular musicians, producers, and athletes. The exaggerated status consciousness of the elite is satirized in Joseph Heller’s novel, *Catch-22*, in which even the nineteenth-century barons of industry were castigated because they had *worked* for their fortunes:

‘Always remember,’ his mother had reminded him frequently, ‘that you are a Nately. You are not a Vanderbilt, whose fortune was made by a vulgar tugboat captain, or a Rockefeller, whose wealth was amassed through unscrupulous speculations in crude petroleum; or a Reynolds or Duke, whose income was derived from the sale to the unsuspecting public of products containing cancer-causing resins and tars; and you are certainly not an Astor, whose family, I believe, still lets rooms. You are a Nately, and the Nately’s have never done *anything* for their money.’¹³

In the anonymity of modern society, old money may be content with private displays of wealth and receive honour from a select few. In a scrambling, upwardly mobile society, however, characterized by new fortunes and new millionaires from middling social strata, claims to honour and status rested on the display of the symbols of wealth and power, a point argued nearly 200 years earlier by Bernard Mandeville. We judge people by the wealth we assume they have based on their appearance, Mandeville claimed. This ‘encourages every body, who is conscious of his little Merit ... to wear Cloaths above his Rank, especially in large and Populous Cities, where obscure Men may hourly meet with fifty Strangers to one Acquaintance, and consequently have the Pleasure of being esteem’d by a vast Majority, not as what they are, but what they appear to be’.¹⁴ As novelist Joseph Conrad put it, A man must identify himself with something more tangible than his own personality, and establish his pride somewhere, either in his social position, or in the quality of the work he is obliged to do, or simply in the superiority of the idleness he may be fortunate enough to enjoy.¹⁵

In the early 1930s, the Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci noted that rich, American women were playing an important role in the emergence of a ‘new social passivity’: The wife and daughter of the millionaire ‘are turning, more and more, into “luxury mammals”.’ In American culture, the ‘feminine beauty of the world’ is ‘put up for auction, stimulat[ing] the mental attitudes of prostitution.’¹⁶ Elite consumption is really conspicuous waste, magnified many times over by the emergence of fashion, which Veblen identified primarily with women.

Being a privileged white male—even if an eccentric one—Veblen was at least ambivalent about the New Woman movement of his day, although he recognized the social contradictions out of which the movement had sprung. Veblen was no practical champion of women’s equality. His own relationships with women appear to have been predatory.¹⁷ In some of his writing,

¹³ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1955) New York: Dell Publishing, 1968, 255.

¹⁴ Mandeville, ‘Remark M’, *The Fable of the Bees*, 152.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (1907).

¹⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 306.

¹⁷ Mills, ‘Introduction’, ix.

however, Veblen recognized arguments in favour of women's superiority and their need for an economic outlet for their talents.

It was precisely among upper-class women that the first wave of feminism broke at the end of the nineteenth century and Veblen addressed the issue explicitly in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Among what Veblen believed to be human instincts, pride of place was reserved for what he termed the instinct of workmanship, the creative drive at the heart of human progress. According to Veblen, women's temperament was not only more favourably disposed to peace than the male temperament, but women naturally abhorred futility to a greater degree than men. Despite their existence in the leisure class as symbols of the reputability of their fathers and husbands, 'the women of modern industrial communities show a livelier sense of the discrepancy between the accepted scheme of life and the exigencies of the economic situation.'¹⁸

The status of women in his time, Veblen claims, derived from a common sense that was created in an earlier stage of social evolution and continued to shape beliefs and attitudes in his day. In this traditional scheme of beliefs, a quality of a woman's life was imputed to a man who stood in some relationship of ownership over the woman. The woman was assigned a social sphere that was ancillary to that of the man. She was to be represented in politics by the head of her household. According to this common sense view:

It is unfeminine in her to aspire to a self-directing, self-centred life; and our common sense tells us that her direct participation in the affairs of the community, civil or industrial, is a menace to that social order which expresses our habits of thought as they have been formed under the guidance of the traditions of the pecuniary culture. All this fume and froth of 'emancipating women from the slavery of man' and so on, is, to use the chaste and expressive language of Elizabeth Cady Stanton inversely, 'utter rot.' The social relations of the sexes are fixed by nature.¹⁹

This was the prevailing view of most women as well, who necessarily saw themselves as ancillary to men. Veblen asserted there is a new sentiment that, at the least, this arrangement does not serve 'the more everyday ends of life'. Even upper- and middle-class women, who are otherwise quite conservative, perceive a discrepancy 'between things as they are and things as they should be'. But this discrepancy is most keenly felt by that 'less manageable body of modern women who, by force of youth, education, or temperament', have a vivid sense of grievance against their traditional status. This new woman demands emancipation from this status and, simultaneously, demands the opportunity to 'unfold her life activity' for useful employment.²⁰

Women were demanding emancipation from exactly those things in their lives that critics of the New Woman movement believed to be their privileges: women are petted by their husbands, required to consume largely and conspicuously, and barred from useful employment. These were the eternal markings of the un-free, Veblen said. Endowed with an instinct for workmanship that is, perhaps, stronger than a man's, a woman's impulse is 'to live her own life in her own way and to enter the industrial process of the community'.²¹ Women have their share

¹⁸ Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 229.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 231-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

of the deeply-rooted human propensity to self-direction which is more permanent than the traits selected by the more recent predatory culture. The New-Woman movement, then, is a reversion to this more generic human type.

The economic conditions of the existing predatory culture and the selection of human traits consistent with it limited the development and practical success of women's emancipation. Similarly, Veblen believed, there were natural limitations to the ability of certain racial groups to 'enter the industrial process'.

