

https://dspace.org/

The idea of race in early 20th Century South Africa: Some preliminary thoughts

Dubow, Saul

1989-04
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8691

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm APRIL 1989

Title: The Idea of Race in Early 20th Century South Africa: Some Preliminary Thoughts.

by: Saul Dubow

No. 252

The Idea of Race in Early 20th Century South Africa: Some Preliminary Thoughts

Saul Dubow

In the first half of the twentieth century racist ideology - whether explicit or implicit - was a vital part of the ideological repetoire by which white supremacy legitimated itself to itself. At one level this contention should not surprise for South Africa is manifestly structured on racist principles. But, whereas noone could deny the existence of racism in South Africa, the extent to which racist ideology fashioned patterns of thought and the ways in which racist ideas articulated with similar trends overseas, is barely understood. I would suggest that this gap in our knowledge is not entirely an accident. In Europe and America the reality of Nazism alerted people in a terrifying way to the consequences of explicit racism. As a result there now exists a sort of collective amnesia about pre-war intellectual and political traditions of racist thought outside of Nazi Germany - traditions which were not only widely pervasive, but also attained a significant degree of respectability.

So fundamental has the shift in intellectual attitudes to race been over the past three or four decades, we almost lack the categories by which to understand the pre-war racial mind-set. In recent years this problem has begun to be addressed in a number of important works dealing with the general topic of Social Darwinism. Yet, even here, a comforting and comfortable attempt to distance approved intellectual traditions from tainted ones is evident. For example, racist science is often referred to dismissively as 'pseudo science'. The difficulty with such an approach is that it begs fundamental questions about the very nature of science for, by implication, the suggestion is that pseudo science can be easily separated from true or objective science. Moreover, to dismiss racial science as bogus seems to suggest that it was peripheral to mainstream scientific investigation, thereby ignoring the extent to which respected scientists participated in its development. Many of the writers who devoted considerable research to the investigation of racial differences were prominent intellectuals who conformed to recognised standards of academic rigour; their arguments are logically constructed and copiously footnoted so that on formal grounds at least there is not always reason to dismiss them as charlatans - however wrong their premises or conclusions may be.

In South African academic circles a special reason for the failure to take seriously the nature of racist discourse may be offered. Debate about the relative primacy of race and class as the appropriate analytical tools by which to understand South African society has been well developed. The actual content of racist ideology, however, has rarely been addressed. Nor has its history. This may well reflect the fact that dominant ideology is conventionally discussed in terms of its functional utility: for example, we frequently ask whose interests are served by particular ideologies, or how ulterior class interests may be dressed up in misleading ideological clothing. With some notable exceptions there is, however, a distinct reluctance to take serious account of the internal structures of dominant ideologies. This reluctance probably stems from the sense on the part of historical materialists that inspecting ideological discourse too closely - without frequently returning to base, as it were - leads irrevocably to the sin of idealism. Many theorists pronounce their readiness to concede the relative autonomy of ideological

superstructures, but this usually falls short of a willingness to appreciate fully their salience and power.

The marxian base-superstructure model, though widely discredited, retains a lingering appeal for many and, however attenuated, continues to encourage the attitude that non-material factors are somehow only of secondary importance in the process of historical explanation. This assumption sits uneasily in situations where the persistence of key ideological traditions appear to be clearly at odds with the rational self interest of social groups. In this regard we surely need to take greater account of the ways in which self interest can be pursued in an apparently "irrational" ways.

Potent ideologies are frequently so thoroughly imbricated in social and economic existence that it is extremely difficult - even dangerous - to separate them out. In situations where ideologies manifestly have the capacity to affect actions in fundamental ways they come to possess a material force of their own. It is not always appreciated that historical subjects formulate their thoughts and actions not though a process of direct interaction with 'objective reality', but through their *perceptions* of reality. It follows from this that the study of people's perceptions and of their commonsense - ie ideological - understanding of the world, is crucial to our analysis of how and why they behave. Despite protestations, it is too often presumed that ideologies are consciously manipulated by cynical social agents. In many instances this may well be the case. However, if those responsible for the propagation of grand ideologies did not believe in a real sense in what they were saying their powers of persuasion would surely be severely constrained.

This study is centrally concerned with the generation and transmission of ideologies, more specifically, the ways in which ideological discourses are fashioned, the means by which they are disseminated and the context in which they are absorbed and reformulated. Much of the racist ideology current in South Africa during the first half of thr twentieth century derived from overseas. In developing their ideas, theorists of race in Europe and N.America relied heavily on already existing empirical material independently generated from within the 'peripheral' world. By virtue of its relatively well developed and easily accessible body of secondary literature, Southern Africa figured prominently. The work of travellers, missionaries, government commissions, academic research, etc. was systematically plundered by metropolitan scholars and writers. It was a reciprocal relationship: observers and activists in South Africa drew gleefully on the body of literature developed overseas, relying on its implicit authority to bolster their own arguments. Mediated by print, the very process of citation and discussion conferred a measure of legitimacy on ideas - whether or not they found acceptance. Thus, even rejected or discredited intellectual concepts could play an important role in the structuring of a wider discourse.

In recent years a number of scholars have made reference to the phenomenon of Social Darwinism in late nineteenth and twentieth century South Africa. This term has, however, been used as something of a catch-all category to explain a range of interlinked social theories proclaiming the inherent superiority of one race over another. If one is really to understand the phenomenon more precisely, greater attention needs to be paid to the many different theories which fall under this

generic umbrella and the ways in which they interacted.[1] Common to Social Darwinist ideas was the notion that mankind, like the animal kingdom, was constantly engaged in a biological struggle for survival. This comparison was no less powerful for being inappropriate: for example, whereas the Darwinian theory of natural selection applied to *individuals* within species, Social Darwinism was generally applied to human *groups* - constituted as races. This, in spite of the fact that Darwin himself was generally reluctant to extend his theories to humankind.[2] Moreover, in their unquestioning readiness to justify political action in terms of natural selection, Social Darwinists confused utterly the realms of science and morality.

The discourse of Social Darwinism was thoroughly impregnated with biological metaphors. As Greta Jones points out, biology helped to 'create the kind of moral universe in which nature reflected society and vice versa'.[3] This theme is brilliantly explored by S.L. Gilman who suggests that 'After Darwin the description of the biological world became ... the source of a universal explanation of causality through analogy.'[4] Historians littered their works with parallels between history and biological development: 'the models with which they operated were models of progress and decay. There arose simultaneously a historical model for biology and a biological model for history.'[5]

Language is an especially useful indicator of the extent to which organic metaphors were employed in a social and political context. As we shall see, words drawn from the language of the biologically-based sciences like 'adaptation', 'segregation', 'degeneration', 'hygienic', 'efficiency', 'fitness', 'stock', etc. were routinely applied to human society. Many of these words now appear relatively neutral, but earlier in the century they were deeply ideologically encoded terms conveying a range of meanings which are somewhat lost on us today.

According to Huxley and Haddon, two of the most effective inter-war critics of the concept of 'race', the term entered Western languages

---

1. See R.J Halliday, "Social Darwinism: A Definition", in *Victorian Studies*, June 1971. Halliday points out that conventional definitions of Social Darwinism cover 'at one extreme the maxims of positive eugenics and race-hygiene, touching at another those arguments which by analogical inference extend the findings of ethology to show man's instinct for aggression.'
2. As Banton in *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, 1987) p71, points out, Darwinian theory does not depend on analogies with any kind of social struggle, though by the time Darwin came to write *The Descent of Man* (1871), he was willing to call for eugenic measures.
3. G. Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought* (Sussex and New Jersey, 1980) p.147.
3. S. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Cornell, Ithaca, 1985) p204.
5. *Ibid*, p205. See also Robin Winks' 'A System of Commands: the Infrastructure of Race Contact' in G. Martel (ed) *Studies in British Imperial History* (Basingstoke, 1986) p15, where he remarks that 'as the historian lazily leans upon his biological metaphors - settlements being plantations, colonies maturing, civilisations decaying - he accepts the bias of Progress'.

relatively late, reaching English through French in the sixteenth century and German well into the eighteenth century.[6] They point out that it soon acquired an essential vagueness, its value as a scientific concept corrupted by imprecise usage. In the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, 'race' was often viewed as the basis of nationality. This association was strongly reinforced after the First World War when 'the "racial" argument was constantly put forward in terms of what, in the current phrase of the time, was called "self-determination"...'[7] A plethora of books with titles like *The Races of Europe* or *The Races of Britain* indicate the extent to which concepts of 'race' and 'nation' were elided from at least the late nineteenth century.[8] In South Africa, until well into the twentieth century, the 'racial question' was generally considered to refer to the difficulties of reconciling Boer and Brit.

