

RACISM

A SHORT HISTORY **GEORGE M. FREDRICKSON**



R A C I S M



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GEORGE M. FREDRICKSON

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When Europeans of the late medieval and early modern periods invoked the will of God to support the view that differences between Christians and Jews or between Europeans and Africans were ineradicable, they were embracing a racist doctrine. The curses on Jews for the killing of Christ and on blacks for the sins of Ham could serve as supernaturalist equivalents of biological determinism for those seeking to deny humanity to a stigmatized group. But the highest religious and temporal authorities generally avoided sanctioning this form of ethnic predestination. Because of their deviation from Christian universalism, these notions lacked the systematic exposition and promulgation that would give them substantial ideological authority. As a set of folk beliefs or popular myths they could create distance enough to dull the sensibilities of slave traders or enflame the passions of mobs bent on killing Jews. But the churches, for the most part, persisted in affirming that Jews and blacks had souls to be saved and were thus the legitimate targets of evangelization. Furthermore, it was not clear that blacks were cursed at all, since the divine malediction in Genesis fell on

Canaan rather than his brother Cush, generally thought to be the ancestor of Africans.

The orthodox Christian belief in the unity of mankind, based on the Bible's account of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of all humans, was a powerful obstacle to the development of a coherent and persuasive ideological racism. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a few venturesome free spirits like Giordano Bruno and Christopher Marlowe included among their heretical speculations the theory that mankind had three ancestors, and that Adam was the forefather of the Jews only. In 1655 the Frenchman Isaac de la Peyrère, a Protestant of Jewish descent, provided the first full exposition of the theory that Adam was not the first man but only the first Jew. The theory of polygenesis, or multiple human origins, challenged the orthodox doctrine of a single creation and "one blood" for all of humanity and could be applied in an extremely racist fashion. If Adam and Eve were to be thought of as simply white rather than specifically Jewish, and if the pre-Adamites were considered black and inferior (somewhere between the descendants of Adam and the beasts of the field created earlier), Africans could be even more effectively dehumanized than through the invocation of the Hamitic curse. Such doctrines might find some oblique support in Scripture (whence, for example, came the people in the Land of Nod among whom Cain found a wife?), but they remained difficult to reconcile with the orthodox reading of the book of Genesis. The theory of polygenesis would thrive only when the power of biblical literalism declined.¹

The modern concept of races as basic human types classified by physical characteristics (primarily skin color)

was not invented until the eighteenth century. The term for “race” in Western European languages did have relevant antecedent meanings associated with animal husbandry and aristocratic lineages. The recognition of superior breeds of horses and dogs obviously foreshadowed the biological ranking of human beings with differing physical traits. Heredity was commonly associated with blood, and titled families were thought to manifest their royal or noble blood through recurring somatic characteristics. In 1611 a Spanish dictionary included among the definitions of *raza* an honorific use—“a caste or quality of authentic horses”—and a pejorative one, as referring to a lineage that included Jewish or Moorish ancestors. The “blood libels” against Jews that began in the Middle Ages were rooted in a belief that blood could convey sacred or magical properties. The notion, implicit in these accusations, that Christian blood differed from Jewish was clearly affirmed in the sixteenth-century Spanish conception of *limpieza de sangre*. But the fact that different varieties of animals of the same species could interbreed, as could all humans, meant that such pre-modern hereditarianism did not threaten the orthodox belief in the essential unity of humankind. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and beyond, the term “race” or its equivalent was also frequently used to refer to nations or peoples—as in “the English race” or “the French race.” Whenever and wherever it was used, however, the term implied that “races” had stable and presumably unchangeable characteristics.²

The notion that there was a single pan-European or “white” race was slow to develop and did not crystallize until the eighteenth century. Direct encounters with Afri-

cans had of course made Europeans aware of their own light pigmentation, but in other contexts whiteness, as opposed to national and religious affiliations, was not a conscious identity or seen as a source of specific inherited traits. At a time when social inequality based on birth was the general rule among Europeans themselves, color-coded racism had little scope for autonomous development. In the New World, where European pigmentation could be readily compared to that of black slaves or copper-toned Indians, color soon became one—but only one—of several salient identities. In the North American colonies, according to Winthrop Jordan, “the terms *Christian*, *free*, *English*, and *white* were for many years employed indiscriminately as metonyms.”³

By the early seventeenth century you had to be black to be a slave in the American colonies, but it was legal and religious status rather than physical type that actually determined who was in bondage and who was not. In every New World slave society, some proportion of the population of African descent was acknowledged to be free or semifree. In early- to mid-seventeenth-century Virginia, for example, blacks might be slaves, indentured servants, or freemen, depending on the circumstances of their arrival in the colony and, in some cases, on whether or not they were Christians. Blacks frequently sued for their freedom on the grounds that they had been wrongly enslaved.⁴ Slaves on plantations might be treated as grossly inferior to their masters, but white indentured servants were not treated much differently, at least on a day-to-day basis. When they bargained for cargoes on the Guinea Coast of Africa, Europeans were forced to treat the indigenous rulers or entrepre-

neurs with whom they dealt as equals. The black servants who were imported into England and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were automatically at the bottom of society, but they were not a separate caste below the white lower class. Intermarriage among white and black servants occurred in both countries. In Britain it was more or less taken for granted, but in France it became a matter of official concern and led to restrictions on the bringing of black slaves back from the colonies to serve in French households. (In 1778 the French government enacted a formal ban on intermarriage, but the law was not enforced.)⁵

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the status of Jews in Europe improved somewhat (their readmission to England and France was perhaps the strongest indication of this relative tolerance), although religiously based antisemitism remained endemic. The entrepreneurial Jews of central Europe were able to widen their economic opportunities by shifting from moneylending to general commerce. A fortunate few acquired great wealth and influence as “Court Jews”—financial advisers and money-raisers for the Hapsburg emperor and for the lesser rulers and bishops of the German-speaking principalities. “The most conspicuous characteristic of the economic life of Jews in the period,” according to David Sorkin, “was . . . the incidence of destitution at one extreme and the accumulation of great wealth at the other.”⁶ The impoverished greatly outnumbered the wealthy. “Up to the end of the eighteenth century,” writes Peter Pulzer, “the great majority of Jews of the German states lived lives that were marginal to the economy and the rest of society, engaged in

peddling or begging at a near destitution level. Above them was a smaller middle stratum of small-scale merchants, cattle-dealers, tavern-keepers, rabbis, teachers, and doctors. . . .”⁷ Because of the marginal and relatively fixed position of western and central European Jewry, a “Jewish question” had not yet emerged, and outbreaks of virulent and aggressive antisemitism, such as pogroms and accusations of ritual murder, were fairly rare. There was as yet no clear conception of a Jewish race with innate characteristics that made them a despised and eternal Other for non-Jewish Europeans.