More progressively, Veblen rejected the view that Germans represented a distinct, biological race. On the contrary, the German-speaking population of Europe 'is thoroughly and universally hybrid . . . compounded out of the same racial elements' as the European population generally. Writing in 1915, Veblen was aware of the revolution in biology wrought by the study of genetics, which originated in the work of Gregor Mendel. In contrast to purebred types, hybrids possessed a much greater range of inherited traits and aptitudes, making them stronger and more adaptable. Hybrid human societies are gifted with a greater variety of physical and intellectual tendencies and possibilities. Veblen rejected the core eugenics argument that 'pure blood' is better. On the contrary, genetic mixing made cultures stronger,²² whereas cultures created by people who were genetically homogeneous, such as tribal societies in Africa, were less adaptable and backward.

Although he was trained as an economist, Veblen's critical writing did not cause a reorientation of American economic theory. Instead, his more lasting influence was in sociology. Veblen turned his critical eye and biting wit on the culture of capitalism rather than on the class struggle, on the superstructure rather than the productive base of society. Veblen's focus on patterns of consumption, lifestyles, and the meanings behind them provide a foundation for the mid-century critique of American society. Conspicuous consumption, planned obsolescence of style, and the establishment of standards of taste by mass advertising had by then come to define the culture of the great mass of the middle class. Veblen also perceived the increasing dominance of politics by business interests. From the White House to local politics, the business of government was ensuring the prosperity of private business. As competitive capital gave way to oligopolies, the need for federal economic regulation grew. Given the close connection between private interests and public officials, however, state regulation was directed at maximizing the interests of large American capital. In the process, the interests of the midwestern farmer, the industrial worker, and the mass consumer were superseded.

RACE AND IMPERIALISM

'Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child.'²³
-- Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden* (1899)

British poet and author Rudyard Kipling phrase 'half devil' reflects the racism explicit in social Darwinism. The phrase, 'half child', however, suggests the liberal justification for colonialism expressed by Kipling's who proclaimed Europe's mission to civilize Asia and Africa to be the 'White Man's Burden'. Liberal justifications were not confined to England.

Gilbert Rist quotes Victor Hugo's speech commemorating the end of slavery, in which

²² Thorstein Veblen, 'Races and Peoples', in Lerner, ed., *Portable Veblen*, 301, 304-5.

²³ Kipling, quoted in C. Loring Brace, *'Race' is a Four-Letter Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 163.

Hugo made the case for the civilizing mission of France in Africa. Hugo called for Europe to fashion a ‘New Africa ... amenable to civilization’:

Go forward, the nations! Grasp this land! Take it! From whom? From no one. Take this land from God! God gives the earth to men. God offers Africa to Europe. Take it! Where the kings brought war, bring concord! Take it, not fro the cannon but for the plough! Not for the sabre but for commerce! Not for battle but for industry! Not for conquest but for fraternity! Pour out everything you have in this Africa, and at the same stroke solve your own social questions! Change your proletarians into property-owners! Go on, do it! Make roads, make ports, make towns! Grow, cultivate, colonize, multiply! And on this land, ever clearer of priests and princes, may the divine spirit assert itself through peace and te human spirit through liberty!²⁴

In the early years of the twentieth-century, the caustic economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto lampooned the self-serving interests that were brazenly overlain with the ideology that colonialism was in the best interests of the colonized (Box 12.1).

Box 12.1 Pareto: The Hypocrisy of Colonialism

‘modern people who decorate themselves with the title “civilized” ... assert that there are people—themselves, of course—who were intended by Nature to rule, and other peoples—those whom they wish to exploit—who were no less intended by Nature to obey, and that it is just, proper, and to the advantage of everyone concerned that they do the ruling and the others the obeying. Whence it follows that if [a European] ... fights and dies for his country, he is a hero; but if an African dares defend his homeland ... he is a contemptible rebel and traitor. So the Europeans are performing a sacrosanct duty in exterminating Africans in an effort to teach them to be civilized.... With a hypocrisy truly admirable, these blessed civilized peoples claim to be acting for the good of their subject races in oppressing and exterminating them; indeed so dearly do they love them that they would have them “free” by force ... and—to make them freer still—killed not a few of them and reduced the rest to a condition that is slavery in all but name.... The cat catches the mouse and eats it; but it does not pretend to be / doing so for the good of the mouse. It does not proclaim any dogma that not all animals are equal, nor lift its eyes hypocritically to heaven in worship of the Father of us all.’²⁵

-- Vilfredo Pareto, *Mind and Society*, Vol. 2 *The Theory of Residues*

In *A History of the Sciences*, Mason exemplifies the supposed racial superiority of Europeans by citing the essay, ‘On National Life from the Standpoint of Science’, written by Karl Pearson in 1900. Pearson believed that racial conflict and hatred were natural, and that doctrines such as Christian brotherly love and Marxist internationalism were unnatural and harmful to the progress

²⁴ Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (New York: Zed Book, 2002), 51. Rist cites Hugo, quoted by Jean-Francois Zorn in an unpublished paper, 1989.