A further confusion in the meaning of race is its deeply entrenched cultural association with 'blood'. The ideological resonance of this association is by no means diminished by the biological fact that there is no continuum of actual blood between parent and offspring.[9] Yet, as Huxley and Haddon point out in this context, the ideological power of a concept or slogan may be heightened rather than weakened by the fact that it is devoid of precise meaning. Thus Michael Banton aptly refers to race as a 'folk concept, a word in popular use with a significance deriving from popular understanding and varying from one historical period to another.'[10] It is this historical flexibility that imparts such potency to the concept of race - though it also makes it particularly tricky to work with.

The indiscriminate sense in which 'race' was employed earlier this century was encouraged by the scientific tendency to view race as type. Carl Linnaeus (1707-78), the Swedish naturalist, is commonly credited with pioneering the system of classification and taxonomy in the biological sciences. He recognised four varieties of *homo sapiens*, namely, European Man, Asiatic Man, African Man, and American Man. In 1781 Blumenbach named five (Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American and Malay) while T.H.Huxley, writing in 1870, added to five 'principal races' or 'types', a further fourteen 'secondary races'.[11] Reviewing this proliferation of types in 1935, J.S.Huxley and A.C.Haddon argued that the basis on which racial classification proceeded was highly subjective and quite often mistaken, commenting that in the 'progress of ethnological study there has been a marked tendency to add to the total.'[12]

According to Michael Banton the typological theory of race gathered momentum especially as a result of the work of George Cuvier after 1800 so that it may be said to have constituted an international school of thought by the mid-nineteenth century. Banton actually prefers the term 'racial typology' to 'scientific racism', by which he means, *inter alia*,

---

6. J.S. Huxley and A.C.Haddon, *We Europeans. A Survey of 'Racial' Problems* (London, 1935), p18.
7,. *Ibid.*, pp21-2.
8. See eg. W.Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe* (New York, 1899); J. Beddoe, *The Races of Britain* (Bristol, 1885); R. Munro, *The Races of Great Britain* - check volumes and look for others.
9. Huxley and Haddon, *We Europeans*, p21.
10. M. Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, 1987), pxiii.
11. Huxley and Haddon, *We Europeans,* p167.
12. *Ibid.*, p166.

that 'Variations in the constitution and behaviour of individuals are the expression of differences between underlying types of a relatively permanent kind, each of which is suited to a particular continent or zoological province.[13] In the light of Banton's discussion common linguistic formulations like 'the criminal type' assumes a new significance. Indeed, the very way the definite article 'the' (as in '*the* native mind') was conventionally used, indicates a grammatical form of distancing and objectification to suggest conceptual boundaries between 'them' and 'us'.

The classification of races was based on the assumption that progressive evolutionary divergence characterised the development of mankind in just the same way that it applied to the biological sciences. This assumption is clearly discernable in the early development of African history and anthropology, both in terms of subject matter and methodology. Exemplified by widely disseminated and influential works like C.G. Seligman's *Races of Africa* (1930) the notion that the history of Africa was synonymous with the development of its constituent races, formed a major organising principle in the study of Africa. For Seligman it was 'obvious that questions of race should first and last be determined by the study of physical characters'.[14] It was widely believed that cultural and linguistic research would help to refine the classification of Africa's constituent races, since these qualities were themselves regarded as being reflective of physiological differences.

A concern to delineate the fundamental racial stocks of Africa dominated much of the academic debate in the first decades of this century. By its very disputatious nature scholarly agreement was rare. But there existed a basic consensus that Africa was composed of 'six great races' - namely, Semites, Hamites, Negros, Bantu, Bushmen and Hottentots.[15] If there tended to be general agreement on the fundamental racial constellation, the story becomes a great deal more complicated with the introduction of hairsplitting distinctions with respect to sub-races and the relationship between races. I do not wish to draw particular attention to the often bizarre way in which this debate proceeded. What *is* significant, however, is that whereas today the essential unity of mankind is stressed, earlier this century there was an overwhelming tendency to split and divide - even when it was openly acknowledged that there was no such thing as a pure race.

The 'racial history' of southern Africa was the subject of considerable contention. A vigorous debate stretching well back into the nineteenth century discussed the origins of Bushmen in terms of their apparent affinities with Mongolian, Central Asian and Australian races. It was the settler historian George McCall Theal, relying on the work of Stow and others who, perhaps more than anyone else, helped to establish the idea that the Bushmen were South Africa's aborigines, that they were subsequently followed by Hottenot and Bantu migrations from the north

---

13. M. Banton, Banton, *Racial Theories*, p38.
14. C.S. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, 3rd edition (London, 1957) p1. Find first edition and find out how many editions it ran to.
15. Basil Matthews, *The Clash of Colour* (1931) p60. cf. Seligman (1957) who defined the principal races of Africa were Hamites, Semites, Negroes, Bushmen, Hottentots and Negrillos.

and finally displaced by white settlement from the South.[16] This sequence of occupation constituted a central element in the argument that white colonists advancing from the Cape confronted southern migrations of Bantu in the relatively recent past - thereby helping to sustain the convenient notion that whites had as much right to South Africa as blacks. The fact that this historical sequence mirrored a supposed racial hierarchy (composed respectively of Bushmen, Hottentots, Bantu and whites) served to reinforce the idea that white supremacy was the natural outcome of a logical historical process in which the survival of the fittest was seen to prevail.*

This line of thought was powerfully buttressed through the work of writers like Roland Dixon, the Harvard anthropologist, who provided a complex account of the races of Africa and the rest of the world in his study, *The Racial History of Man* (1923).[18] Using three main physical criteria (cranial, altitudinal and nasal indices) Dixon analysed the peoples of the world in terms of eight primary racial types. The purpose of his book was to sketch the racial history of each of the continents in terms of these fundamental types.[19]

At this point a note of explanation is necessary. By the 1880s it was commonly accepted that the cranial or cephalic index (the ratio between the breadth to the length of the head or skull) was the most important single measurement in the classification of racial types. By convention, the cranial index was used to divide mankind into three major groups: dolichocephalic (long-headed), mesocephalic (medium-headed) and brachycephalic (round-headed). Bracychephaly was often considered superior (by, for example, Huntington) because it maximised the size of the brain in proportion to surface and weight. However, since the 'nordic races' were dolichocephalic, many other writers found reason to claim that this was in fact the superior head-form.[20]

In the case of South Africa Dixon addressed himself to the difficult problem of the origin and racial relationship between Hottentots and Bushmen. On the basis of comparisons of their crania, he advanced the theory that 'the Strandlooper, Bushman, and Hottentot represent three successive stages in the racial history' of southern Africa, 'the fourth and last stage of which was put to an end by the European

---

16. G.M. Theal, *The Yellow and Dark-Skinned People of Africa South of the Zambesi* (London, 1910).
* The one phenomenon which disturbed this sequence was the evidence of a higher civilisation which left its mark in stone- working, gold mining, etc. It is here that the Great Zimbabwe myth comes into play. Theal, in *Yellow and Dark-Skinned Peoples of SA entitles his last chapter* 'The Mystery of SA'
18. R.B. Dixon, *The Racial History of Man* (New York, 1923)
19. Dixon acknowledged that there were no longer any pure races as a result of constant amalgamation or fusion. He considered that the different racial 'types' were archeytypes which had to be deduced from more original races. This led him to endorse the polygenist theorythat the existing varieties of mankind derived not from a single ancestral form, but from several quite discrete types. See pp502-5.
20. For a critical review of the literature on this subject see Klineberg, *Racial Differences* .

colonization'.[21] Dixon's theory was endorsed and quoted at length by the Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington, for whom Dixon's work on South Africa and elsewhere demonstrated 'the remarkable way in which a mathematical analysis of the form of the head seems to bring out racial relationships'.[22]

The welter of detail in Dixon's massive book almost overshadows his underlying thesis: that 'the racial history of man is in final analysis that of the struggles for dominance among the descendents of differently dowered types, together with their gradual blending into an ever more homogeneous form'.[23] From the perspective of German racial science Dixon's work must have been profoundly disturbing, for he considered that the supremacy of the 'nordic race' was passing in favour of the most gifted of all - the 'Mediterranean-Caspian' and 'Alpine' races.[24] By contrast, in the section on Africa, Dixon's highly technical research gave succour to the ideology of white supremacy. In his view the African continent was, from the earliest times, 'the battle-ground between the lighter and darker races'.