The scientific thought of the Enlightenment was a precondition for the growth of a modern racism based on physical typology. In 1735, the great Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus included humans as a species within the primate genus and then attempted to divide that species into varieties. This early stab at the scientific classification of human types included some mythical and “monstrous” creatures; but the durable heart of the schema was the differentiation Linnaeus made among Europeans, American Indians, Asians, and Africans. Although he did not explicitly rank them, Linnaeus’s descriptions of the races clearly indicated his preferences. Europeans he described as “acute, inventive. . . . Governed by laws.” Blacks, on the other hand, were “crafty, indolent, negligent. . . . Governed by caprice.”⁸

The most authoritative classification of the races produced by the Enlightenment was Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, published in 1776. Rightly deemed the father of physical anthropology, Blumenbach had no doubt that all humans belonged to a single species and that they had a common remote ancestry. He

also recognized that his categories were abstractions or ideal types rather than discrete units. “*Innumerable varieties of mankind run into each other by insensible degrees,*” he wrote. His fivefold division into Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays was a reasonable deduction from what was then known about the dominant physical types on each of the continents or regions of the known world, and his description of each race stressed purely somatic characteristics rather than intellectual or moral traits. He went out of his way to refute the common claim that Africans were “nearer the apes than other men.” But as a white European he could not escape ethnocentric bias. He was the first to trace the white race to the Caucasus, and he did so because of the reputed beauty of its inhabitants. He then went on to hypothesize that those he dubbed “Caucasians” were the original human race from which the others had diverged or degenerated. They were, he affirmed, “the most handsome and becoming,” having “the most beautiful form of the skull.”⁹

Whatever their intentions, Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and other eighteenth-century ethnologists opened the way to a secular or scientific racism by considering human beings part of the animal kingdom rather than viewing them in biblical terms as children of God endowed with spiritual capacities denied to other creatures. Earlier versions of “the great chain of being” extending from God to the most humble of his creations had posited an unbridgeable gap between the human and the nonhuman that was now being closed.¹⁰ The efforts to demote Africans from human to ape or half-ape status that Blumenbach sought to discredit revealed how a purely naturalistic chain of being could be

employed to deny full humanity to non-Caucasians. But as Blumenbach's degeneration theory suggested, eighteenth-century ethnological thinkers did not for the most part question the notion that humanity had a common origin and that the variations currently observed must have been environmentally induced. The comte de Buffon, the greatest of Enlightenment naturalists, expressed the prevailing view when he attributed variations in skin color to the effects of climate in the various regions of the world inhabited by the distinct races. To Buffon, it seemed obvious that the contrast of black and white pigmentation could be attributed mainly to the differing effects of sun and temperature in Africa and Europe.¹¹

But an environmental explanation for the variations did not prevent naturalists like Linnaeus or Buffon from ranking the races. Buffon, for example, assumed that Europeans were intellectually superior to Africans. He attributed their greater ingenuity to the difficulty of raising food on barren soil. The ease with which Africans could provision themselves made them "large, plump, and well made but . . . simple and stupid."¹² Characteristics induced by climate and customs were not likely to change unless the environment was radically altered, and no one knew how long it would take for the effect of a new milieu to reverse the "degeneration" caused by climate or other physical conditions. Some racial environmentalists in the early American republic fully expected imported Africans to turn white in the more temperate climate to which they were now exposed, but the process seemed to be taking a very long time.¹³ There was little doubt among whites on either side of the Atlantic that Africans were currently less "beautiful" than whites,

more barbarous in their habits, and probably less intelligent. Hence, for most practical purposes, they were members of an inferior race. The possibility of uplifting them was not foreclosed, but in the meantime there was no reason to think of them as cultural and intellectual equals or as potential compatriots.

The purely aesthetic aspect of eighteenth-century racial attitudes deserves more attention than it has received. In *Outline of the History of Humanity*, published in 1798, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners correlated physical beauty with intelligence in his ranking of human types. "Fair" people were superior in both respects, while the "darker, colored peoples," he deemed both "ugly" and at best "semi-civilized."¹⁴ In his *Notes on Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson reflected the most sophisticated European ethnology of the day when he made blacks the equal of whites in their innate moral sense and gave only a tentative endorsement to the popular belief in their intellectual inferiority. But he had no doubts whatever that they were the uglier race.¹⁵ Both Jefferson and Charles White, a British surgeon who wrote in 1799 on the differences among men and animals, were particularly impressed with the fact that only white women could blush. Furthermore, asked White, "[w]here, except on the bosom of the European woman, [shall we find] two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermilion?"¹⁶

The neoclassical conceptions of beauty that prevailed in eighteenth-century Europe and America were based primarily on Greek and Roman statuary. The milky whiteness of marble and the facial features and bodily form of the Apollos and Venuses that were coming to light during the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created a standard from which Africans were bound to deviate. The Dutch sociologist Harry Hoetink has attributed to nations or ethnic groups “somatic norm images” or stereotypes of the beautiful that influence their attitudes toward people they perceive as physically different from themselves.¹⁷ But these images are themselves cultural constructions that change over time. Because of the classical revival, Europeans of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries valued extreme paleness, as well as the facial features and physiques thought to have characterized the ancient Greeks and Romans.

While critical to these aesthetic judgments about human types, skin color was not the be-all and end-all. The common admiration for the appearance of North American Indians was based on an appreciation of the physiques of young warriors. Before they became “redskins” in the late eighteenth century, their tawny complexions were either ignored or attributed to artifice rather than nature.¹⁸ On the other hand, the most denigrated of all races encountered by Europeans before the nineteenth century—the Khoikhoi or “Hottentots” of southern Africa—were not black or even dark brown but yellowish tan in pigmentation. They were viewed as the lowest of the low both because their nomadic, nonagricultural way of life was considered highly uncivilized and because in physique and physiognomy they were perceived as deviating more from the European somatic norm than did other (and much darker skinned) Africans.¹⁹ What such reactions reveal is that the predominating belief in the unity of mankind and in the environmental sources of physical divergences

among groups of human beings did not preclude an aesthetic revulsion against some non-Europeans as ugly, if not monstrous, in appearance. A heightened emphasis on the physical, as opposed to the inner or hidden sources of human character, was also evident in the greater attention to what was thought to be the “ugliness” of the typical Jew.²⁰ Aesthetic prejudice may have been more central to the negative assessments of non-Europeans and Jews in the eighteenth century than the tentative and ambiguous verdict of science about their intellectual capacities.

Although the racial typologies of the eighteenth century established a framework for the full-blown biological racism of the nineteenth, much of the ethnological thought of the Enlightenment was without immediate practical application. Before the mid-nineteenth century, as Michael Adas has shown, Europeans did not generally regard their penetration and dominance of other parts of the globe as the result of their innate biological superiority. They saw it rather as the fruit of acquired cultural and technological advantages. In the specific case of British India, he notes that British officials remained convinced that their colonial subjects were capable of being fully civilized long after social discrimination against Indians and half-castes had developed in the late eighteenth century. He concludes from such evidence that “popular racism can arise with little or no validation from the writing of social theorists and other intellectuals.”²¹