²⁵ 19??, section 1050, pp. 626-27.

of humankind. There has always been, Pearson maintained, ‘a struggle of race against race, and nation against nation’:

The man who tells us . . . that he loves the Kaffir [African] as he loves his brother is probably deceiving himself. If he is not, then all we can say is that a nation of such men . . . will not stand for many generations: it cannot survive in the struggle of nations.²⁶

Within European social thought, social Darwinism shaped social theory in such fields as anthropology and criminology. These theories were used to justify a new form of imperialism, the conquest and colonialization of less economically industrialized parts of the world, principally at the time in Africa. Social Darwinism had already been extended to legitimate the conquest of weaker by stronger nations. Economist Walter Bagehot argued exactly this point in 1872, claiming that by such conquest ‘the best qualities wanted in elementary civilization are propagated and preserved’, since ‘the most warlike qualities tend principally to the good.’²⁷

Ideas of racial inferiority had a long history in Europe. Aristotle had believed in the natural inferiority of slaves. In 1735 Linnaeus had attempted to divide humanity into a scientific subclassification with the American Indian representing the ‘noble savage’. By 1775, however, as Patterson demonstrates,²⁸ the standard view had changed. Linnaeus had divided humanity into four varieties: European, Asian, American, and African. Consistent with the dominant reading of the *Bible*, all humans shared a single origin, traceable to Adam—a view known as monogenism—single origin. It was commonly assumed in Europe that the original human was white. From being initially identical, however, different varieties of humanity had degenerated from their origins as they had come to inhabit different regions of the globe. The German physician, Johann Blumenbach understood that each of these defined groups shaded into its neighbouring variety through an ‘imperceptible transition’.²⁹ Varieties were caused by different climates and diets. Blumenbach added a fifth variety, dividing ‘Asian’ into ‘Mongolian’ and ‘Malay’, and termed the white variety ‘Caucasian’. He derived the term from people who lived on the slopes of the Caucasus mountains in Russia, regarding them as ‘the most beautiful race of men’. The Caucasians were assumed to be the original type of humanity.³⁰ From them had diverged, in one direction, the Ethiopians (Africans) and the Malays (South Asians) and, in another direction, the American Indians and the Mongolians (East Asians).

By 1839, the pioneer American physical anthropologist, Samuel George Morton had coined the word ‘race’ to describe Blumenbach’s five varieties of humanity.³¹ Morton further sub-divided these races into 22 ‘families’, including seven within the ‘Caucasian race’. His arguments were based on careful measurement of hundreds of skulls he collected, including many American aboriginals. He differed from Blumenbach, most profoundly, by rejecting the theory of monogenism. The alternative was polygenism. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774), Edward Long, an English plantation owner, had asserted that blacks and whites belonged to different species and had different original parents—separate Adams (polygenism or many

²⁶ Stephen F. Mason, *A History of the Sciences* (New York: Collier, 1962), 423.

²⁷ Quoted *ibid.*, 422–3.

²⁸ Thomas C. Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

²⁹ Brace, ‘Race’ is a Four-Letter Word, 83.

³⁰ Brace, ‘Race’ is a Four-Letter Word, 44–5.

³¹ Brace, ‘Race’ is a Four-Letter Word, 83.

origins). Africans, Long claimed, were closer to apes, were mentally inferior to whites, and were ‘inherently bloody, brutish, crafty, idle ... and superstitious’.³²

Morgan claimed that each race was the result of a separate divine creation and that distinctly different ‘racial’ features were present in the beginning. Since he accepted the origin of the earth as 4004 B.C., this seemed to be the only scientific explanation—there was insufficient time for slow climatic change to have produced differentiation from a single type. Furthermore, by that date it was assumed that the races differed in innate intelligence and that this could be determined from the different sizes and shapes of the heads found among the various races of humanity.³³ As C. Loring Brace has shown, nineteenth century racism was fueled by roughly equal measures of scientific misinterpretation and by the Romantic assumption that, as science had identified different biological ‘races’, each race was characterized by a different spiritual ‘essence’. Caucasians, Morton concluded, were ‘the noblest race.’³⁴ In theory, it makes a considerable difference, however, whether it was assumed that the races were created with unequal intelligence or whether they were originally identical, but that some subsequently degenerated. In the latter supposition, it was conceivable that, under appropriate environmental and social conditions, the effects of degeneration could be reversed and equality was achievable. According to Brace, the predominant view in scientific circles in the nineteenth century, however, was that the racial groups had become ‘real’ phenomena, and were inherently and permanently unequal. According to this view, once it became permanent, no variety could return to its original form ‘without an intermixture’—that is, miscegenation. Since racial mixing was ‘revolting’, the races were fixed in their inequality.³⁵

The French aristocrat and scientific racist, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816–82), argued in his 1853 *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, that you could divide humanity into a small number of distinct races existing in a hierarchy of intelligence, nobility, creativity, and energy. Not merely ‘Whites’ but a subset of Caucasians named the Nordic or Aryan ‘race’ represented the superior group.³⁶ As Tom Buchanan said in *The Great Gatsby*, they had been responsible for the development of civilization (Box 12.2).³⁷

Box 12.2 Racism: It’s All Scientific

‘Civilization’s going to pieces,’ broke out Tom violently. ‘I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read “The Rise of the Colored Empires” by this man Goddard?’

‘Why, no,’ I answered, rather surprised by his tone.

‘Well, it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved.’

³² Brace, *Race’ is a Four-Letter Word*, 83, 40. The French-born scientist, Louis Agassiz, converted to polygenism after travelling to the US in 1846 and, for the first time, actually encountering people of African ancestry in the South. He concluded they were a ‘degraded and degenerate race’ which was ‘not of the same blood as we are’ (quoted, p. 98).

³³ Patterson *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁴ Quoted in Brace, *Race’ is a Four-Letter Word*, 90-91.

³⁵ John Bachman, Quoted in Brace, *Race’ is a Four-Letter Word*, 109.

³⁶ Hans Kohn, *The Twentieth Century: A Mid-way Account of the Western World* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 134.