> And now again, in our own day, the phenomenon is being repeated, for, coming by sea to the south, where climatic conditons are favorable, the superior civilization of the white peoples is, in South Africa, steadily and for the first time from this direction, pressing the Negroid population back toward the Equatorial Forest, just as the remote ancestors of these Negroids did the true Negroes and Pigmies uncounted thousands of years ago.[25]

Within South Africa anatomical measurement, consideration of skull forms and research into the origins of Africa's races was an important feature of the rapidly developing discipline of physical anthropology. The outstanding figure here is Raymond Dart, whose fossil discoveries led him to confirm Darwin's prediction that Africa was the cradle of mankind. In 1925 Dart summarised the state of physical anthropology in a presidential address to section E of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science. He argued that discoveries at Boskop (1913), Oldaway (1914), Broken Hill (1921) Zitzikama (1923) and Taungs (1924) put paid to the conventional wisdom that the peopling of Africa by 'Negros' was relatively recent (in comparison with Europe) and that in South Africa they had no human predecessor. On the contrary, said Dart, 'Negro stock' was preceded by at least two more primitive varieties of mankind and there was now 'presumptive evidence' that South Africa 'harboured the pre-human stock from which the human race itself was derived.'[26]

---

21 *Ibid.*, p218. -check book. Dixon acknowledged that the notion that the 'Hottentot represented a very old Bushman-Bantu mixture' was commonplace; his personal contribution was to claim that the Bushmen were themselves derived from still older Standloopers.
22. E. Huntington, *The Character of the Races* (New York, 1927) p87.
23. Dixon *Racial History*, p523.
24. *Ibid.*, pp515-7, 520-22.
25. Dixon, *Racial History of Man*, p191.
26. R.Dart, "The Present Position of Anthropology in South Africa", *SAJS*, XXII, 1925, p75.

These path-breaking discoveries are well known today; as developed in Dart's later work they are considered to have effected 'a revolution in mankind's thinking about his place in nature' and therefore fit into the approved history of physical anthropology.[27] Yet it is also important to recall the intellectual context in which Dart was writing and in which he engaged, namely, the attempt to explain the development of man by ranking existing races on a scale of civilisation. If one looks more closely at the article cited above it is clear that Dart was aware not only of the intellectual importantance of his project, but also of its political and social implications. In appealing for the devotion of greater resources and attention to anthropological study he argued that there was a critical lack of precise knowledge about the immediate historical past of existing races. For instance, more anatomical research was needed to confirm or deny the claim that 'the Hottentot is intermediate between the Bantu and the Bushman'. To be 'a virile subject pulsating with the breath of life and reality', physical anthropology had to 'go far further than noting the differences in head length, bony formation and bodily stature. *Its objective is the understanding of the laws governing racial divergence.*'[28]

To be sure, Dart denounced the 'bitter intolerance of those possessing skin coloration', a phenomenon which was 'based on political sentiment and has no justification in biological laws any more than that Great Danes should suddenly take an aversion for Alsatian Wolfhounds'.[29] But this impatience with unfounded racial prejudice did not prevent him from listing amongst the tasks of physical anthropology 'the study of the brain and relative intelligence'. In sum, there appears to be an important tension between Dart's generally liberal outlook and his claim that the 'supreme challenge' of modern anthropology was 'the discovery of the secret of racial divergence'.[30]

If Dart was prepared to stress racial differentiation and divergence over unity and similarity, others were far less cautious. The notion that the Bushmen and Hottentots were amongst the lowest orders of humanity was deeply entrenched in Western thought - according to the 1933 Oxford Dictionary the word 'Hottentot' denoted 'a person of inferior intellect or culture; one degraded in the scale of civilization, or ignorant of the usages of civilized society.'.[31] The intensity of interest in the diverging history of mankind is reflected, for example, in the musings of Jan Smuts. In his 1932 address to the SA Association for the Advancement of Science Smuts asked how it was the 'immense difference between the European and Bushman of today' had come about, given that their forebears only 15 000 years previously were relatively similar.[32]

---

27. Raymond Dart's obituary by Phillip Tobias in *The Independent*, 29/11/88.
28. Dart, "The Present Position of Anthropology", p78 [my underlining].
29. *Ibid.*, p79.
30. *Ibid.*, pp78, 79.
31. The 1976 Supplement to the Oxford Dictionary offered an entirely revised definition of 'Hottentot' and commented that the derogatory sense based upon a failure to understand alien culture was now very rare.
32. J.C. Smuts, 'Climate and Man in Africa', *SAJS*, XXIX, 1932.

> We see in the one the leading race in the world, while the other, though still living, has become a mere human fossil, verging to extinction. We see the one crowned with all intellectual and spiritual glory of the race, while the other still occupies the lowest scale in human existence. If race has not made the difference, what has?[33]

Smuts's speculation was that climate provided the key to this problem. The Bushman 'has been physically dwarfed and shrivelled and mentally stunted by nature... he has become a desert animal, carved and moulded by the desert, just as much as the rest of our desert animals or plants.' And now that desert conditions were being ameliorated 'by the ironic truth of civilisation, there is nothing left for him but to disappear. As the Cromagnon cousin [in France] has responded to the generous call of Europe, so the Fish Hoek cousin has followed the lure of the desert wild...'.[34] The demise of the Bushman may be sad, but it was unavoidable given his inability to adapt to new conditions. Similar views were expressed by Matthew Drennan, Professor of Anatomy at UCT, who spoke of 'the Bushman' as 'one of the dying branches of the genealogical tree, soon to be added to the many dead branches of already extinct forms.'[35]

The most enlightened intervention into the extensive literature discussing the relationship of Bushmen and Hottentots was made by Issac Schapera in 1926.[36] Schapera noted that early European settlers had made little or no attempt to distinguish between the two groups and that the first serious attempts to differentiate them on linguistic and physical criteria were only made in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Writing against the dominant intellectual current, Schapera argued that the ostensible differences between Hottentots and Bushmen were outweighed by the fundamental traits they held in common. The resemblances in their physical and cranial charactersistics, he concluded, were 'too great to justify our regarding the two as separate physical types'.[37] Despite the apparent difference in their modes of existence (Bushmen being hunter-gatherers and Hottentots being pastoralists) they shared important elements in common. And, in spite of notable variations, the two languages had to be regarded as belonging to one and the same family. Since they shared a common origin it was more likely that the Hottentot language was modified by contact with Hamitic peoples, than the customary view that the Hottentot languages were essentially Hamitic with subsequent Bushman admixture. As for the Strandloopers (who were seen by writers like Dixon as constituting yet another race), they were nothing more than Bushmen living along the southern and western coasts.

Schapera's insights were subsequently developed in his seminal text, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa* (1930). Its very title indicates an attempt to play down - though not to dispense with - the notion that Bushmen and Hottentots were racially diverse and to treat them instead

---

33. *Ibid.*, p129.
34 *Ibid.*, p129.
35 M.R.Drennan, *A Short Course on Physical Anthropology* (CT [1924]), p43.
36. I. Schapera, 'A Preliminary Consideration of the Relationship between the Hottentots and the Bushmen', *SAJS*, XXIII, 1926.
37. *Ibid.*, p845 *footnote morris et al here

as part of a 'larger ethnic unit'.[38] Taking its lead from Schapera modern scholarship has developed a far more sophisticated understanding of the khoisan peoples in which the history and material existence of South Africa's indigenous inhabitants is emphasised. Compared with the position half a century ago this shift is not only a major intellectual advance; it represents a significant paradigmatic change from previous concerns with racial origins and divergence, to one which includes the khoisan in the overall stretch of southern African history.[39]

In order to illustrate this change a comparison between *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (1937) and its successor, Hammond-Tooke's *The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (1974) seems useful. Just as 'peoples' are substituted for 'tribes' in the title of the later edition, so Raymond Dart's chapter on 'Racial Origins' is replaced by Phillip Tobias' contribution, 'The Biology of the Southern African Negro'.[40] It is worthwhile looking more closely at the content of these two articles. Dart's 1937 essay summarised the findings of physical anthropolgists over the preceding decade. He began, quite conventionally, by dividing Africa into three major geographical regions, occupied by the Brown (Hamitic or Mediterranean), Negro and Bush races. Dart laid great emphasis on the distinctive features of each ancestral race, noting for example that the Negro skull was 'infantile' in form whereas the the Bushman was 'foetal'.[41] Supplementing the vast literature on cephalic indices with reflections on distinctive skull forms (pace Sergi and Frassetto), he aimed to reveal the complex racial chemistry of the indigenous Southern African peoples. Dart went so far as to isolate 13 Southern African tribes and to analyse them with respect to the percentages of Negro, Bush, Caucasoid and Mongoloid features they contained.[42] In his own words, the object of his paper was to demonstrate how 'history verifies the story of the bones'.[43]