The obverse of this proposition is also true, as the case of Voltaire illustrates. An intellectual can be a theoretical racist without contributing significantly to the growth of popular prejudice or actual discrimination. By quoting

from the scattered references to Jews and blacks in the vast corpus of his writing, one can easily portray Voltaire as the first thoroughgoing modern racist. His direct contacts with blacks were extremely limited, if not nonexistent, but he may have been inclined toward antisemitism by unpleasant experiences with Jewish bankers. His main animus, however, was against Christianity, and he attacked Judaism mainly because of its links to the New Testament and the religion that it inspired. Rejecting the orthodox biblical account of human origins, he contended that the human races were distinct species that had developed separately and with permanently unequal capacities. His opinion of the black or African “species” can only be described as extremely dismissive and derogatory. His reading of the Old Testament and his observations of the contemporary descendants of the ancient Hebrews made him thoroughly unsympathetic, not only to Judaism, but also to Jews. In fact, he anticipated the secularized racial antisemitism of the late nineteenth century by implicitly attributing to Jews a permanent set of undesirable traits. But their defects, in his view, were the opposite of those that nineteenth-century antisemites would ascribe to them. For Voltaire Jews, past or present, symbolized religious fanaticism and intolerance as opposed to reason. (Romantic nationalists would later castigate them for their extreme rationalism.) His disbelief in the promises of the New Testament denied the power of conversion and gave Jews no role whatever in the drama of human redemption or progress.²²

On another level, however, his general defense of religious toleration and civil liberties promised more to Jews than did the traditional Christian view that they were wit-

nesses to divine revelation and predestined converts. Despite his contempt for blacks, Voltaire was generally critical of slavery and condemned Christianity for having tolerated it. His primary enemy was traditional religious and secular authority, and his ethnological heresies were one small part of a campaign to attack orthodoxy at any point where it seemed to conflict with human reason and experience. Despite his own prejudices, he contributed to the growth of an antislavery based on reason rather than revelation and to ethnic and religious tolerance as a public policy. No thinker better illustrates the dual character of Enlightenment rationalism—its simultaneous challenge to hierarchies based on faith, superstition, and prejudice and the temptation it presented to create new ones allegedly based on reason, science, and history.²³

The role of ethnology in the debate over the abolition of the British slave trade shows that theories denying the unity of humankind were basically irrelevant to the policy questions concerning slavery and race that arose at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Edward Long, a militantly proslavery Jamaica planter, attempted to defend the trade on the grounds that blacks belonged to a separate and inferior species naturally endowed with bestial and servile qualities. But most other proponents of the slave trade shunned his arguments. Indeed they provided more ammunition for the opponents of the trade than for its defenders. Abolitionists like William Wilberforce quoted Long's strictures on black humanity in parliamentary speeches to illustrate the callousness, immorality, and religious infidelity that the master-slave relationship engendered.²⁴

Until the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, most Jews remained in ghettos and most blacks were on slave plantations, which meant that a “race question” did not emerge with great urgency. Strong incentives to elaborate a systematic racist ideology for the purpose of maintaining domination or inciting persecution did not yet exist. In the English-speaking world, an evangelical revival that reemphasized the spirituality of human beings and their equality under God countered the tendency to deny the humanity of non-Europeans and Jews.²⁵ The secular Enlightenment, on the other hand, was a double-edged sword. Its naturalism made a color-coded racism seemingly based on science thinkable and thus set the stage for nineteenth-century biological determinism. But at the same time, it established in the minds of some a premise of equality in this world rather than merely in heaven or under God, an assumption that could call into question the justice and rationality of black slavery and Jewish ghettoization. The Enlightenment thus managed to give new salience and potency to the concept of race while at the same time making it possible to question whether its use as a basis for social ranking and privilege was just and reasonable.

The age of democratic revolution that dawned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century brought serious challenges both to the institution of black slavery and to the legalized pariah status of European Jews. The doctrine that “all men are created equal” and endowed with individual rights derived from nature or reason was difficult to reconcile with lifetime servitude and forced ghettoization, unless blacks and Jews were to be considered less than human. In the wake of the struggle for independence from England,

the northern states of the new United States of America gradually abolished slavery. A combination of the economic interests involved in the emergence of cotton as a major export crop and the racial anxieties of whites in areas of heavy black concentration prevented the South from following suit and set the stage for the great American sectional conflict of the mid-nineteenth century. The separation of church and state decreed in the United States Constitution, and eventually in those of all the states, meant that the few Jews residing in the early American republic would suffer less than their coreligionists in the mother country and other European nations from the persistence of legal and political disabilities.

The French Revolution seemed at first to go even further than the American in extending democratic rights to previously oppressed racial and ethnic groups. In the early 1790s, slavery was abolished throughout the French colonies. The resistance of planters in Saint Domingue to the decrees of the French National Assembly provoked the slave revolution that gave birth to the world's first independent black republic. At the same time, the Jews of France were emancipated from special taxes, restrictions on movement, and political and social segregation, and they were made citizens of the republic. But Napoleon's rise to power and his subsequent creation of an empire saw the reestablishment of slavery in the remaining French colonies and the passage of new laws discriminating against Jews. Great Britain, which did not have a democratic revolution but did have a potent humanitarian movement, moved decisively against the slave trade in 1807 and became the first European nation to abolish slavery on a permanent basis in 1833.

In their own gradual and consensual fashion, the British also moved during the first half of the nineteenth century to provide legal and political equality for Jews. Britain thus escaped the full brunt of “the Jewish question” that agitated the Continent, especially the German states.²⁶

Ethnological discourse in the early to mid-nineteenth century focused more than before on the question of whether human beings were “of one blood,” as the New Testament proclaimed, or three to five separately created species with greatly differing aptitudes and capacities. Scientific racism of the explicitly or implicitly polygenetic kind did not take hold in England until after the mid-nineteenth century, mainly because of the strength of evangelical Christianity and its commitment to the belief that all human beings descended from Adam. James Cowles Prichard, the leading British ethnologist of the early nineteenth century, was a staunch proponent of monogenesis, but he nevertheless rejected the climatic theory of racial differentiation that had been so favored during the Enlightenment. He argued instead that changes in the physical and mental characteristics of the races were by-products of a civilizing process that Europeans had undergone, but that most dark-skinned peoples had not.²⁷ While such a theory might not justify slavery, it was compatible with imperial expansion based on the belief that Europeans were embarked on a “civilizing mission.” French ethnology was more open to polygenesis, and the belief that the color-coded races were separate and unequal species of the genus *Homo* gained substantial credibility between 1800 and 1850.²⁸ On the other side of the Atlantic, an “American School of Ethnology,” which came to prominence in the 1840s and 1850s, pro-

voked resistance from the religiously orthodox by presenting reams of “scientific” evidence to support the proposition that the country’s three main races—whites, blacks, and American Indians—belonged to separately created and vastly unequal species.²⁹

In France ethnological discourse was uninhibited by Protestant evangelicalism and could take a more radical turn than in Britain or even the United States. Polygenesis, or more generally the view that the differences that made the races unequal were of great magnitude and unalterable, had the support of leading French scientists and intellectuals, beginning with Henri de Saint-Simon’s justification of Napoleon’s reenslavement policy. The revolutionaries had made a mistake, Saint-Simon wrote a year after the rescinding of emancipation, when they “applied the principle of equality to the Negroes.” If they had asked men of science, “they would have learned that the Negro in accordance with his formation, is not susceptible under equal conditions of education of being raised to the same level of intelligence as [the] European.”³⁰ A leading French advocate of polygenesis, who later influenced proslavery writers in the United States, was Jean-Joseph Virey, whose “scientific” conclusions about blacks included the assertions that they copulated with apes in Africa and had brains and blood the same color as their skin.³¹ Polygenetic theory dominated French anthropology right through the second emancipation of colonial slaves in the 1840s. The proceedings of the Ethnological Society of Paris for 1841–1847 contain extreme racist statements that aroused little dissent. The aesthetic aspect of blacks’ inferiority was not forgotten in the increased attention to their intellectual shortcomings. Ac-