³⁷ Fitzgerald’s purpose is to reveal the vapidness of the characters he portrays and, thus, to denigrate their ideals.

‘Tom’s getting very profound,’ said Daisy, with an expression of unthoughtful sadness. ‘He reads deep books with long words in them. What was that word we—’

‘Well, these books are all scientific,’ insisted Tom, glancing at her impatiently. ‘This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.’

‘This idea is that we’re Nordics. I am, you are, and you are, and—’ After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod. . . . ‘—And we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that. Do you see?’

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Gatsby identified the author as ‘Goddard’. It is likely that F. Scott Fitzgerald was referring to the book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920) written by Lothrop Stoddard. For Stoddard, ‘The backbone of western civilization is racially Nordic’. Through a suicidal policy of internationalism, however, the white race had begun to share its blood with inferior races and, Stoddard claimed, would inevitably lose its predominance. The white race must restore its racial pride, preserve the purity of its blood, and maintain its hereditary right to rule.³⁸ Gobineau had expressed this idea earlier. Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton (1822-1911), created a movement to bring this end about.

Galton was a statistical researcher interested in the principles of heredity. He observed that the offspring of the most talented individuals tended also to be gifted, which he attributed to inheritance; genius was inherited the same way as blue eyes. Consequently, it should be possible, by careful selection of parents, to engineer an improvement in the human stock, as animal breeders were doing for other species. For Galton, natural selection accounted for racial differences in intelligence. Benign climates produced inferior races while more difficult and varied climates, such as in Northern Europe, selected a greater proportion of intelligent people.

In *Hereditary Genius*, Galton devised the term ‘eugenics’ to mean the science of improving the human genetic pool by encouraging the most intelligent to have children while preventing the weaker from reproducing. According to the eugenics movement, in the world of nature the struggle for survival ensured that the best of any species would survive, while the least well-adapted—the weakest, less active, less energetic—would die or be killed, yielding few offspring. Modern society, however, prevented the struggle for existence from ‘cleansing’ the population. Following Malthus’s arguments, Christian charity for the poor as well as humanitarian sentiments helped those with undesirable traits to survive, under the assumption that the poor in society were physically and morally the worst of humanity. Most ominous, to Galton and the eugenics movement, was the tendency for the poor to have more children than the rich.

Over time, then, the positive human traits, supposedly represented by the wealthy, would become less and less common while the disadvantageous traits, passed on by the parents of the poor to their numerous offspring, would increase. The ‘national stock’ of humanity, then, would degenerate over time. Such changes, the eugenicists supposed, were responsible for the fall of ancient empires and were being allowed to happen in society again. European civilization was doomed to be overwhelmed by mediocrity unless the principles of eugenics were adopted.

³⁸ Brace, ‘Race’ is a Four-Letter Word, 176.

According to the eugenics movement, people who were mentally defective, disabled, chronically unemployed, or criminal should be sterilized so they could not reproduce. This would lead to a gradual improvement of humanity. Galton's most immediate influence was in the United States, where concern about the large number of recent immigrants from rural Italy, Russia, and Poland, as well as many Jews, raised fears of racial degeneration. The laws to exclude certain immigrants that were passed in the first third of the twentieth century, in the United States and the Anglo dominions of Australia and Canada, were based on the assumption that science had proven that these ethnic groups were mentally and morally inferior. The concern of the eugenicists with interracial marriages was portrayed critically in the Australian movie, *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Box 12.3).

Box 12.3

Notice, if you will, the half-caste child. And there are ever increasing numbers of them. What is to happen to them?

Are we to allow the creation of an, unwanted, third race? Should the coloured be encouraged to go back to the black, or should they be advanced to white status and absorbed in the white population?

Now, time and again, I am asked by some white man, 'If I marry this coloured person, will our children be black?' And as Chief Protector of Aborigines, it is my responsibility to accept or reject those marriages.

Here is the answer [shows slides]: Three generations; half-blood grandmother, quadroon daughter, octoroon grandson. As you can see in the third generation, or third cross, no trace of native origin is apparent. The continuing infiltration of white blood finally stamps out the black colour. The aborigine has simply been bred out.

Now we come to, we come to, the Moore River Native Settlement.

Ladies, most of you are familiar with our work here, the training of domestic servants and farm labourers. I would like to thank you for your continued support.

Hundreds of half-caste children have been gathered up and brought here to be given the benefit of everything our culture has to offer. For if we are to fit and train such children for the future, they cannot be left as they are, and in spite of himself, the native must be helped.

—*Rabbit Proof Fence* (2003), directed by Phillip Noyce, screenwriter Christine Olsen

The use of 'science' to justify racism is not an error merely of the past. In the recent turn-of-the-century conservative climate, arguments have been revived claiming that social inequalities in races are reflections of innate inferiority. Intellectual superiority again is being attributed to some races over others. These ideas are emerging in a society that, officially at least, embraces multiculturalism and human rights. In more explicitly racist societies, such as in apartheid South Africa, the use of science to justify the unequal treatment of races was perpetuated late into the twentieth century.