By contrast, Tobias sought to demonstrate the essential biological unity within Africa. Whereas Dart and his generation attempted to categorise distinct racial types with ever more precision, Tobias argued that classification was not very meaningful in biological terms. It was more relevant to explain genetic diversification by reference to the totality of environmental or selective pressures.[44] Dart spoke of tribes and races, whereas Tobias used the more flexible notion on 'breeding populations'. Like Dart, Tobias reviewed the existing literature on head and skeletal features in considerable detail, but he concluded that for practical purposes there were no major intergroup differences within what he

38. *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa: Bushmen and Hottenots* (London, 1930). Schapera credits L. Schultze as the person who fist proposed using the term 'Khoisan'. Schapera does not say so explicitly, but 'Khoisan' avoids the offensive nature of the terms 'bushman' and 'hottenot'.
39. footnote elphick here
40. I. Schapera (ed), *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa. An Ethnographical Survey* (London, 1937); W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (London, 1959).
41. Dart, "Racial Origins", p9.
42. *Ibid.*, Table VI p27.
43. *Ibid.*, p3.
44. Tobias, "The Biology of the Southern African Negro", p4.

referred to as the Negro population.[45] And he warned of the 'danger of "typing" any single person on one or more of his racial features'.[46] Tobias ended his account drily with an implicit rebuke of earlier physical anthropologists:

> This is a general description to satisfy the curiosity of those who wish to know what a Negro skull looks like: the account is not used here in an attempt to read into the dried bones a long history of tribal and racial wanderings and genetic misdeeds.[47]

One of Tobias' chief concerns was to bury the idea that the 'Bantu' were a physically distinct African race. The study of genetic markers disclosed that 'it was biologically unjustified to continue speaking of "the Bantu" as a biological entity'. It made sense to talk of the *'Southern African Negro'*, but that was a geographical rather than a racial epithet.[48] A major point of disagreement between Tobias and his forerunners centres on his rejection of the categorisation of the Bushmen and Hottentots as distinct races. He maintained that San and Khoi-Khoi belonged to the same major genic constellation as other sub-Saharan Africans. Their apparent differences, he speculated, derived from a relatively recent period of geographical isolation during which Negros, through selection, genetic drift and hybridisation, had departed fairly appreciably from the common ancestral genotype.[49] In summary, the overall physical and genetic affinities of the Southern African negros with other sub-saharan peoples outweighed any divergences. "Neither the lapse of time nor cultural and ecological diversification has been sufficient to generate a new race of man: the Bantu-speakers of Africa remain a part of Africa's Negro population".[50]

****

The branch of science most directly influenced by Social Darwinist thought was the eugenics movement which attracted a zealous and diverse group of adherents in Europe and America from the late nineteenth century. Strictly defined, eugenics was the study of race improvement through selective breeding. Its founder, Francis Galton (a cousin of Charles Darwin) developed his theories in the 1880s, in part borne out of his observations as an explorer in Damaraland (Namibia) during 1850-1. Eugenic ideas were founded on the notion that that social ends could be efficiently achieved through the manipulation of genetic pools. As a movement it confounded conventional political boundaries in the first decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, influential Fabian intellectuals like John Maynard Keynes, Sidney Webb, H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw viewed eugenics at one time or another as a means of improving the condition of the working classes. On the other hand eugenics was associated with a belief in free-market individualism on the grounds that socialist welfarism implied the survival of the unfit. For the political right, moreover, eugenics provided scientific confirmation of the inherent biological inferiority of the urban proletariat, aliens and non-white races.

---

45. *Ibid.*, p12. Here Tobias relies on the work of Hertha de Villiers.
46. *Ibid.*, p12.
47. *Ibid.*, p13.
48. *Ibid.*, p30
49. *Ibid.*, pp33-5.
50. *Ibid.*, p44.

Eugenics was deeply influenced by Darwinian and Malthusian thought, fearing the cumulative effects on 'civilisation' of an increasing population with inferior hereditary traits. It received a major scientific boost with the scientific rediscovery of Mendelelan genetics in 1900, which explained how acquired characteristics could be selectively transmitted and inherited. Though founded on the notion of evolutionary development through natural selection, eugenics questioned the assumption that progress was inevitable, suggesting instead that civilisation could just as easily decline. In this sense it was infused with an 'air of catastrophism'.[51] Eugenics drew strongly on late-nineteenth century anxieties over working class discontent, thriving in a situation where physical and moral 'degeneration' of the urban proletariat was believed to pose a fundamental threat to the existing social order.[52] It was in the British context that eugenics initially gathered momentum, but its language and applications were readily transferred to the colonial domain where it came to be especially directed towards questions of race.[53] Here, eugenics fed on the paradox that whites' certainty of their unassailable supremacy went along with a profound sense of their vulnerability.

It is noteworthy that the eugenics movement was never as strongly represented in South Africa as it was in the metropoles of Britain or the United States. Elsewhere, I have suggested that paradox may have to do with the fact that the lived relations of paternalism which bound black and white together presented white supremacy as part of the natural order things, thereby obviating the need for an explicit elaboration of theories of racial superiority.[54] At the same time, however, implicit assumptions drawn from the language of scientific racism were widely prevalent and played an important role in the construction of segregationist discourse during the inter-war years. Subsequent research has not caused me to change this view overall, though it has yielded further direct evidence of interest in eugenics.

One of the most enthusiastic and outspoken eugenists in South Africa was H.B. Fantham, Professor of Zoology at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1917-32, who advanced his beliefs in a series of addresses to the SA Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1918 he advanced the common eugenic argument that, in a state ruled according to evolutionary principles, government by trained specialists rather than amateurs was necessary. Both democracy and socialism were flawed because of their refusal to recognise natural variations within mankind. The failure to recognise the importance of 'mental ability' meant that only 'uniform or standardised mediocrity' would prevail

---

51. Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought* (Sussex and New Jersey, 1980), p103. [check]
52. See eg. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*
53. The above themes have been treated in greater detail in my paper "Race, Civilisation and Culture: the Elaboration of Segregationist Discourse in the Inter-War Years", in S. Marks and S. Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London and New York, 1987). In the following section I intend to develop some of these ideas further.

54. See my *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid* (London and New York, 1989), p31.

because the 'level of intelligence of the least-informed but loudest talker' would be adopted as standard'.[55]

By 1924 Fantham's fascination with eugenics had, if anything, increased. He contended that mental and moral differences were 'almost entirely due to the influence of heredity' and that the environmental influences (euthenics) were only of slight importance. Turning his attention to 'feeble-mindedness' (with which he associated the phenomenon of 'poor whiteism') Fantham argued that it too was hereditary.[56] Fantham made great play about the need to foster a 'eugenic conscience' in South Africa. He stopped short of demanding immediate measures restricting procreation, but claimed that it was necessary to segregate 'persons with marked hereditary defects' - amongst whom he included 'epileptics, idiots and habitual animals'.[57] On the issue of race Fantham was no less forthright. He considered that the evolution of the natives had been exceedingly slow.

> Energy, perhaps the most valuable of human attributes, is inherited, and, in the germinal make-up of the negroid peoples, this factor appears to be either very feebly developed or lacking.[58]

The sexual impulses of the negro, moreover, were stronger than his inhibitions. South African natives, through their lack of foresight and improvidence, failed to put by sufficient crops in good times. And they lacked persistence and initiative. These characteristics, Fantham claimed, reappeared constantly, regardless of environmental factors.[59]

At the core of Fantham's argument lay the issue of biological reproduction. He denounced the tendency of the 'least fit or useful classes to reproduce the most', explaining that the maintenance of human prosperity rendered it imperative that the 'more energetic and intelligent of the population should reconsider their attitude towards reproduction and obey the Darwinian injunction to make themselves fitter to survive.'[60] The growth of medical services as well as philanthropic measures protected the unfit at the expense of 'the more adequate members of the community', a process which would lead to 'the reversal of natural selection'.[61] Racial intermarriage, Fantham contended, was undesirable both from the social and the strictly eugenic point of view and it invariably induced 'degeneration'.

> Considered racially, the white man loses and the negro gains in such miscegenation. But in neither case can the unions of white and black be considered really advantageous to the community at large. The coloured race has not the energy nor the persistence of the white, neither is it controlled by the tribal conventions of the native. Educationally, the coloured peoples lag behind the

55. H.B. Fantham, "Evolution and Mankind", *SAJS*, 1918, p304.
56. H.B. Fantham, "Heredity in Man: Its Importance both Biologically and Educationally", *SAJS*, 1924, p519.
57. *Ibid.*, p523.
58. H.B. Fantham, "Some Factors in Eugenics, Together with Notes on Some South African Cases", *SAJS*, XXII, 1925, p408.
59. *Ibid*, p409.
60. *Ibid.*, p404.
61. *Ibid.*, p405.