According to Victor Courtet de l'Isle, the races could be measured through an assessment of how close the faces of each type approximated the Greek statues of Apollo. There was, however, something theoretical and unworldly about the French discussions of black ugliness and stupidity. At times members of the society advocated, in all seriousness, the crossbreeding of colonial whites and blacks as a way of improving the latter. Mulattoes, it was asserted, were scarcely if at all inferior to whites. Nothing could have been more remote from the phobias that characterized North American attitudes toward the prospect of intermarriage with people of African ancestry.³²

The fact that pre-Darwinian scientific racism flowered in France and the United States more than in England may derive to some extent, paradoxical as it may seem, from the revolutionary legacies of nation-states premised on the equal rights of all citizens. Egalitarian norms required special reasons for exclusion. Simply being a member of the lower orders would not suffice. Civic nationalist ideology (operative by virtue of the egalitarian *Code Napoléon* even when France was having one of its nineteenth-century imperial or monarchical episodes) hindered legal and political acknowledgment of the hierarchy of classes and orders that slowed the emergence of mass democracy in Great Britain. The one exclusionary principle that could be readily accepted by civic nationalists was biological unfitness for full citizenship. The precedent of excluding women, children, and the insane from the electorate and denying them equality under the law could be applied to racial groups deemed by science to be incompetent to exercise the rights and privileges of democratic citizenship. In France, the question

was theoretical because there were no significant racial minorities. But in the United States, a true “*Herrenvolk* democracy” emerged during the Jacksonian period, when the right to vote was extended to all white males and denied to virtually all blacks, including some who had previously voted under a franchise restricted to property holders.³³

Napoleon’s discriminatory laws of 1808 were only a temporary setback for French Jews on the path to equal citizenship. But in the German lands invaded and occupied by Napoleon, the reaction against everything that the French Revolution stood for encouraged an exceptionally hostile attitude toward Jews, not least because one of the egalitarian reforms forced by Napoleon on defeated or compliant German principalities was Jewish emancipation. During the course of the nineteenth century, the Germans, more than any other western Europeans, repudiated the civic nationalist ideal inspired by the Enlightenment and the eighteenth-century revolutions in favor of a concept of national membership based predominantly on ethnic origins rather than human rights. Defining themselves culturally and linguistically rather than in terms of territorially based rights of citizenship originally served as compensation for the failure of the German-speaking peoples to unify politically and become a single nation-state.³⁴ The civic form of nationalism, in which citizenship is allegedly based on universal human rights rather than ethnic particularities, can become extremely oppressive or exclusionary if some segment of the population is viewed as less than fully human. If, however, biological racism can be refuted or discredited, a polity inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment could become a racially inclusive democracy. Where

nationality is ethnic, and if ethnicity is thought to derive from the blood or the genes, those of the wrong ancestry can never be accepted as sons and daughters of the nation.

The herald of the German reaction against Enlightenment universalism, and the forefather of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, was the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803). Herder was a cultural pluralist who professed respect for all peoples, including Africans, explicitly disavowed biological theories of human variation, and was personally opposed to slavery and colonialism. But his contention that each ethnic group or nation possesses a unique and presumably eternal *Volksgeist* (or folk soul) laid the foundation for a culture-coded form of racism. Although he was in many ways a man of the Enlightenment, Herder substituted a spectrum of incommensurable cultural essences for the dominant eighteenth-century belief in a universal human nature. Those essences were manifested above all in language, but also in folklore, poetry, and the arts. To preserve and nourish its *Volksgeist*, Herder asserted, a people should remain in one place reacting poetically to the same physical environment that had inspired its ancestors. Foreign or cosmopolitan cultural influences were a source of contamination and should be resisted. Hence an uprooted or displaced people was both very unfortunate and a problem for those settled people among whom they were forced to dwell. Herder regarded the Jews of Europe as an Asiatic, desert-dwelling people, clearly out of their element. Showing that he was not a strict hereditarian, he expressed the hope that they could be culturally and politically assimilated, but in the state that he found them at the turn of the nineteenth

century, they were “a parasitic growth on the trunk of other peoples.”³⁵

Herder’s tolerant pluralism—his refusal to associate cultural difference with inferiority—was not maintained by the romantic nationalists who came to dominate patriotic discourse in Germany during and after the Napoleonic invasions. For idealist philosophers and writers like Fichte, Schlegel, and their successors, Germany stood for the life of the spirit against the arid rationalism of the French Revolution. It also stood for Christian belief against the infidelity of the *Philosophes*. Initially the French themselves were the main target of the romantic reaction. But the efforts of the Napoleonic invaders to emancipate the Jews of the German states they occupied or influenced implicated Jews in the conspiracy to impose alien, cosmopolitan values on the Germanic peoples. In Germany, “the Jewish question” arose initially when the German “nation” was only a cultural and linguistic community and not yet a unified state. The question of how Jews would fit in when cultural and linguistic identity became the basis of citizenship, and the *Volksgeist* was embodied in a *Volksstaat*, could be answered in only one of two ways. Either Jews had to surrender their Jewishness and become good Germans or there would be no place for them. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, a liberal assimilationist perspective was ascendant in German thought, but beneath it lurked a deep intolerance of the Jew who remained distinctive. In 1793, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who professed to be advocating that Jews be given “human rights,” put the choice before them in starkly brutal terms: “As for giving them [the Jews] civil rights, I see no remedy

but that their heads should be cut off in one night and replaced with others not containing a single Jewish idea.”³⁶ Historian Peter Pulzer has incisively described the essence of the Jewish question in nineteenth-century Germany: “Those who governed Germany, and those who strongly influenced public opinion, could not decide between the insistence that Jews should assimilate more and the conviction that they were incapable of ever doing so.”³⁷

The growth of a firm conviction on the part of some Germans that assimilation was impossible was the main-spring of the antisemitic racism that developed after German unification in 1870. Explicit biological racism was not applied to Jews in Germany until well after it had been invoked to rationalize white American attitudes toward blacks. The older tradition of antisemitism, which stressed cultural differences and, at least in theory, made conversion to Christianity the miraculous cure for Jewishness, survived. For a time an expectation of full Jewish inclusion in German life was reinforced by the liberal conception of the state as guarantor of individual rights, a viewpoint that competed with the more mystical and authoritarian conceptions of the state that eventually triumphed. A transitional figure who embraced the coercive, culturally intolerant, and increasingly pessimistic assimilationism that served as a segue between the old religious intolerance and the new racism was the famous professor and public intellectual Heinrich von Treitschke. When he wrote in 1879 that “the Jews are our misfortune,” he was referring mainly to an influx of culturally alien immigrants from Poland rather than to the German-born Jews who he thought still might be turned into good subjects of the Reich.³⁸

The closest American analogue to this highly qualified and increasingly tenuous assimilationism might be found in the characteristic attitude of late-nineteenth-century reformers, missionaries, and government officials toward American Indians. The belief that Indians, unlike blacks, were capable of being civilized, but only under conditions that they were likely to resist, gave way around the turn of the century to a conviction that Indian resistance to white ways was genetically programmed and could not be overcome by education and indoctrination.³⁹

The United States had its own variant of romantic nationalism in the early to mid-nineteenth century. There was no Jewish question, partly because there were relatively few Jews in the country, but principally because religious toleration and the separation of church and state barred official discrimination on the grounds of faith. The status of blacks as slaves and pariahs highlighted the advantages of a white racial identity but conveyed little sense of America's cultural or ethnic specificity. If the Germans endowed themselves with a "racial" identity and then excluded others from it, Americans tended to racialize others and consider themselves simply human—citizens of the "Universal Yankee Nation" and beneficiaries of what was promised to "all men" by the Declaration of Independence.