Eugenics had its fullest expression in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s when the Nazi Party adopted the 'final solution' to annihilate Jews, As well as murder Gypsies, the mentally ill,

the disabled, chronic criminals, Communists, and others deemed undesirable. At the same time, the Nazis experimented with breeding a super Aryan race, selecting men and women to serve as ‘ideal’ parents. If a social theory can be evaluated by the extremes to which it has led, social Darwinism, to its discredit, led to the death camps at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN EMANCIPATION

Slavery was institutionalized in American society past the mid-point of the nineteenth century. The abolitionist movement included liberal whites, freed blacks, and many women who learned to struggle for their own rights in the cauldron of racial politics. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the abolitionist author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), challenged slavery on moral grounds (Box 12.4).³⁹ This often melodramatic anti-slavery novel was a vehicle for exposing the abuses of slave owners and their overseers and for raising public awareness of what Frederick Douglass, the black orator and journalist, had called the ‘revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy’ of slavery. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* declared slavery the antithesis of the Christian ethic of brotherhood. Slave owners professed their religious faith while ‘Christians as good or better than they—are lying in the very dust under their feet. They buy ’em and sell ’em, and make trade of their heart’s blood, and groans and tears.’ For Stowe, the question was not to expose the abuses of slavery, but to realize that slavery ‘*itself* is the essence of all abuse.’⁴⁰

Box 12.4 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: Slavery is the Essence of Abuse

This cursed business, accursed of God and man . . . [R]un it down to the root and nucleus of the whole, and what is it? Why, because my brother Quashy is ignorant and weak, and I am intelligent and strong,—because I know how, and *can* do it,—therefore, I may steal all he has, keep it, and give him only . . . so much as suits my fancy. Whatever is too hard, too dirty, too disagreeable for me, I may set Quashy to doing. Because I don’t like work, Quashy shall work. Because the sun burns me, Quashy shall stay in the sun. Quashy shall earn the money, and I shall spend it. Quashy shall lie down in every puddle, that I may walk over dry-shod. Quashy shall do my will, and not his, all the days of his mortal life. . . . This I take to be what slavery *is*. . . . Talk of the *abuses* of slavery! Humbug! The *thing itself* is the essence of all abuse.

—Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)

Following the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the first Civil Rights Act, from the point of view of many white southerners, liberal northerners had allied with southern blacks, forcing integration on the unwilling South and giving African Americans political power. African Americans used their legislative rights to begin the process of democratizing the South. In South Carolina, black legislators outnumbered whites and attempted to remove all racial distinctions from the laws, including the ban on interracial marriages.

Formal freedom did not bring social equality or the economic means to be independent of the white upper class. Few former slaves had the ability to acquire land. As agricultural wage labourers or sharecroppers, the rural black population was not, in general, materially better off

³⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: New American Library, 1966 [1852]), 242.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 209, 242.

following emancipation. For the next dozen years, the northern army occupied the South in a period known as Reconstruction, becoming the symbol of integration and racial equality. In 1876–7, in the midst of an economic depression, the federal government withdrew its troops from the South. White southerners lost no time in reinstating social, political, and legal inequality.

Upper- and lower-class whites used their political power to pass laws at the state level that enforced segregation of public facilities, known as Jim Crow laws. Blacks and whites were required by law to attend separate schools, separate restaurants, hotels, theatres, and parks. Black and white cemeteries were legislated. Since blacks legally were citizens, they had a constitutional right to vote; however, to prevent the black population from exercising their political right, state legislators passed laws that had the effect of restricting those eligible to cast ballots. These included tests of literacy, which blacks would fail more frequently than whites. In Mississippi, an ‘understanding clause’ was used to restrict the number of black voters. Unscrupulous whites used the clause prejudicially, ruling ‘that the ignorant white man does understand the Constitution when it is read to him and that the ignorant black man does not.’⁴¹ It was ‘a world’, novelist Walter Mosley wrote, ‘where being black put you below the lowest rung of white society.’⁴² These laws were clearly discriminatory in their intent or interpretation. At the time, however, conservative, white males dominated the Supreme Court of the United States. In their view, the American Constitution did not prohibit segregation, and the Supreme Court ruled that these racial laws were within the power of the various state governments to enact. In the view of the Supreme Court, separate facilities were not necessarily unequal.

The ultimate form of repression is violence. The terrorist organization known as the Ku Klux Klan was organized by ex-Confederate officers in 1865 to use vigilante violence to maintain white supremacy in the South in the face of northern occupation and the emancipation of the slaves. The Klan faded during the post-Reconstruction period, when segregation and other forms of discrimination against blacks became written into law and were sanctioned by the Supreme Court, although its sordid history could be followed through the twentieth century.

In *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone argues that black novelists of the period wrote for the black middle class and for the white upper class they hoped would be their ally in the move towards assimilation. The problems of the caste line and Jim Crow were attributed to poor whites, who (the argument went) had the most to gain by keeping blacks in a subordinate place. This ‘white trash’ made up the hooded horsemen who terrorized the black population during the post-Reconstruction era.

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington was born in slavery. Following emancipation, he received industrial training in the Hampton Institute. Not content to work in a simple, industrial pursuit, Washington went to Tuskegee, Alabama, where he built a model school for industrial education. Washington rejected the argument that African Americans have inherent character traits that would prevent them from reaching a high standard of civilization.⁴³ As anthropologist Franz Boas (1908) pointed out:

⁴¹ Booker T. Washington, *The Future of the American Negro* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969 [1899]), 212.

⁴² Walter Mosley, *Bad Boy Brawley Brown* Boston: Little, Brown, 2002, 237.

⁴³ Washington, *Future of the American Negro*, 26, 31–2, 167, 168.