> white, and the general tendency is towards mediocrity. As a body, the coloured are often despised by white and black alike.[62]

Fantham was undoubtedly extreme in his views, but it would be mistaken to dismiss him as a crank. Indeed, Bruce Murray refers to him as an 'outstanding scholar' who succeeded in building up a department noted for its scholarship and research.[63] He was himself an expert in protozoa but his research interests ranged widely. Within the scientific community at large, it appears that Fantham was well regarded. In 1925-6 he served as Vice-President of the SAAAS. It was during this time that the topic of eugenics was added to the Association's standing committee on Zoology, Physiology, Hygiene and Tropical Science. Fantham seems to have played a role in the affairs of the Pretoria Eugenic Study Circle and enjoyed a close association with the British Eugenic Society. As a member of the Transvaal Education Department's Committee on the teaching of science in high schools, Fantham proposed that biology should be a necessary part of a liberal education, that school-children should be introduced to the study of heredity, and that they should be be inculcated with a basic eugenic understanding.[64]

Fantham was by no means alone. Many of his ideas were endorsed by J.E. Duerden, a past president of the SAAAS and zoology professor at Rhodes University, though Duerden's approach was rather less authoritarian.[65] For instance, he hoped the genetically superior white race in South Africa would neither exterminate nor enslave the inferior, but that they too could endevour to adapt to one another and live in harmony. Like Fantham, Duerden recommended that the zoologist extend his range beyond the confines of the laboratory and 'apply the results of his studies and experimental work on the lower creatures to that most important of all animals, man.'[66] He therefore saw no problem in moving directly from, say, reflections on the improvement of agricultural stock to a consideration of 'The Native Bantu'.

In their evident willingness to translate laboratory results to the political and social sphere Fantham and Duerden reflected the widespread belief in the utility of the expert, captured in the doctrine of 'national efficiency'. This ideology, as G.R. Searle explains, cut across conventional political divisions and was strongly pervasive in England at the turn of the century. By the 1930s it had developed into a 'strongly

---

62. *Ibid.*, p409.
63. B.K. Murray, *Wits: The Early Years* (Johannesburg, 1982), pp.156-7 check
64. "The Teaching of Biology in High Schools", *SAJS*, XXVI, 1929.
65. See eg. J.E. Duerden, "Social Anthropology in South Africa: Problems of Race and Nationality", *SAJS*, 1921; J.E. Duerden, "Genetics and Eugenics in South Africa: Heredity and Environment", *SAJS*, XXII, 1925.
66. Duerden, "Genetics and Eugenics in South Africa", p59. A dissident view was expressed by J.W. Bews, the Principal of Natal University College. Bews recognised the contribution of genetics to biological science but warned, '...we may hesitate - as the human race as a whole is certainly doing - before consenting to be guided by the results of any such single science. The trouble is that the viewpoint of genetics, by itself, is not broad enough." See J.W. Bews, "The Ecological Viewpoint", *SAJS* XXVIII, 1931.

technocratic approach to government in which science was celebrated as a 'kind of self-sustaining force, providing 'objectively valid solutions to social and political problems, quite independently of the wishes and beliefs of the majority...'[67] As political segregation became an urgent political issue in South Africa, the need for a solution to the 'native question' embodying the scientific findings of independent experts became a common cry amongst intellectuals and social reformers. Leonard Barnes spoke for many other observers from a radical point of view when he warned that the 'native question' would end in violence 'unless Science, the "cool, gentle, serious spirit of science", science which alone embodies the maturity of the human mind, takes charge of the situation.'[68]

The more technically abstruse aspects of scientific racism - like developments in genetics, or measurements of cephalic indices - were not easily accessible to the general public. However, the implications of such work were easily popularised and rapidly percolated through to a wider audience. Amongst the issues most extensively debated were the question of the relative intelligence of black and white, the notion of 'arrested development', the problem of 'miscegenation' and the fear of 'racial degeneration'. It was on the issue of 'racial fusion' or 'miscegenation' that the convergence of popular anxieties and scientific racism became particularly acute. Gilman points out that the word 'miscegenation' derives from the late-nineteenth century vocabulary of sexuality. "It embodies a fear not merely of inter-racial sexuality, but of its supposed result, the decline of the population."[69] In South Africa miscegenation concentrated fears of contamination, of the loss of 'racial pride' and 'purity', and of the 'black peril'. Yet, from the eugenic point of view, miscegenation was an ambiguous concept, for although it was almost universally condemned the biological evidence was by no means clear.

For instance, Fantham and Porter's claim that racial purity was an ideal 'no less for the people of colour than for whites' was echoed by countless others. But their evidence of physical malformation allegedly caused by racial mixture - from 'crimpy hair' to supernumary fingers - was hardly compelling. Nor did they prove their case that mixed physical and social inheritance 'combine to produce instability of temperament in the hybrid population'[70] R. Ruggles Gates, Professor of Botany at Kings College, London and an authority on the inheritance of racial characteristics, claimed that miscegenation between whites and Africans was 'wholly undesirable from a eugenic or any other reasonable point of view.'[71] However, he was forced to admit that there 'appear to be cases in which hybrid vigour or increase of size results from intermarriage between races'. E. Fischer's work, for example, indicated that the Reheboth people of Namibia were 'sound, strong, and very fertile...'[72] Gates could only be

67. G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency. A Study of British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (Oxford, 1971), pp.1, 260. check and read again.
68. L. Barnes, *Caliban in Africa. An Impression of Colour-Madness* (London, 1930), p212.
69. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, p107.
70. H.B Fantham and Annie Porter, "Some Further Cases of Physical Inheritance and of Racial Admixture Observed in South Africa", *SAJS* XXVII, 1930, pp404,405.
71. R.R. Gates, *Heredity in Man* (London, 1929), p336.
72. *Ibid.*, pp328-9, 333.

sure that crosses between 'an advanced and primitive stock' were dangerous, for they might lead to physical disharmonies like 'the fitting of large teeth into small jaws'. But even here, he was forced to bolster his arguments with distinctly non-scientific allusions to 'social failure' and 'serious difficulties'.[73]

This lack of clarity meant that, on occasion, the miscegenation argument could be turned on its head. George Findlay, the left-wing Pretoria lawyer, was reported by Ralph Bunche in 1937 to adhere to the theory that 'the interbreeding of white and non-white in South Africa has led to a superior type because skin pigmentation and broad nostrils made for better adaptation to this climate'.[74] And the young William Plomer became notorious because of his novel *Turbott Wolfe* which advocated large scale intermarriage as a means of eradicating South Africa's racial problems.[75] The almost universal abhorrence of racial mixture was propounded both at a popular and at a scientific level. A scaremonger like B.L. Puttnam Weale maintained that 'there exists some law forbidding the mixture with black blood'. As evidence he pointed to the deep-seated 'aversion' shown towards blacks by whites and 'the yellow man' alike. Moreover, the perpetual impotence of the hybrid mule demonstrated Nature's outrage at cross-breeding in animals as well as man.[76] In this case it can be seen how prejudice was reinforced by reference to scientific authority. Conversely, scientists were capable of citing spurious notions like 'incompatibilities of racial temperament' or 'inherent communal dislike' where they evidence was lacking.[77] The uncertainty surrounding miscegenation seems only to have increased the level of hysteria, suggesting that ideologies may be more, rather than less, compelling if they are fundamentally ambiguous or even contradictory.

The intellectual capacity of Africans was a major focus of discussion. In the context of pending segregationist legislation, it was frequently argued that the extent to which blacks would be able to participate in South African politics depended on their intellectual abilities. As I have indicated elsewhere, there was intensive discussion on this point, and intelligence testing became popular from around the First World War.[78] Closely related to this debate was the theory of 'arrested development', the idea that Africans' intellectual development somehow lagged behind that of whites after pubescence. I have not yet established how far back this widespread theory dates, but it was certainly current in South Africa by the early twentieth century. Theal quotes lengthy extracts from the 1908 Cape Select Committee on Native Education which sought the opinions of a range of experts on the matter.[79] One variant of the theory of arrested development claimed, as Dr H. Lyster Jameson did in 1907, that the sutures of the negro skull closed earlier in life than they did in white children, thereby stunting mental development.[80] As Otto