But during the 1840s the arrival of vast numbers of Irish immigrants and the war with Mexico under the banner of Manifest Destiny created a desire for finer distinctions. The Irish were at least legally white, and so were the "Spanish" inhabitants of the parts of Mexico coveted and eventually acquired by the United States. In this context, as Reginald Horsman has shown, the belief took hold that Americans

loved liberty and showed an aptitude for self-government, not so much because these were universal human traits, as because their Anglo-Saxon ancestors invented democratic institutions in the forests of Germany, carried them to England, and then to the United States. Whether such Anglo-Saxon virtues were inherited in the blood or acquired through upbringing and education was an issue that was left unresolved during the antebellum period. Supporters of the Democratic Party, which appealed to Irish immigrants and kept alive the residue of Anglophobia left behind by two wars with England, preferred to think of a newly emerging "American race," which would be a vigorous hybrid of all the European immigrant nationalities. But these same Democrats were likely to be white supremacists who were horrified at the prospect of any amalgamation of this emerging white American race with any non-European or colored races.⁴⁰

Before the turn of the century, when advocates of restricting immigration from eastern and southern Europe began to promulgate the idea of northern European racial superiority, Americans tried to embrace the democratic universalism of the Enlightenment, while at the same time being proud bearers of a specific ethnoracial identity that was sometimes conceived of as Anglo-Saxon, sometimes as northern European, but most often as simply European or white.⁴¹ The particularistic and universalistic impulses could be reconciled, at least superficially, if it were understood that the capacity for self-government, and the claim to equal political and social rights that went with it, came more naturally to some peoples or "nations" than to others. Germany by contrast came to embrace an ethnoracial

particularism that was explicitly anti-Enlightenment and antimodern, one that affirmed traditional divisions of estate or class among the dominant group but left no place for Jews as Jews. Nevertheless, a consistently naturalistic or biological racism was not applied to Jews in Germany until well after it had been invoked to rationalize white American attitudes toward blacks. Surviving until the end of the century and beyond was the older tradition of antisemitism, which stressed cultural differences and, at least in theory, made conversion to Christianity (or at least the renunciation of a Jewish identity) the miraculous cure for pariah status.

Racism is always nationally specific. It invariably becomes enmeshed with searches for national identity and cohesion that vary with the historical experience of each country. It is therefore expedient to narrow the focus to the United States and Germany in the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth and attempt a bilateral comparison of the nexus between emancipations—of blacks in one case and Jews in the other—and the crystallization of racist thought and action. To achieve its full development as what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call “a social formation,” racism must, in their words, become a “political project” that “*creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.*”⁴² The projects that brought racism to ideological fruition and gave it the independent capacity to shape the societies and politics of the United States and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were organized efforts to reverse or limit the emancipation of blacks in the former country and of Jews in the latter.

“Emancipation” is the central theme of both black and Jewish history in the nineteenth century. There were of course obvious differences between suddenly liberating a people from chattel servitude and the normally gradual and piecemeal elimination of the special taxes, residential restrictions, public stigmatization, and limited communal autonomy that set Jews apart from Christians in Europe before the late eighteenth century. But if we define emancipation inclusively as the process of elevating the civil and political status of an entire ethnic or racial group from legal inferiority to equal citizenship, comparisons can be made. As already suggested, both emancipations gained great impetus from the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century. The white or gentile reformers who were active in both crusades—the abolitionists of Britain, the United States, and France, as well as the liberal nationalists who championed Jewish emancipation in various European countries—aimed, at least in theory, at the obliteration of difference through the acculturation and assimilation of the Other. They tended to have a low opinion of the actual cultural and moral condition of those whose freedom they advocated and whose “elevation” they sought. But unlike true racists they attributed these deficiencies to an oppressive environment rather than to nature.

Jewish emancipation from the status of social and political pariahs confined to ghettos took place throughout western and central Europe between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries.⁴³ The process was relatively painless in England and France, at least until the Dreyfus affair led to a dramatic spasm of antisemitism in France around the turn of the century. But in the German-speaking states and

later in the newly unified Germany of Bismarck there was significant opposition to carrying emancipation to the logical outcome of full equality. By the late nineteenth century, political movements to reverse the process had arisen in Germany and Austria.⁴⁴ One reason that Germany in particular had a more persistent “Jewish question” was that it had more Jews than its neighbors to the west, but they were still a minuscule minority of the population—about 1 percent in 1900. Although Jews were granted limited rights in some German principalities and cities during the 1820s, it was not until the convening of the all-German Frankfurt Assembly in 1848 that the principle of full Jewish equality was proclaimed. But the Frankfurt Assembly was an abortive, revolutionary effort to unify Germany on a liberal basis. In 1849 the lower house of the Bavarian Parliament passed a bill equalizing the civil status of Jews in the kingdom. But a great popular outcry against Jewish emancipation impelled the upper house to reject the bill in 1850.⁴⁵ A second-class citizenship that permitted some official discrimination was the best that most Jews could hope for in most of the states of a still-divided Germany in the 1850s and 1860s. When Germany was unified by Bismarck, full citizenship was granted to Jews, first throughout the North German Federation in 1869 and then in the entire Reich in 1871. But some restrictions based on religion persisted in the member states of the federation: in Prussia, for example, unconverted Jews could not serve the state as military officers, diplomats, bureaucrats, or even schoolteachers. Throughout the Reich, Jews who had not become Christians were often denied access to civil service positions, university professorships, and military commissions.⁴⁶

Despite the barriers, German Jews became increasingly prosperous during the nineteenth century. The opportunities in commerce that opened up in the first half of the century became the launching pad that enabled the next generation to go to the university (admission was not restricted) and achieve success in the “free professions” of law and medicine. Jews also found opportunities in the arts and journalism, while continuing to be prominent in the business world, not only in banking and finance but also in retail trade and light manufacturing. “By 1871,” according to David Sorkin, “fully 80% of German Jewry qualified as bourgeois.”⁴⁷ But the fact that Jews were overrepresented in some lucrative or prestigious fields of endeavor and virtually absent in others provided the raw material for antisemitic agitation. It is in the context of this asymmetrical pattern of exclusion and success that “the Jewish question” was discussed in late-nineteenth-century Germany. Exclusions from governmental and military service reflected the prejudice that continued to exist, primarily or at least nominally on religious grounds. The success in some other areas aroused anxieties about Jewish power and potential domination among people who tended to believe that emancipation had gone too far. Fear of Jewish success became in the minds of pioneer racists like Wilhelm Marr, who coined the term “antisemitism” and founded the Anti-Semitic League, a settled conviction that Jews were well on their way to establishing their hegemony over those of pure German descent. Marr’s book *The Victory of the Jews over the Germans*, published in 1879, was the first systematic presentation from a secular perspective of the view that Jews were

corrupt by nature and not because of their beliefs.⁴⁸ Marr was the earliest of many theorists who argued that Jews were innately evil and beyond redemption. In 1880, Karl Eugen Dühring published *The Jewish Question as a Problem of Racial Character*, a fuller and more sophisticated exposition of the new racist antisemitism.⁴⁹ The time would come, Marr, Dühring, and others warned, when the German victims of Jewish aggression would strike back and punish the Jews for their diabolical conspiracies.