[A]n unbiased estimate of the anthropological evidence so far brought forward does not permit us to countenance the belief in a racial inferiority, which would unfit an individual of the negro race to take part in modern civilization. We do not know of any demand made on the human body or mind in modern life that . . . would be beyond the powers of the Negro.⁴⁴

In the existing context of Jim Crow, white prejudice, and the backwardness of the masses, Washington believed that African-Americans should not immediately try to open all trades and professions. Rather, the prudent strategy was to prepare, first, to fill the basic, mechanical occupations. Eighty per cent of African Americans were dependent on agriculture in some form, yet very few had been educated in agricultural sciences. Learning and applying the ethics of hard work, frugality, and home ownership, the race must first raise itself to a position of economic self-sufficiency and education, upon which foundation white prejudice would be found to be groundless. African-Americans would achieve social equality, not by demanding equal rights immediately, but by living within the boundaries of segregation and slowly reshaping white attitudes.

During Reconstruction, Washington argued, there had been too much emphasis on politics, on controlling the vote and on office-holding, encouraged by ‘unscrupulous whites’ who had not been concerned with the future welfare of black citizens. No effort was expended on preparing the African American ‘to become an intelligent, reliable citizen and voter’⁴⁵ At a time of heightened racial tension and white violence, when the political gains of the Civil War and Reconstruction were being stripped away, Washington called for a withdrawal from politics. To agitate for social equality was extreme folly. Zinn argues that this message appealed to many blacks and even more whites.⁴⁶

There were few signs of social advance in the ‘souls’ of white people by the time Washington died in 1915. On the contrary, it was a period of economic difficulty and increasing competition between whites and blacks, as large numbers of African Americans migrated from the rural South to the cities, where they became low-wage competition for white labourers. Any African American who appeared to be challenging the colour line became a target of Ku Klux Klan violence, many being lynched by angry mobs of whites egged on by Klan members. In 1892, black journalist Ida Wells (1862–1931) initiated an anti-lynching campaign in response to the growing violence that the black community was facing.

Ida Wells

Ida Wells was born in Mississippi, the daughter of former slaves. When she was 16, her parents died of yellow fever and Wells was able to find work as a teacher to support her siblings. Working as a teacher and journalist in the black press in Memphis, Wells had first attacked lynching in a series of articles published in 1883. The next year she thrust herself directly into the eye of the racial struggle when she refused an order to leave the first-class railway car in which she was travelling and for which she had bought a ticket. Her stature might have appeared

⁴⁴ Franz Boas, quoted in W.E.B. DuBois, ‘Race Friction between Black and White’ (1908), in Meyer Weinberg, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 203.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 38, 11–13, 144–6.

⁴⁶ Zinn, *People’s History*, 203–4.

frail—she was in her early twenties and less than five feet in height—but she was full of determination and indignation. She resisted the conductor’s efforts to dislodge her and it took three men to push her out. Undaunted, Wells then sued the railway company for discrimination.⁴⁷ Wells began a second career as a journalist, becoming the part-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech and Highlight*. The job became full-time when she was fired from her teaching position because of an article she wrote exposing the inferior facilities that existed in the segregated black schools.⁴⁸

Eight years later, in response to the brutal lynching of three prominent Memphis black businessmen, she embarked on a crusade to expose the despicable practice (Box 21.3).⁴⁹ Lynching is a common theme of Black literature. In his autobiographical *Black Boy*, for example, novelist Richard Wright described a lynching in graphic and horrific detail. Sometimes a more subtle approach is more effective. Mrs. Loving, a character in Alicia Weld Grimkè’s play, *Rachel* (1916) married an ‘utterly fearless’ man who owned and edited a small Negro newspaper. When ‘a mob made up of the respectable people in the town lynched an innocent black man’, he published a ‘terrific denunciation’ of the mob, not once, but twice, the second time under a death threat. Mrs. Loving describes the night the white mob broke into her house, overpowered her husband and son, and dragged them outside. In this woman author’s play, the violation of the home and family is described in detail; the murder is only implied.⁵⁰

Ida Wells was equally fearless. She approached her indictment of lynching sociologically by conducting a statistical analysis of incidents. She proved that most blacks who were lynched were not accused of rape; most had violated the colour line by competing successfully with white businesses, trying to vote, insulting whites, fighting, or refusing to obey a white man. Of those accused of rape, many were having consensual sexual relations with white women.⁵¹ Wells exposed the myths and hidden truths about the sexually predatory and unchivalrous white southern male. Lynching, whites claimed, was necessary to protect chaste, asexual white women from the naturally aggressive and unrestrained sexual impulses of black men, an ideology rooted in racist assumptions about African Americans. In the history of the South, Wells pointed out, the proclivity to rape was primarily found among white men, as the numbers of mixed-race offspring in the South visibly demonstrated. Their horror over sexual relations between freed blacks and white women were simply projections of their own guilty consciences (Box 12.5).⁵²

Box 12.5

Ida Wells provided anecdotal evidence that ‘some white women love the company of Afro-American’ men. ‘There are thousands of such cases throughout the South, with the difference that the Southern white [men] in insatiate fury

⁴⁷ Lynne Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 33–5.

⁴⁸ Kay Brochart, ‘Ida B. Wells-Barnett’, in Mary Jo Deegan, ed., *Women in Sociology: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), 433.

⁴⁹ For author Richard White, it was ‘the white death, the threat of which hung over every male black in the south’ (*Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* [1937]. Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1945, 150).

⁵⁰ Alicia Weld Grimkè, *Rachel* (1916) pp. 189-226 in Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, eds. *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2001, 201-2.

⁵¹ Ida Wells, ‘Southern Horrors’, *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21, 24–5.