73. *Ibid.*, p329.
74. Ralph Bunche Diary, 1937? See also Findlay's book *Miscegenation*, (Pretoria, 1936)
75. W. Plomer, *Turbott Wolf* (London, 1926)
76. B.L. Puttnam Weale, *The Conflict of Colour* (London, 1910), pp.231-2.
77. H.B Fantham, "Some Factors in Eugenics", p409.
78. I hope to extend my understanding of intelligence testing when I go to SA in February.
79. Theal, *Yellow and Dark-Skinned People*, pp265-73.
80. H.Lyster Jameson, "An Ethnographic Bureau for South Africa", *Report of the South African Association for the*

did in white children, thereby stunting mental development.[80] As Otto Klineberg, the critic of race points out, this idea was linked to the notion propounded by R.L. Briffault in 1927 that the rate of individual development becomes slower the higher up one goes in the scale of biological organisation. By analogy, therefore, 'savage children' are more precocious than 'Europeans', but complete their development sooner and have less capacity for further progress.[81] The theory of arrested development also gained currency because it fitted in with more general fears of black sexuality. As the Rev. Noel Roberts claimed, with the onset of puberty

> the wave of intellectual progress and development ebbs, and it is followed by an overwhelming wave of sexualism which, in many cases, takes entire possession of their natures to the exclusion of every other desire.[82]

Here, in its purest form, we see a direct association between mental and moral development - concepts which were often lumped together indiscriminately. As in the case of intelligence testing the theory of 'arrested development' was always hotly disputed, but the extent to which it was addressed is an indication of the seriousness with which it was regarded.[83] The idea that morality or 'character' was a direct function of innate or inherited traits (the very word 'character' connotes physical as well as temperamental qualities) led to considerable speculation about the association of race with crime. This theory was first adumbrated by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lambroso, who identified 'certain physical signs, the so-called "stigmata of degeneration", by which the true criminal could be recognized - large projecting ears, a receding forehead, asymmetrical bodily proportions, and others.'[84] The notion of a distinct 'criminal type' was by no means exclusively associated with blacks; in the United States, for example, many studies were undertaken in the early twentieth century purporting to show a natural propensity to crime amongst Italian and other immigrants.

In South Africa G.T. Morice argued that 'feeble-mindedness' - which was supposedly inherited - was accompanied by a weakness of will which led males to drift into crime and females to becoming prone to seduction.[85] This claim reflected a more general view that criminality

---

80. H.Lyster Jameson, "An Ethnographic Bureau for South Africa", *Report of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science 1907* (Cape Town, 1908) p166; also evidence of William Charles Willoughby to 1908 Cape Native Education Select Committee. Klineberg (see below) attributes this theory to L.P.Gratiolet (1861).
81. O.Klineberg, *Race Differences* (New York, [1935]) p93.
82. Rev. N.Roberts, "Native Education from an Economic Point of View", *SAJS*, 1917, p99. Also evidence of Rev. D.D. Stormont to 1908 Cape Select Committee.
83. Amongst those disputing the theory of arrested development were James Henderson and Neil Macvicar (1908 Cape Select Committee); S.G.Rich, "Binet-Simon Tests on Zulus", *SAJS* 1917; D.D.T. Jabavu, "Higher Education and the Professional Training of the Bantu", *SAJS*, XXVI, 1929.
84. Klineberg, *Race Differences* p237.
85. G.T. Morice, "Crime and Feeblemindedness", *SAJS* XVII, 1920-1.

amongst blacks arose out of their alleged lack of foresight and inability to resist sensuous impulses. Central to this was the idea of 'degeneration', a concept which entered the medical and popular vocabulary of the mid-nineteenth century and came to play a vital role in constituting the notion of 'the Other' by the end of that century.[86] I am not yet sure to what extent such theories were current in South Africa. But it is noteworthy that H.J. Simons considered it necessary to attack the racial theory of crime at some length as late as 1949, arguing that crime, like other forms of behaviour, 'is the result of an interaction between the environment and the individual, who is himself a social product.'[87]

****

A further strand of Social Darwinist thought which requires analysis is that which intersected with climatic theories. The idea that mankind is fundamentally a product of his environment goes back a long way. But this notion was given new force in the twentieth century through the work of writers like Ellsworth Huntington. A geographer at Yale University, Huntington was a prolific and influential writer who attempted to embed the theory of natural selection within an overall conception of environmental determinism. In *Civilization and Climate*, first published in 1915, Huntington sought to show the relationship between inheritance, physical environment and culture in determining the 'distribution of civilization'. Huntington's basic thesis is that climatic changes lead to economic and political distress, which in turn cause large-scale human migrations. Those who migrate inevitably encounter hardships as a result of which their numbers diminish until 'only a selected group of unusually high quality remains.' With an improvement of climatic conditions the new immigrants 'not only possess unusually strong inheritance, but are stimulated by unusually good economic conditions and by improved conditions of health and energy.' Under these beneficial circumstances, rising standards of living release more and more individuals to the pursuit of progressive new ideas.Thus the repeated coincidence between periods of improving climate and periods of cultural progress is determined by climatic stimulus together with 'high racial inheritance due to natural selection'.[88]

These ideas were explored further in *The Character of Races* (1927) in which Huntington sought to explain how migrations or changes of environment cause natural selection, thereby leading to alterations in the 'character of races' or racial stocks. It was written in the belief that 'the biological laws which apply to animals also apply to man'[89] In Huntington's view, it was a biological law that tropical environments, because of their uniformity, tend to 'perpetuate primitive, unspecialized forms'. By contrast, in areas of high latitude which experienced glacial periods, 'an intensive selective process' ensured that 'only those with

---

86. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* pp 60-61.
87. H.J. Simons, "The Law and its Administration", in E. Hellman (ed) *Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa* (London, 1949), p93.
88 E. Huntington, *Civilization and Climate*, third ed. (New Haven, 1924) pp.27-8. One of the main refinements of this edition was its greater appreciation of the role played by biological inheritance and natural selection.
89. E. Huntington, *The Character of Races* (New York and London, 1927) pp.20, 7.

the greatest skill could survive'. The cleverest of these would choose to migrate to warmer lands. It was thus the 'nervous, active types who lead the march of human progress'. They, however, would be at a disadvantage compared with people of a 'more phlegmatic constitution' (eg. Lapps and Eskimos) who remained behind in extreme climatic conditions and in whom 'the passive qualities of resistance to hunger and discomfort were most highly developed.'[90]

Huntington's tomes were highly speculative and drew eclectically from an enormous range of sources across the entire world and through the whole of human history. His arguments, though riddled with anomalies and contradictions, nonetheless had the virtue of being able to provide a more or less plausible explanation for almost anything. For instance, his works are filled with spurious maps and diagrams purporting to demonstrate the relationship between 'head-form and routes of migration in Europe', percentages of 'eminent Europeans engaged in art and literature', and correlations between cultural conditions and cephalic indices. But, despite the eccentric conclusions he arrived at and, notwithstanding hostile criticism, Huntington's basic arguments struck a resonant chord. He is a prime example of someone who is forgotten today but whose ideas diffused widely and commanded considerable attention.[91]

One of the questions Huntington addressed himself to was the problem of whether tropical regions were suitable for white settlement. There was a widespread belief earlier in this century that Africa was essentially 'a coloured man's continent; a land where no other man may thrive; a land where climate is absolute master'.[92] Archie Grenfell Price, the noted Australian geographer and right wing politician, dealt with this debate at length in a study published in 1939 by the American Geographical Society entitled *White Settlers in the Tropics*.[93] Its aim was to explain why, in general, whites had failed to colonize the tropics and whether they could hope for ultimate success. Price dealt with South America, the West Indies, Australia and Africa and he engaged directly with Huntington's work. His overall conclusions - from the point of view of white racial purists - were pessimistic, though he noted that in regions like N.Queensland, the outlook was more hopeful.

In a recent illuminating book on settler culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia Dane Kennedy shows that fear of the tropical climate was pervasive in Kenya during the first decades of the twentieth century. Settlers resorted to outlandish prophylactic measures such as the wearing of felt-lined hats, solar topis, cloth spine pads and red vests, and the construction of wide verandahs. These measures were considered essential to protect the nervous system from a form of solar radiation said to derive from 'actinic rays'.

> According to this theory, the intense actinic radiation in the tropical climate was capable of paralyzing and even destroying the

90. *Ibid.*, pp50-3.
91. The third edition of *Civilization and Climate*, for instance, went through five printings.
92. Puttnam Weale, *Conflict of Colour*, p96.
93. A.G. Price, *White Settlers in the Tropics* (New York, 1939).

> nerve cells of Europeans, thereby generating various neurasthenic symptoms ranging from depression to "outbursts of passion".[94]

As Kennedy shows, these 'quaint quackeries' should not simply be dismissed because they lack scientific foundation. In the first place disease posed a real threat to newcomers. Moreover, settler fear of the environment, especially after the First World War, underlines their profound sense of social vulnerability. For most European-born settlers in Kenya, 'the physical milieu of Africa induced a sense of ambivalence, a conviction that they were at odds with their host environment'.[95] The antagonism expressed towards the physical environment also indicated a desire to draw stricter boundaries between coloniser and colonised. Kennedy observes quite rightly that fear of the tropical environment was less marked in Southern Rhodesia, probably because the Rhodesian population had a longer and more direct empirical experience of their environment. For similar reasons South Africans were even less concerned with the dangers of the environment. Nevertheless, the issue of physical degeneration as a result of environmental conditions did arise there, especially in relation to the so-called poor-white problem.

