

**SAVAGE INEQUALITY:
ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE EROSION OF THE
FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT**

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Many scholars recognize that anthropology has had a checkered past. During the 1890s, a prominent strand of anthropological thought was racist and articulated social Darwinist ideas of racial inferiority under the guise of science. In this essay, I explore how ideas of racial inferiority were buttressed by this powerful current within the anthropological profession and ensconced in the actual machinery of racial oppression. The familiar savage-barbarian-civilized racial/social hierarchy that many early ethnologists sought to scientifically validate was employed by Southern Democrats to sway public opinion in support of a legislative agenda that disenfranchised African-American men.

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Following the Civil War, the Democratic Party in the South sought power to govern their own states. In their quest for home rule, Southern Democrats disenfranchised African-American men, imposed segregation, promoted White supremacist demagoguery, and suppressed African-American resistance.

During the 1870 and 1880s, the Republican Party, which held power at the federal level, attempted to rule the South from Washington. Congress passed three bills designed to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment and to stem the rising tide of lynchings. The legislation, collectively referred to as the Force Acts, made it a federal crime to obstruct the election process and placed the election apparatus under the jurisdiction of U.S. Attorneys. Routinely,

U.S. Attorneys prosecuted state election officials who allegedly disqualified voters based on race or previous condition of servitude. Another bill, The Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, made interfering with citizen's rights a high crime. U.S. Attorneys, federal marshals, the army, and election commissioners were deployed to enforce these acts (Valelly 1993:12).

These efforts to stave the abridgement of African-American suffrage by the states and by secret organizations were thwarted after the 1890 congressional elections. In the Fifty-Second Congress elected that year, the number of Republican seats in the House dropped from 173 to 88 as the number of Democratic congressmen surged from 156 to 231 (Valelly 1993:26). This dramatic loss for the Republican Party and subsequently for African Americans, in the party or not, signaled the beginning of a Democratic backlash. Waves of violence, policies, and legislation that forced the disenfranchisement of African Americans followed in lock step with the rising number of Democrats in Washington; the number of lynchings and terrorist attacks reached an all-time high in 1892. The second Cleveland administration was elected that year on a platform that explicitly attacked legislation enforcing fair elections (Valelly 1993:27).

In 1892, the Democratic Party gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Senate, and the White House. With Democrats now in power at the federal level, individual state governments began to impose Jim Crow statutes segregating public con-

veyances, rest rooms, drinking fountains, and eating establishments. These statutes were enacted with blatant disregard for an individual's right to equal protection by the law, which was guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

The U.S. Supreme Court quickly interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment in a fashion that was commensurate with the crescendo of racist violence and the rising belief that African Americans must be segregated from Whites because of their savage traits and racial inferiority. Immediately after the Civil War, the Court had been composed of Northern justices who held somewhat liberal attitudes on race and who sought to punish the South. However, their liberal outlook regarding race and their punitive attitude towards the South seemingly waned in step with those of their congressional contemporaries. After Reconstruction was blocked by the government, the Court consistently upheld Southern segregation statutes. One landmark case was the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. This decision institutionalized racial segregation and established a climate that facilitated the onslaught of Jim Crow legislation and the tactics of disenfranchisement.

The decision was underwritten by the growing belief among politicians and capitalists of the idea that the colored races were biologically inferior. The policies they enacted ensured their own political and economic power (Logan 1972: 115-116). One result was a socially constructed concept of race imbued with notions of inferiority which connected with the social and

structural repression of African Americans in particular and other peoples of color in general.

Once the Democrats seized the elected branches of the federal government, it took only two years to dismantle, section by section, all of the federal legislation written to enforce Negro suffrage (Valelly 1993:28). As a result, Southern state legislatures were virtually allowed to void the Fifteenth Amendment by various schemes and measures. Since there was no federal resistance, the Southern Democrats devised schemes, policies, and state constitutional amendments to disenfranchise African Americans while, at the same time, granting poor, illiterate, and landless Whites the ability to vote. The proposal to enfranchise poor Whites, coupled with zealous White supremacist demagoguery and propaganda, effectively reunited poor and rich Whites in the South. To shore up support for their party at a national level, Democrats had to sway public opinion in the North, as well as the South. One way that proved effective was to publish arguments about racial inferiority and racial hierarchies buttressed by anthropological data or written by anthropologists in widely circulated magazines. The arguments of some anthropologists were used to validate claims that Negroes were not civilized enough to vote.