⁵² Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 36–41.

wreck their vengeance without any intervention of law upon the Afro-Americans who consort with their women.’ Among them was Edward Coy, who, according to a Chicago newspaper, ‘was burned alive . . . protesting his innocence.’ The woman, however, ‘was publicly reported and generally known to have been . . . intimate with Coy for more than a year previous.’ The woman was ‘compelled by threats . . . to make the charge against the victim.’ ‘A large majority of the “superior” white men prominent in the affair are the reputed fathers of mulatto children. . . . There can be no possible belief that these people were inspired by any consuming zeal to vindicate God’s law against miscegenists.
—Ida Wells, ‘Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases’ (1892)

Ida Wells was attacked viciously in the press for bringing into the light of day some of the sordid secrets of southern white society and denying the most comfortable of white prejudices about African Americans. Northern journalists responded in an equally racist way. The slander was personal, racial, and sexual. The building housing her newspaper office was burned to the ground and Wells’s life was threatened, but Wells persisted, carrying her campaign to England and across the American continent. In 1895, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, an activist lawyer and editor of the black newspaper, the *Conservator*. Facing the double burden of motherhood and the life of an active social reformer, Wells carried her nursing children with her on speaking tours.⁵³ Wells raised the issue of lynching to the forefront of the national consciousness and affected the country’s national reputation. Her courage inspired a younger generation of black women to create the national Association for Coloured Women, the first national organization of its type.⁵⁴

The Ku Klux Klan was the ultimate power sustaining the prejudices of white southerners, who feared the mixing of the races and justified their violence by assuming the inability of African-American males to control their sexuality, particularly when white women were involved. Both myths were reinforced by D.W. Griffith’s epic silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which was based on *The Clansman*, a racist novel by Thomas Dixon. In this three-hour motion picture, Griffith, a white southerner himself, told the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction from the point of view of the white southerner. *The Birth of a Nation* is a milestone in cinema for technique and storytelling. The dramatic final rescue scene builds tremendous tension in the audience as Griffith rapidly cuts between scenes of the mob, the victims trapped inside a cabin, and the men riding to the rescue.⁵⁵

Northern opportunists hoping to steal the spoils of war from the devastated South conspire with freed, power-seeking southern blacks to supplant the domination of whites. The predominant southern stereotypes of African Americans pictured them either as loyal, docile ‘house slaves’ or as buffoons—dim-witted, foolish, fearful, and child-like. The most dangerous schemer is Silas Lynch, a mulatto. Dixon’s *The Clansman* used Lynch to reinforce the myth that the offspring of miscegenation have the worst characteristics of both races. Lynch is a sexual predator, consistent with the white myth of black primitive sexuality, but he is also an intelligent schemer, a trait supposedly derived from his Caucasian background.

When the blonde niece of Ben Cameron, the southern hero, jumps to her death to escape from Gus, a lustful ex-slave, Cameron organizes the Ku Klux Klan to protect white women and

⁵³ Broschart, ‘Ida B. Wells-Barnett’, 434.

⁵⁴ Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 45.

⁵⁵ The same technique is employed, for example, in the movie *Payback* (2000), starring Mel Gibson.

save the South. In the dramatic climax to the film, the Klansmen ride to rescue Ben Cameron's fiancé from the grip of Silas Lynch and rescue the Cameron family, besieged in a cabin by a mob of armed blacks. The Klansmen emerge as the heroes of white civilization and womanhood, and white supremacy is restored. At the conclusion of *The Birth of a Nation*, white northerners and white southerners are reunited in their common interest to preserve their Aryan heritage. The social Darwinist fear that the allegedly superior Caucasian race would be morally and intellectually degraded by intermarriage with inferior races was part of the common mythology of the period.

If it is possible to look beyond the racist message to its cinematic style, *The Birth of a Nation* provided a stunning introduction to the power of the cinema and introduced many innovative cinematic techniques. Nothing like it had ever been seen. Much of the audience, however, was moved in more than one way. As filmmaker D.W. Griffith promised, 'Art is always revolutionary . . . always explosive and sensational.'⁵⁶ It is impossible to ignore the racist message. Griffith's epic film both reflected and crystallized the southern white's fundamental racism and deeply rooted beliefs in the inferiority and potential dangerousness of African Americans. It also reflected a sense of racial superiority that was widespread in the United States in the early decades of the century. Whites in every state urged the government to pass restrictive immigration laws to keep people of colour out of the country and preserve the 'white heritage'. Not surprisingly, in the twentieth century the movie proved to be popular cinema in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa.

The Birth of a Nation played to appreciative white audiences, as much for its racist ideology as for its cinematic originality. In the southern states the movie reinforced the myths about black inferiority and the Reconstruction era.⁵⁷ Of course, even negative publicity can be beneficial for sales. Partly in response to the vituperation Griffith experienced in 1915, his next project was a \$2 million, four-part film called *Intolerance* in which he depicted religious freedom and targeted judicial injustice. It flopped at the box office, however, and did nothing to undercut the social damage caused by the popular *Birth of a Nation*.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Du Bois was the most important African-American leader of the early twentieth century and the vociferous opponent of Washington's gradualism. Turned down for admission to Harvard, Du Bois studied at Fisk University, in the American south before eventually graduating as the first African-American to earn a PhD from Harvard. In his view, the slow, evolutionary approach to racial equality was doomed to failure. '[E]very step we have made forward has been greeted by a step backward on the part of the American public in caste intolerance, mob law, and racial hatred.'⁵⁸ Black workers were handicapped by their legal inequality in the face of white competition and blacks could not develop a sense of self-respect in the face of their legal inferiority. Giving up on the demand for equal civil rights was the wrong strategy; rather, Du Bois followed a double strategy. One was organization, persistently demanding basic rights such as an end to discriminatory practices in everything from voting rights to water fountains. While du Bois never actually counselled violence, his rhetoric did not preclude armed self-defence.