In the United States racism as an ideology of inherent black inferiority emerged into the clear light of day in reaction to the rise of northern abolitionism in the 1830s—as a response to the radical demands for emancipation at a time when the federal government was committed to the protection of slavery.⁵⁰ Defenders of black servitude needed a justification of the institution that was consistent with the decline of social deference and the extension of suffrage rights among white males, a democratization process that took place in the South as well as the North. They found it in theories that made white domination and black subservience seem natural and unavoidable. Some proslavery politicians and publicists had recourse to the American School of Ethnology and its contention that the “types of mankind” were created separate and unequal. But this apparent revision of the book of Genesis was unpalatable to many of the orthodox evangelical Christians who were becoming increasingly influential in the religious life of the South. Those who were versed in scientific ethnology but wished to avoid contradicting the Genesis story simply adopted the eighteenth-century theory that blacks had degenerated

from the original race of white Adamites, and then went on to contend that the deviation had become irreversible. They could thus preserve the concept of inherent black inferiority and slavishness without overtly contradicting Scripture.⁵¹ Popular among less sophisticated religious defenders of slavery was the reassertion of the hoary myth that God had placed a curse on the allegedly black descendants of Ham, condemning them to be “hewers of wood and carriers of water” or “servants unto servants.”⁵²

It was, however, the hostile and discriminatory treatment of the “free” blacks of the northern and border states, who had been emancipated after the Revolution, that showed American white supremacy in its starkest form. Slavery was a legal status that could be, and often was, defended on grounds other than race. One religious defense was simply that slavery had existed in biblical times, was never condemned by Christ, and therefore could not be regarded as sinful (the standard charge of abolitionists). Conservatives who had refused to adapt to “the age of the common man” declared that a social hierarchy with a menial class at the bottom was essential to any society, although some special reason still had to be found why blacks (and only blacks) were at the base of the pyramid.⁵³ But the segregation, discrimination, and violence that were visited upon the ex-slaves in areas where slavery had been abolished, or where large-scale manumission had occurred, conveyed the clear message that being the wrong color was an insuperable obstacle—in and of itself—to membership in the nation.⁵⁴ When the Supreme Court declared in the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 that free blacks could not be citizens of the United States, because the framers of the

Constitution had assumed that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” the racist foundation of the American polity was laid bare.

But the decision was in effect for only about a decade. The slaves’ emancipation occurred in 1863 as the by-product of a war to save the Union from southern secession. During the Reconstruction period that followed the war, the exigencies of the struggle between the Congress and President Andrew Johnson over the terms under which the seceded states could be readmitted to the Union led to the nullification of the Dred Scott decision. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, wrote equal citizenship for all people born in the United States (except “Indians not taxed”) into the Constitution. But the federal effort to enforce civic and political equality for blacks during Reconstruction failed because the government proved unwilling or unable to commit sufficient resources or apply enough force to overcome the violent white resistance to black equality that erupted in the South. Antiblack racism peaked in the period between the end of Reconstruction and the First World War, the era that historian Rayford W. Logan has called the “nadir” of the African American experience.⁵⁵

Emancipation could not be carried to completion because it exceeded the capacity of white Americans—in the North as well as in the South—to think of blacks as genuine equals. A sectional consensus emerged after Reconstruction to the effect that the nation was well rid of slavery, an institution that had retarded the economic development and prosperity that a system of capitalism based on wage labor now made possible. But efforts to extend the meaning of emancipation to include black civil and political equality

awakened the demons of racism to a greater extent than the polemical defense of slavery had done. The rhetoric of the latter had been leavened by a good deal of condescending paternalism that had stressed the inherently “childlike” nature of African Americans. Postwar racism, especially in some of its popular manifestations, portrayed black males as beasts lusting after white women, some of whom needed to be hanged or burned alive by lynch mobs to keep the rest properly cowed and respectful of white authority.⁵⁶

These two flawed or limited late-nineteenth-century emancipations—of the Jews in Germany and of blacks in the United States—may seem very different in both context and character. But there are some intriguing analogues that make a close comparison worthwhile, even if, in the end, the differences are more significant than the similarities. In both cases, first of all, federalism served as an obstacle to equal citizenship. The American Civil War may have determined that a state cannot be sovereign, but resolution of this constitutional issue did not prevent the states from having rights that could, given a Supreme Court respectful of their prerogatives, make it extremely difficult to protect blacks from discrimination. As we have already seen, German citizenship in the Reich after 1871 did not prevent discrimination on the state level under the cover of established religion. Second, in both the United States and Germany, rapid industrialization and economic growth gave rise to situations where members of the majority were in competition or at least potential competition with members of the outgroup for jobs or other economic opportunities—something that would have been inconceivable in the era of the ghetto and the slave plantation.⁵⁷

A third similarity is that in both cases the success of emancipation depended on the fortunes of a liberal-to-radical political movement. It is one of the great commonplaces of modern German history that the fate of the Jews was linked to the fate of liberalism. Emancipation occurred at a time when Bismarck was allied with the center-left National Liberals. When he repudiated the Liberals in 1879 and associated himself with conservative and aristocratic political elements, the situation of the Jews immediately worsened and political antisemitism emerged for the first time.⁵⁸ The rights of blacks were similarly dependent on one of the majority political parties or factions—the Radical Republicans—who had passed the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868, partly out of idealism and partly out of political calculation. (They hoped to use black votes to gain political leverage in the southern states.) Analogous to the way that the decline of liberalism in Germany had made Jews vulnerable to antisemitic assaults, the Republicans' failure to prevent the South from becoming solidly Democratic after 1876, along with a decline of the influence of the Radical element within the national party, exposed blacks to white supremacist terror and Jim Crow segregation. German liberalism and American Radical Republicanism were by no means identical. The former was more elitist and less committed to popular democracy than the latter. But if newly freed African Americans could think of themselves as fully enfranchised citizens of a democratic polity, German Jews had good reason to think of themselves as part of a new elite based on achievement rather than birth. By the early twentieth century, liberalism had lost much of its ideological influence in Germany and Austria,

leaving middle-class Jews without powerful political allies. In the United States, the Republicans had become a pro-business party with little further interest in the rights of blacks, while the Democrats appealed to a coalition of southern whites and northern working-class immigrants and were therefore even less friendly to black aspirations.