Fifteen-cent monthly magazines emerged as turn-of-the-century vehicles of mass culture. They propagated the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate, and intellectual elite. Therefore, by serving up arguments of racial inferiority that relied on certain anthropological authorities, the magazines cemented the emerging racial hierarchy as part of a mass culture voraciously consumed and believed by the American middle classes.

The proliferation of the fifteen-cent monthlies was one of the most effective agents in the construction of race as a social category. Their wide circulation among middle-class audiences across

the country helped to create shared understandings. In this respect, the magazines were different from newspapers whose content and circulation were geared to regional markets. The monthlies were filled with images, Negro dialect, literature, pictures, lithographs, poems, anecdotes, and demagoguery that encoded a single message—Negroes are inferior. The anthropological discourse on race that was appropriated served as a scientific pronouncement that Negroes were not fit for the responsibilities of civilization: ergo *the vote*.

Rayford Logan (1972:242-275) has documented how the portrayal of African Americans in turn-of-the-century magazines helped to construct notions of race. Logan has cataloged the plethora of stories, anecdotes, poems, and cartoons that characterized African Americans as niggers, coons, pickaninnies, or mummies to name only a few of the terms used. African Americans were also portrayed as buffoons with preposterous names and titles: Apollo Belvedere, Caesar, Lady Adeliza Chimpanzee, or Prince Orang Outan (Logan 1972:243-244).

Although derisive literature, addresses, images, and folklore have a long history in the United States, pervasive, consistent stereotypes depend on mass media for their dissemination. The consistent duplication of ideas and images creates the conditions for readers to share an experience and to reproduce these authoritative stereotypes. The circulation, authority, prestige, and format of the magazines lent themselves to the appearance of truth. The better the copy, the greater the sense of truth and the more convincing the stereotype (Gumpert and Cathcart 1982:351).

The sense of truth was not based solely on the copy quality. The fifteen-cent illustrated monthly relied on expert and authoritative sources rather than journalists to analyze current issues. Their discussions of Negro suffrage, education for Negroes, the emergence of Booker T. Washington, criminality

among Negroes, emigration, the new South, and imperialism among other issues appeared alongside and were complimented by racist epithets, degrading cartoons, and contemptuous literature, (Logan 1972:265). The experts often recast the stereotypes that were being perpetuated within the literary genres and grounded them in scientific or political expertise. Anthropological claims about race became important hooks upon which the experts hung their preconceived ideas of racial inferiority. However, the anthropological ideas about race that appeared in these magazines were not written by anthropologists. They were written instead by politicians and policymakers.

U.S. Senators and Congressmen were perhaps the most influential and powerful authors of articles dealing with race in these magazines. They used arguments about race to sway public opinion in the North and fuel race antipathy in the South. Southern legislators wanted to keep African Americans out of the polls and themselves in office. Senator John T. Morgan (1890:397) of Alabama warned the audience of *The Arena* "that there is extreme danger, under existing conditions, in confiding to negro the representation of white families in the ballot box."¹ Morgan wanted to make it clear that the tactics of disenfranchisement were not born from Southern prejudice, but rather that they were implemented because "the inferiority of the negro race, compared with the White race, is so essentially true, and so obvious, that ... [it] cannot be justly attributed to prejudice" (Morgan 1890:390). To illustrate how obvious this inferiority was, Morgan used the same arguments as Daniel Brinton (1890), Professor of American Archaeology and Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, and W. J. McGee (1899), Ethnologist-in-Charge at the Bureau of American Ethnology. Morgan stated:

The mental differences and differing traits, including the faculty of governing, forecast, enterprise, and the wide field of

achievement in the arts and sciences, are accurately measured by the contrast of the civilization of the United States, with the barbarism of Central Africa. . . The negro race, in their native land, have never made a voluntary and concerted effort to rise above the plain of slavery; they have not contributed a thought, or a labor except by compulsion, to the progress of civilization. Nothing has emanated from the negroes of Africa, in art, science, or enterprise that has been of the least service to mankind. Their own history, at home, demonstrates their inferiority when compared with that of other peoples. . . Their social development has never risen so high as to repress human sacrifices and cannibalism; while their religion is a witchcraft that is attended with every brutal crime (Morgan 1890:387-389).