⁵⁶ D.W. Griffith, quoted by Leon Litwack, 'The Birth of a Nation', in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 141.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁸ DuBois, 'Negro College', 178.

Most tactics, however, involved using the courts, freedom of speech, petitions, and mass demonstrations to make the political demands explicit. Second, as a nationalist, du Bois argued for the maintenance of black institutions, such as businesses to help build the economic basis of the community.

DuBois's sociological method meant immersing himself in the community he studied and working in their interest. He was a leader of the community he researched and his social theory emphasized the importance of the racial divide in American society. Sociologically, DuBois analyzed the link between the structural conditions of the various social classes that made up the black community and their consciousness. Politically, DuBois intervened to improve the social conditions of African Americans. Although economic self-sufficiency was the basis of improvement, DuBois fought simultaneously for political and civil rights. The historical task of the black elite—the talented tenth, he called them—was to lead African Americans to cultural parity with whites, not assimilation.

Du Bois was drawn to the ideals of the socialist movement, but he was disillusioned by the racism he encountered even in progressive groups. To black Americans, he argued, the socialists dissimulated, claiming that racial problems would be solved later, after the objective of socialism was achieved. The socialists had adopted 'a kind of fatalistic attitude' that assumed socialism was 'coming by a kind of evolution in which active individual effort on their part is hardly necessary.'⁵⁹ On the contrary, DuBois believed, the exclusion of the cause of black Americans would result in a white industrial aristocracy that, although larger in numbers than any previous social elite, would leave African Americans as 'serfs'. For DuBois, 'the test of any great movement towards social reform is the Excluded Class', the fate of those the program 'does not propose to benefit'.⁶⁰ By that measure, the socialist movement was a failure. The NAACP supported black capitalism, which could not be worse than the status quo and might be open to more democratic control.⁶¹

There were four main political solutions to the race question in the United States. One of these was black nationalism. In its most literal form, this could be achieved by carving a black majority nation out of parts of several geographically connected states. Another suggestion was 'colonizing', moving African Americans to territory in the United States where few people lived. Even assuming that a black separate state could be set up in either of these two fashions, Booker T. Washington argued, it would prove impossible to maintain this geographical segregation. African Americans would seek opportunities in white-dominated territories and, if there was anything of value in the black nation, whites would enter in search of it.⁶²

A second form of black separatism involved, as much as possible, separate black economic development. African Americans should own their own businesses, buy and sell to other blacks, and patronize services provided by blacks. This would encourage black pride and African-American culture, provide experience in management and business, and develop independence and self-assertion. As DuBois became more explicitly socialist, he became less inclined towards separate development. Washington was opposed to separatism and did not endorse a commercial 'buy black' policy. Blacks should patronize the most successful and useful business, regardless of the race of the proprietor, the better to learn business skills.⁶³

⁵⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, 'The Class Struggle' (1921), in Weinberg, ed., *A Reader*, 341.

⁶⁰ DuBois, 'Socialism and the Negro Problem', 338–9.

⁶¹ DuBois, 'Class Struggle', 342–3.

⁶² Washington, *Future of the American Negro*, 158–9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 180.

The third solution was repatriation, going back to Africa. There was a history of ex-slaves returning to the American-sponsored colony of Liberia, and the back-to-Africa movement, under the influence of Marcus Garvey, appeared to be a practical alternative in the 1920s. DuBois's move to Ghana late in his life was as much an expression of internationalism as the return of a racial son. For Washington, 'The idea was chimerical.' There was no place in Africa, Washington believed, where the conditions of life of black people would be improved. Most of Africa was under European colonial domination and the orientation of the colonizers was to secure the land for themselves by expelling or killing Africans.⁶⁴

The fourth possibility was integration, which appeared to be more possible through northern migration than by remaining in the South. Ironically, blacks escaping the South faced an equally overt form of racism and discrimination from northern whites afraid of the competition of cheap labour and based on their own deep prejudices. For Washington, migration north had proved disastrous for African Americans in the face of white discrimination, even from trade unions. African-American morals deteriorated under the impact of the freedom and temptations of the city, Washington warned, producing vicious habits, ill-health, and criminality. He campaigned to keep African Americans in the rural South where they could make the best living and where their services were of most value to the country. The African American should 'cast down his bucket where he is'.⁶⁵ Many did, finding their bucket still empty and the colour barrier difficult to cross. Many more carried their buckets to the southern cities, becoming an urban underclass or creating the nucleus of a small but significant black middle class. Northern migration was the solution that millions of blacks had voted for with their feet. African Americans became part of the great, industrial proletariat in the newly built American industrial belt. It was not until the 1930s, however, with the rise of industrial unionism, that black workers would find a place in the house of organized labour, and not until the 1950s that a movement for civil rights would unite blacks in the American South.

One of the most significant elements dividing the black movement was the place of whites within it. Allowing white liberals rights of membership in largely African-American groups often meant conceding leadership positions to whites. Assimilation had to be part of the organizational means, not only the goal of the movement. Alternatively, black nationalists tended to prefer black-only organizations for fear that integrated groups would sacrifice the real interests of African Americans to the benefit of whites. Many of the same debates about strategic alternatives for change occurred in the women's movement that also developed in the late nineteenth century.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 201, 160. Washington quotes 'Old King Cetewayo', who said: 'First come missionary, then come rum, then come traders, then come army', and English imperialist Cecil Rhodes, who expressed the 'prevailing sentiment': 'I would rather have land than "niggers"' (p. 160).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 166, 165, 202, 189, 193, 226.