Concomitant with the loss of political allies was the rise of parties and factions committed to exploiting Negrophobia or antisemitism. White supremacy was the central rallying cry of the post-Reconstruction southern Democrats, to be stressed whenever disadvantaged whites unfurled the banner of class grievance and challenged the elite of planters and businessmen who controlled the party machinery and the state and local governments that served their interests.⁵⁹ In Germany, an antisemitic party first had an impact in the election of 1881, but its success was engineered from above by Bismarck and the Conservatives, who were using hostility to the Jews to lure middle-class voters away from the Liberals. In the 1890s a more spontaneous and populist antisemitism entered the electoral arena with enough success to induce the Conservatives to emulate their tactics. The incorporation of an antisemitic appeal into the Conservative program led to the decline and disappearance of the single-issue anti-Jewish parties by the late 1890s. Like the Democrats in the southern United States, the German Conservatives learned that racism could be used, whenever expedient or necessary, to steal the thunder of their populist rivals and keep themselves in firm control.⁶⁰

Although it is more accidental or contingent than the other similarities, both German Jews and American blacks were impeded in their struggles for equality by the interna-

tional economic downturn that began in 1873. In Germany the crash raised doubts about who benefited from financial capitalism, and drew attention to the Jews who had been involved in some of the failed financial schemes of the day. The notion that Jewish swindlers had fleeced German investors became a staple of antisemitic propaganda from that time on.⁶¹ No one blamed African Americans for the Panic of 1873, but some of the remaining Republican-dominated state governments in the South, with which blacks were associated as supporters and officeholders, had overextended themselves and were forced into insolvency. Northerners seeking reasons to abandon the Radical Republican experiment in biracial democracy were given a stronger justification by evidence pointing to the corruption or fiscal extravagance of the “black and tan” governments.⁶² The depression that followed the panic gave rise to violent confrontations between labor and capital in the industrializing North. As a result, fears of class warfare helped to smother what was left of the middle-class humanitarianism inherited from the antislavery movement and expressed in the activities of the freedmen’s aid societies during the immediate postwar years.⁶³

These similar or analogous developments provided contexts favorable to the rise of racist ideologies. In the United States “racial Darwinism” made a stronger case for innate black inferiority than the older polygenetic theories that had seemed implausible or heretical to many. The theory of evolution provided an explanation of how new species could emerge over a vastly extended period of time and become permanently differentiated in their capacities. It also suggested that human races were in competition,

and that inferior breeds would not survive in “the struggle for existence.”⁶⁴ In both the United States and Germany the eugenics movement, which began in England as a biological approach to class differences, was eventually applied to racial and ethnic groups. The belief that government intervention was required to weed out or neutralize inferior breeding stock could justify a variety of policies, including immigration restriction, prohibition of interracial marriage, the forced sterilization of undesirables, and ultimately the euthanasia of entire categories of people.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, despite all these similarities between the context and character of emergent racism in the United States and Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the differences are even more significant. In the first place, the economic and social competition set off by emancipation involved different classes or strata of society. The freed slaves in the United States competed mainly with lower- or working-class whites. Employers who wished to undermine the ability of their white workers to organize and bargain from strength frequently used African Americans as strikebreakers. It was in this context that a distinctive white working-class racism took shape on the assumption that only white men were loyal to their fellow workers. Blacks and Chinese immigrants (and at times even swarthy newcomers from southern and eastern Europe who did seem quite white) were deemed genetically incapable of class solidarity and were therefore potential tools of exploitative employers.⁶⁶ In the rural South, the many white farmers who were losing land and independence during the long cotton depression of the late nineteenth century clung more desperately than ever

to the automatic social status that inhered in their white skins. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, “the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.”⁶⁷ To acknowledge that working- and lower-class whites felt particularly threatened by blacks is not to exempt the middle and upper classes from racial prejudice. But a greater sense of status and security permitted privileged whites to be more relaxed and paternalistic in their relationship with blacks, whom they encountered mainly as servants or service workers.⁶⁸

In Germany, on the other hand, the zone of actual or potential competition between Jews and gentiles was in the middle or professional classes. The successful beneficiaries of the increase in rights and opportunities that came with the unification and industrialization of Germany were doing quite well by the end of the century in commerce, journalism, medicine, and the law, as well as in the realms where small numbers of Jews had traditionally been able to situate themselves—banking and finance. Hence Jews were, unlike African Americans, in direct competition with members of the ethnic majority’s middle class. Jewish-owned department stores, for example, sometimes drove gentile shopkeepers out of business. What was more, Jewish businessmen often employed clerks, white-collar workers, and even servants who belonged to that majority. Almost never in the United States during this period were blacks in a position to exert authority over whites. (The fact that Jewish babies in Germany were sometimes wet-nursed by Christian women, a practice that the Nazis later outlawed,

highlights the radical difference in the social status of the two groups. White women nursing black babies was of course inconceivable in the United States.) It was therefore not in the working class but rather in the *Mittelstand*, or lower middle class, that resentment of Jewish advancement was greatest. Traditional stereotypes about Jewish unscrupulousness and clannishness created the impression, particularly among those who were relatively unsuccessful themselves and saw Jews moving ahead of them, that Jewish achievement was undeserved and resulted from a malevolent conspiracy to dominate German life. The historian John Weiss has described the dynamic at work: "Belief in the superiority of German blood enabled men of lesser rank and status to maintain their pride as Jews rose rapidly in commerce and the professions. Sales clerks and bureaucratic menials, semi-skilled and with a weak grasp on the lower rungs of the middle-class ladder of success, clung to racism to confirm a supposed latent superiority. . . ."69 The working-class movement in Germany, which found political expression in the Social Democratic Party, was relatively immune to anti-semitic racism, far more resistant, it would appear, than the American labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to the color-coded variety.

These differing economic and social contexts help to explain why racist ideologues in the two countries also differed in their characteristic obsessions. The traditional stereotypes associated with Jews and blacks were given new applications that served immediate needs or interests. Anti-semites in the Wilhelmine Reich did not accuse Jews of incompetence or intellectual inferiority but claimed rather that they were innately incapable of participating in Ger-

man cultural life and were indomitably hostile to it. A reactionary romantic nationalism—fostered by Wagnerian music dramas set in the pre-Christian Teutonic past, the folktales of the Brothers Grimm, and histories of the Germans that portrayed them as an ancient, brave, and virtuous race—prepared the way for the belief in an eternal *Volkgeist* that could not be acquired through acculturation, especially by Jews, whose innate characteristics were considered the absolute antithesis of those possessed by Germans. Germans were spiritual, Jews materialist; Germans were intuitive and poetic, Jews hyperrational; Germans were honest and honorable, Jews unscrupulous and untrustworthy. *Völkisch* nationalism, more than evolutionary biology, was at the core of the racist antisemitism that emerged in the 1870s and crystallized by the turn of the century.⁷⁰ It would take the Nazis to synthesize effectively the kind of scientific racism that had not previously focused on the Jews in particular with the mainstream German antisemitism associated with *völkisch* antimodernism. It was the latter, as articulated by thinkers like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, that did most of the damage prior to the 1920s.⁷¹ It portrayed Jews as the symbols and agents of unwanted changes and thus created a powerful hostility toward them, at least on the part of many who felt overwhelmed, disoriented, or displaced by the extraordinarily rapid transformation of Germany from a loose association of predominantly rural and agricultural principalities into an urban and industrial nation. The process took less than half a century, and it was not made more palatable by the ascendancy of the kind of liberal ideology that, in countries like Great Britain and the United States, heralded such

changes as “progress” and supplemented them with democratic reforms. Unable to accept socialism because of its attack on private property and traditional values, but nevertheless alienated or threatened by aspects of capitalist development, many in the *Mittelstand* found irresistible the temptation to blame the Jews for what had gone wrong.

Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German antisemitism differed most obviously from the American white supremacism of the same period in the contrasting ways that the targets of racist aggression were stereotyped. Germans feared that, under modern competitive conditions, which allegedly reward the clever and unscrupulous, Jews might be their superiors. Discrimination was justified, therefore, as a means of self-preservation.⁷² Most white Americans, on the other hand, believed that blacks were innately incompetent in all ways that mattered. The danger that they represented for extreme racists was the disease, violent criminality, and sexual contamination that a large population in the process of degenerating, or “reverting to savagery,” could present to their white neighbors.⁷³

If the “they” were different in each case, so were the “we.” Germans were not simply whites or Caucasians; they were members of a superior branch of the Caucasian race—the Aryans. The political purpose of the Aryan myth (which had arisen from linguistic studies that traced German and other Indo-European languages to ancient Sanskrit) was to distinguish Germans and other northern Europeans from Jews. Since ethnologists generally regarded Semites as a branch of the Caucasian race, mere “whiteness” would not do to designate the master race. In the United States, despite occasional doubts about

the full claim to “whiteness” of various southern and eastern European immigrants, “Caucasian” was the designation that mattered in the end and served to distinguish all those of European descent from blacks, Asians, and native Americans.⁷⁴

Although still generally valid, this contrast requires some qualification to take account of recent scholarship on the period between the 1880s and the 1920s. During those years, the ideology that political scientist Rogers M. Smith calls “ascriptive Americanism” presented an especially strong challenge to the competing ideology of Enlightenment universalism. It did so by making exclusionary distinctions among European “races,” as well as between Europeans in general and Africans and Asians. Nativists seeking to restrict immigration from eastern and southern Europe stressed an association between a capacity for self-government and Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-American, or Nordic (not simply white or European) ancestry. Hence the United States was not immune from its own variety of ethnic nationalism.⁷⁵ But what the right kind of people inherited from their ancestors was the capacity to be liberal or democratic in the manner prescribed by the Enlightenment and the founding fathers. In Germany, *völkisch* nationalism was explicitly promoted as antithetical to liberalism and the heritage of the Enlightenment, and it had relatively weak opposition from those who sought to make the national project a prototype for humanity as a whole or even a large segment of it.

At the turn of the century, American white supremacist ideology was based on an interpretation (or distortion) of the Enlightenment philosophy on which the nation was

founded. Science was expected to determine a group's unfitness for full citizenship before it could be excluded. German antisemitism, on the other hand, was based on a rejection of rationalism, universalism, and the political values that went with them. The American choice in regard to blacks was either acknowledgment of their full equality as human beings or their relegation to lower-caste status. In logic, if not in the inevitable messiness of social practice, no other possibilities existed. In 1900, the prevailing opinion was that science had resolved the issue in favor of black inferiority. But the issue would be resolved differently half a century later. In Germany there was no such choice or dilemma, because antisemitism was relentlessly particularistic. According to the German ideology that would come to fruition in the Nazi era, it is peoples or *Völker* who have rights, not individuals. As a unique and superior *Volk*, Germans were entitled to defend themselves by any means necessary against alien blood and values. The crimes against humanity perpetrated by Germans in the twentieth century were rationalized as much by the idealization of themselves as by hatred of the Other.

What do these differences tell us about the deep underlying factors determining what British sociologist John Rex calls "race relations situations"?⁷⁶ A critical variable in both of our cases is the economic role the victims of racism played and with which they had become identified. Jews in Germany and central Europe were perceived as "an entrepreneurial minority," the kind of group that is likely to be deeply resented and readily turned into a scapegoat when conditions are unstable and times are hard. Total elimination of the group by deportation or worse is likely to be

proposed by its domestic enemies and is sometimes acted upon. Other examples of such minorities would be the Indians of East Africa and the Chinese of Southeast Asia.⁷⁷ African Americans, on the other hand, spent most of their first three hundred years on the North American continent as a servile labor force. Slave masters or landlords with sharecroppers have a stake in the preservation of the subordinated group because its labor is essential to their prosperity. So long as members of the group stay “in their place,” they may be treated with the paternalism that is often associated with vast power differentials. But if they seek to rise out of their place and demand equal rights with members of the dominant group, they are likely to be exposed to a furious and violent form of racist reprisal.⁷⁸

But the stereotypes that economic relationships have produced or reinforced may survive a change in the actual economic functions performed by the groups. Some Jews originally became members of an entrepreneurial minority because of medieval religious prejudices, and the occupational diversification that followed their emancipation in the nineteenth century did not eradicate the image of them as usurious moneylenders and devious traders. The migration of blacks in the United States from the directly oppressive conditions in southern rural areas to the somewhat freer atmosphere of the urban North did not alter the conviction of most whites that they were lower-caste people, born to serve. A culture of racism, once established, can be adapted to more than one agenda and is difficult to eradicate.

The political context is another variable that has independent significance. As we have seen, the American conception of citizenship had to include blacks once their full

humanity was acknowledged. But the logical outcome of the blood-based folk nationalism increasingly embraced by the Germans was the total exclusion or elimination of Jews. The implications of this difference would become apparent only in the mid-twentieth century. If we take 1900 as our vantage point, there is no question that the American color line was much more rigid than the barriers between Jews and gentiles in Germany. Perhaps future developments in Germany were not inevitable. Without further crises, frustrations, and ideological developments, Jewish assimilation into a more tolerant and pluralist Germany might well have occurred. Similarly, Americans might not have repudiated their legalized racial caste system and embraced public equality in the 1960s if it had not been for some domestic and international political contingencies. Historical preconditions do not usually become determinants unless there are some intervening circumstances or contingencies.⁷⁹

Perhaps the most profound lesson to be drawn from the comparison concerns the relation of racism to modernity or modernization. Sources of resistance to capitalist economic development and the individualistic values that went with it were significantly weaker in the United States than in Europe, and perhaps stronger in Germany than in any other western European nation.⁸⁰ Jewish immigrants, in the long run at least, adapted well to the American modernist ethos and prospered within it. Blacks, on the other hand, were associated in the white mind with the primitive, the backward, or the irredeemably premodern. The heritage of slavery and beliefs about the savagery of Africa engendered a white supremacist myth that blacks were an inherently unprogressive race, incapable of joining the

modern world as efficient and productive people. If the relative weakness of antimodernism in the United States promoted the toleration of Jews, it had the effect of exacerbating the disdain for blacks. The relation of the two groups to America's commitment to the modern seems to me a better explanation for the relative weakness of American antisemitism than the conventional theory that Jews were not needed as universal scapegoats because blacks already performed that function.

In Germany, where modernization was uneven, disruptive, and sharply contested, it was the traditionalist or reactionary resistance to aspects of capitalist-inspired economic and social development and, above all, to the political liberalism with which it was associated in other nations that led to Jews' being made the symbols and putative agents of frightening or unwanted change. If African Americans were not modern enough, German Jews were too modern. The penalties that had to be paid for serving as the antitheses of prevailing conceptions of national character were exceedingly high in both cases.