The apparent 'degeneration' of poor whites was frequently commented on in South Africa. Maurice Evans, a keen observer and important early ideologue of segregation, was much concerned by the 'demoralisation' and 'deterioration' of both black and white in the urban context. Like many others, he feared the political and social consequences of competition between white and black proletarians for unskilled labour.[96] J.E. Duerden was fascinated by the fact that individuals who derived from 'good stock' and whose 'original germ plasm' was of high quality, had 'succumbed to their environmental influences'.[97] As mentioned above, H.B. Fantham, was particularly interested in the relationship of feeble-mindedness to poor whiteism, and he cited C.B. Davenport's theory that nomadism or 'the wandering habit' was a sex-linked recessive trait.[98]

In *Civilization and Climate* Ellsworth Huntington singled out poor whiteism in South Africa for special attention. Huntington acknowledged that poor whiteism was an economic problem but noted that 'Back of the economic facts, and in many ways conditioning them, lies the climate'. The South African climate was indeed pleasant but, contrary to popular belief, it lacked the 'stimulating qualities' characteristic of Europe and North America. 'Poor whites were 'a shiftless set, living from hand to mouth, proud of their race, yet less efficient than the blacks'. They lacked 'the push and energy which characterize the rest of the white population'.[99]

---

94 D. Kennedy, *Islands of White. Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939* (Duke University, 1987), p110. Even Huxley and Haddon in *We Euroeans*, p58, refer to actinic rays.
95 *Ibid.*, p5.
96. See eg. M.S. Evans, *Black and White in South East Africa. A Study in Sociology* (London, 1911); M.S.Evans, "A Survey of the Past and Present Relations of the European and Bantu Races in Natal and Surrounding Territories", *SAJS*, 1916.
97. Duerden, "Genetics and Eugenics in South Africa", p70.
98. Fantham, "Heredity in Man", *SAJS*, 1924, p519.
99. Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* , p44,45.

Huntington's speculations about the nature of poor whiteism in South Africa were picked up and scrutinized by A.G. Price.[100] W.K. Hancock also raised the problem whether the low-lying sub-tropical parts of South Africa were 'inimical to the stamina of the white stock'. Louis Leipoldt was so shocked by the poor physical condition of white children when working as a medical inspector of schools in the Bushveld during the First World War, that he expressed grave doubts about the future of white civilisation in Africa.[101]

These arguments were publically aired in the important 1932 Carnegie Report into conditions of white poverty in South Africa. In Volume IV, written by W.A.Murray, Huntington's theory of climate-induced deterioration was afforded considerable attention, but rejected. Murray cited R.W.Cliento's objection to Huntington that disease provided a more adequate explanation of retardation. Most importantly, he pointed out that most of the poor white population was concentrated in the Karroo and on the Highveld - regions whose climate could hardly be described as 'tropical'.[102]

R.W. Wilcocks's volume on the psychology of poor whiteism also rejected biological theories of race deterioration. Based on his own intelligence tests Wilcocks concluded that the majority of poor white children and adults fell within the limits of normality and that there was no reason to believe their inherent abilities were impaired. The tendency of poor white children's IQs to fall with age had more to do with the unfavourable social conditions under which they lived.[103] Wilcocks acknowledged that biological heredity might play a role in the development of the 'trek spirit', but he insisted that the extent of this trait should not be overestimated and he distanced the phenomenon from the mental state of 'psychological nomadism' and 'feeble-mindedness'.[104]

The general tendency of the Carnegie Commission, therefore, was to disavow explanations of poor whiteism in terms of biological deterioration. Rather, it sought to emphasise sociological and economic causes of the problem. This is not surprising given the commitment of Afrikaner intellectuals like Wilcocks to the general social upliftment of the volk. However, it is striking that the commissioners felt it necessary to enter directly into a serious dialogue with theorists like Huntington. The vocabulary of the Commission (which freely speaks of 'demoralisation', 'retrogression', 'moral weakness', 'mentality' etc.) suggests a measure of commitment to biological theories of degeneration which it otherwise fights shy of. Moreover, photographs with captions like 'Menfolk-Impoverished Type' and 'Disappearing Types', or the chapter headings in Volume V which refer to categories such as 'the nomadic type', the 'pathological type', etc., also indicate the sense in

---

100. Price, *White Settlement*, p143.
101. W.K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs Vol II Part 2* (London, 1942), p19 and fn; C.Louis Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor* (London, 1937).
102. *The Poor White Problem in South Africa. Report ofthe Carnegie Commission. Part IV. Health Report*, by W.A. Murray, (Stellenbosch, 1932), pp.84-8.
103. *The Poor White Problem in South Africa. Report ofthe Carnegie Commission. Part II. Psychological Report*, by R.W. Wilcocks (Stellenbosch, 1932), pp.144-7, 168-9.
104. *Ibid.*, pp12-14.

which the poor white problem was - at least in part - conceptualised in the terms of racial typology.

****

A different, but related tradition of intellectual racism stressed the distinctiveness of the 'native mentality'. One of the best known popular books in this genre is Dudley Kidd's *The Essential Kaffir* (1904). Written in an impressionistic, anecdotal style Kidd offers us his 'artistic presentation' not so much to teach the reader '*about* the Kaffirs', as to ensure that he '*knows* the Kafir'.[105] In contrast to later academically-trained writers like Lévy-Bruhl and Raoul Allier, Kidd is not concerned to present a structured argument or thesis. His shamelessly ethnocentric writings are firmly cast in the amateur tradition of the traveller, and his liberal use of photographs suggests that the audience he envisages is a non-specialist one.

If there is a central theme to Kidd's book it is that 'The whole mental furniture of a Kafir's mind differs from that of a European. His outlook upon life is different; his conception of nature is cast in another mould.'[106] Kidd purported to back this claim up with all sorts of examples showing that Africans could not distinguish between causation and coincidence, that they lack mental stability, powers of imagination or invention (but can copy well), that they are utterly deficient in aesthetic taste, etc. - in short, a voyeur's compendium of prejudice and myth. Kidd is not even sure whether Africans are part of the general human species: at one point he suggests that they are children 'misgrown with a vengeance', but he seems happier with the idea that they are in fact more like 'highly evolved animals'.[107]

Of the writers claiming to be more rigorous in their characterisation of the 'native mentality', Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Sorbonne professor of anthropology, is perhaps the best known. In *How Natives Think* (translated from the French and published in 1926) Lévy-Bruhl sought to prove that 'the mentality of primitive peoples is essentially mystic and prelogical in character' and that it therefore differs fundamentally from that of Europeans.[108] Lévy-Bruhl attacked what he called the 'English school' of anthropology for perpetually trying to show *and explain* the relationship between 'savage' and 'civilised' mentalities. This was mistaken because it was based on a faulty assumption of the essential identity of the 'human mind'.[109] Working instead from Durkeim's theory of the 'collective representations' Lévy-Bruhl concentrated on the psychology of the collective group rather than the individual subject.

According to Lévy-Bruhl primitive mentality was governed by what he termed 'the law of participation'. This refers to the idea that natives are indifferent to the principle of logical contradiction, *i.e.*, they allow essentially mystical phenomena to coexist with rational explanation in the same mental universe. For example, in the case of a picture or portrait, the primitive mind is able to believe that the same life and properties

---

105. p vi.
106. D. Kidd, *The Essential Kafir* (London, 1904) p277.
107. *Ibid.*, pp.46-7, 62, 278.
108. L. Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian Clare (London, 1926) p386.
109 *Ibid.*, pp.17-18.

exist in the original and its reproduction at one and the same time.[110] In positing an intrinsic difference between the minds of primitive and civilised man, Lévy-Bruhl refused to accept the extent to which European logical thought itself coexisted with 'irrational' beliefs - be they religious or superstitious. Moreover, he denied that the mystic, prelogical elements of primitive mentality would ever be supplanted by logical forms of thought. Unlike knowledge, which displaces ignorance, prelogical mentality is indifferent to the claims of reason. 'It does not seek that which is contradictory, nor yet does it avoid it'.[111]

Lévy-Bruhl's insistence on an irreducible difference between the mind of the primitive and civilised man was an extreme view which few were prepared to countenance. However, his characterisation of the primitive mind as irretrievably bound by prelogical and mystic belief was far more widely accepted. Raoul Allier, the French theologian and missionary, mounted a strong attack on Lévy-Bruhl for carrying 'to extremes the theory of a great gulf between the uncivilized peoples and outselves'.[112] As a Christian devoted to the cause of mission work Allier's evident concern was the theoretical unity of mankind. But, in practice, he endorses the overall drift of Lévy-Bruhl's work, arguing that the 'lower races' have encountered a condition of 'arrested growth' and are unlikely to develop further without external intervention. Moreover, the mentality of uncivilized man is dominated by magic; 'it masters him, giving a precise and never changing form to his inner life'.[113] This belief in magic is a major obstacle to the 'civilizing agency', for it gives rise to

> a realm governed by the illogical, fosters every kind of emotional outburst, suppresses self-control, engenders morbid fears and murderous frenzies: in a word, produces and maintains a veritable intellectual and moral disintegration.[114]

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these theories were directly picked up in South Africa, though it is clear that they permeated through in one form or another. In 1933 Edgar Brookes, the liberal observer and commentator, deplored the baneful influence of the 'older school' of anthropology (identifying Lévy-Bruhl as its foremost exponent) in favour of the newly developing discipline of social anthropology.[115] In criticising the notion that variations in 'mentality' were the expression of congential or innate (rather than cultural) differences, Alfred Hoernlé also took Lévy-Bruhl to task.[116] It is

---

110. *Ibid.*, pp.79-80.
111. *Ibid.*, p283.
112. R. Allier, *The Mind of the Savage*, trans. F.Rothwell, (London, 1929), p28.
113. *Ibid.*, p212.
114. *Ibid.*, p119.
115. Edgar Brookes, *The Colour Problems of South Africa* (Lovedale and London [1934]), pp142. Brookes criticised the 'pseudo scientific' theories associated with Lévy-Bruhl for their arbitrary tendency to divide mankind into 'civilised' and 'primitive' peoples, and for their negative influence on government policy. See also Rheinallt-Jones' criticisms in SAJS 1920 - plea for a scientific spirit.
116. E.G. Malherbe (ed), *Educational Adaptations in a Changing Society. Report of the New Education Fellowship Conference* (CT and JHB, 1937), pp.446-7

notable that Lévy-Bruhl relies extensively on evidence drawn from H.A. Junod's work on the Ba-Ronga. I am not clear whether the respect was reciprocated, but Junod's 1920 address to the SA Assoc. for the Advancement of Science certainly appears compatible with the Lévy-Bruhl-Allier position. On this occasion he argued that the 'fundamental difference between the European and the Bantu mind' preventing a true understanding of the one by the other is that twentieth century Europeans possessed 'the scientific spirit, whilst Bantus are still plunged in the magic conception of Nature.' In general 'a Bantu does not bother very much about causes' so that whenever he is afflicted by disease or suffering he resorts to magic.

The notion that there existed a distinct 'native mentality', a cosmology governed by animism, magic and witchcraft, was very much part of the colonial common-sense. In the nineteenth century in particular, missionaries and administrators regarded these beliefs as posing a giant obstacle to the 'civilising mission', though they differed on the question of whether the problem was insuperable. In the twentieth century the idea of 'backwardness' was frequently linked to Africans' belief in magic. The influential 1932 Native Economic Commission, for example, stressed the idea that spirit worship, animism and anti-economic attitudes to the ownwership of cattle, together constituted a major hindrance to agricultural and social progress.[118]

Like Social Darwinist theories the science of native mentalities was flexible enough to embrace contradictory ideas. A dominant theme in the attempts to capture the essence of the native mind was the idea that Africans possessed special powers of intuition. Citing evidence (from Rider Haggard, amongst others) of the speed at which news travelled of General Buller's defeat at Colenso in 'the Zulu War', Dudley Kidd suggested that Africans were able to communicate over vast distances by some form of telepathy.Under certain conditions it was possible that whites could find themselves isolated and mentally overpowered by 'some strong psychic-tide'. This sixth-sense, if it indeed existed, was no longer accessible to 'us'; it had been eliminated by civilisation since it was no longer needed in the struggle for existence.[119] By implication, therefore, the special abilities of Africans were also proof of their essential inferiority. (Similarly, the rapidity with which African children were supposed to absorb knowledge was linked to the theory of arrested development at puberty[120]).

This form of inversion was also the case where writers attested to the extraordinary faculties of memory which Africans were often said to possess. Thus Lévy-Bruhl argued that memory was 'extremely well developed in primitives' because it compensated for their singular incapacity for logical reasoning.[121] In his erudite study of differing 'intellectual types' the anthropologist G.H.L. Pitt-Rivers concluded that Africans were superior to whites in terms of memory, intuition and imitation, though they were deficient in respect of reflection, judgement

117. Fn harries
118. UG 22-'32, *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-32* (Pretoria, 1932).
119. Kidd, *The Essential Kafir*, pp.342-3. Kidd surely meant the Anglo-Boer War!
120. *Ibid.*, p281.
121. Lèvy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, p110 and ff.

and comprehension.[122] This was to be explained by the fact - attested to by E.Rignano and the eugenist Francis Galton - that

> A deficiency of memory tends to be associated with originality of thought, for a limited memory facilitates generalization and the discovery of the equivalences of phenomena, while the burden of vividly memorized details hinders the schematization or reduction of phenomena to those attributes which make them equivalent in respect to an end.[123]*

Proponents of the idea that there existed a distinctive 'native mentality' did not necessarily subscribe to biological evolutionism or theories of natural selection. Such conceptions are notably absent in the writings of Allier or Lévy-Bruhl, though they coexist in the work of Pitt-Rivers and Kidd. The claim that there was an effectively unbridgeable gap between 'civilised' and 'primitive' peoples was sustained just as effectively whether one believed that the basis of human differention was founded on mental or physical characteristics. The science of race could be founded just as easily on idealist as materialist principles - a factor which only served to increase its potential scope.

******

The retreat from explicit racism in the post-WW2 era has to some extent inured us from patterns of thought, habits of mind, and uses of language which, earlier this century, had profoundly racist implications. The fact that our language has largely been expunged of explicit racist assumptions should be counted as a major achievement. Yet, this should not blind us to the fact that other codes and euphemisms have been developed to refer to race indirectly. In any case, vestiges of an earlier racist discourse can still be detected today: in Wilbur Smith's recent best-selling political novel about South Africa, the behaviour of the key black protagonists is correlated to their 'negroid/hamitic' inheritance in much the same way that they are in George Heaton Nicholls' *Bayete!*, published over sixty years previously. In relatively recent academic literature like Roland Oliver's 1966 *JAH* paper on 'The Problem of the Bantu Expansion' traces of the 'racial history' paradigm are evident.[125] This is even the case in Ruth First's outstanding work, *South West*

---

122. G.H.L. Pitt-Rivers,, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races* (London, 1927) chaps.IX&X.
123. *Ibid.*, p170. Notably, Pitt-Rivers drew an explicit comparison between the ways in which 'the Bantu differs from the European' and the ways in which 'female mentality generally differs from the male': 'In memory, assimilation, suggestibility and precocity the female excels, in judgement, reasoning originality and in abstract thought, the male.'p173

*A further strand in Pitt-Rivers' thinking which deserves attention is his attempt to reconcile eugenic notions of degeneration with psycho-analysis, in particular the work of Carl Jung who compares the primitive mind to an infantile stage of development, corresponding to dream and phantasy. This is so complicated that I cannot possibly deal with it here - though it recurs, I think in a SABRA studies of migrancy and the psychological inability of Africans to come to terms with the urban environment. And also in Laurens vd Post.
125. On this debate see Colin Flight's recent 'The Bantu Expansion and the SOAS Network', *History in Africa*, XV, 1988.

Africa, which begins by categorising and describing its subject population in a fashion which strikes one today as distinctly incongruous. Consider, for example, her characterisation of 'The Herero' which seems to carry with it echoes of the hamitic thesis.

> Long-limbed, erect, with oval faces, high foreheads, aquiline noses, they must be among the most handsome peoples in Africa: composed, elegant, and proud, if also somewhat aloof.[126]

I have written this paper firstly, in an attempt to outline some of the major themes which a fuller study of racial ideology in SA might include, and, secondly, in the belief that the power of racism can only be understood if its ideologies are fully laid out and the interconnections of its internal discourse followed through. Instances of explict racist thought are ugly enough. But almost as insidious are the patterns of thinking which implicitly rely on racist assumptions. I refer here to such conventions as the 'typing' and classificaion of human beings by race and temperament, the unquestioning acceptance of 'race' as a meaningful concept, the belief that evolutionary biology provides a model for human society, and the assumption that significant correlations can be made in respect of linguistic, cultural and physical characteristics.

126. Ruth First, *South West Africa* (Harmondsworth, 1963) p27.