In 1907, John Sharp Williams, the freshman Senator from Mississippi and former Speaker of the House, employed the anthropological discourse on race in an article titled "The Negro and the South," published in *The Metropolitan Magazine*. Williams (1907:138) wanted "to indorse the repeal of the fifteenth amendment." While he realized that the Northern states would not pass such a repeal, he strongly urged them to consider the weight of his proposal. He used anthropological arguments to offer a simple rationale:

The reason seems plain to me. No race ever succeeded in reaching civilization by the superposition of the civilization of another race unless that superposition were by force. Then only a veneering of the civilization is put on, and it comes off when the venerated race is left to itself (Williams 1907:148).

Although Williams understood the need for Negro labor in the South, he favored sending "the negro somewhere where he could develop undisturbed

along his own racial lines of evolution" (Williams 1907:146).

In the same year, Senator Benjamin Tillman, William's good friend from the state of South Carolina, echoed the same thoughts in the *Van Norden Magazine*. In an article entitled "The Race Question," Tillman suggested that "The negroes were changed from barbarians to a degree of civilization under the coercive power of slavery" (1907:28). Tillman even suggested that "Those who have read Booker Washington's book, 'Climbing up from Slavery' [sic. *Up from Slavery* (1901)] ought to consider the title of a book which has not yet been written, 'Climbing up from Barbarism through Slavery'" (Tillman 1907:28). He concluded his discussion of the race question, with a statement that "Negroes are great imitators and many of the mixed blood have shown great aptitude and capacity" (1907:28). He quickly jettisoned any idea of race mixing, because "Ethnologists warn us against the degeneracy, physical and mental, which comes from the mixture of different races" (Tillman 1907:28). This same line of thought had already been used earlier by another politician, Marion L. Dawson (1901), the former Judge-Advocate-General of Virginia, who wrote "The South and the Negro" for *The North American Review*.

For readers of *The Arena*, The Honorable William C. P. Breckinridge of Kentucky attempted to explain why Northerners were likely to harbor less "race prejudice" than their fellow Southerners. Breckinridge believed that it was not a question of prejudice at all, but the North had different Negroes. Using neo-Lamarckian arguments, he explained that Negroes in the North acquired better race traits and tendencies than the Negroes in the South because of their contact with Whites. Breckinridge suggested that where the negro was less numerous he was a much better man" (1890:45). The better race traits of Northern Negroes, he speculated, were acquired by more contact with Whites. He stated that slavery in the border slave states consisted almost entirely of domestic slavery

where slaves were comparatively few, and lived in the family and in daily association with the family of their owners.... And the daily contact with the white families to whom they belonged was an education. In the planting states there were domestic slaves; but there were also very large numbers of plantation slaves who lived at 'quarters,' isolated from the whites and the influence of daily contact with them (Breckinridge 1890:45).

He also asserted that

Ethnologically it is perhaps true that there were differences between the early importations which settled in Virginia, and from which largely came the negroes of the border slave States, and that later importations from which the majority of the 'plantation' slaves in the cotton and sugar growing States came; (Breckinridge 1890:45).

Educational reform for African Americans was another issue that received considerable attention in the press. Booker T. Washington described his plan for Negro uplift through industrial education in a number of magazines (e.g., Washington 1896, 1899a, 1899b 1900, 1903; *Century Magazine* 1903). The central question posed was: Could Negroes raise themselves or progress with education? During the Democratic backlash of the 1890s, there was little money or public support for Negro education. Although Negro education in the South was contingent upon Northern philanthropists, Southerners still controlled how the money was allocated.

Jabez L. M. Curry, the General Agent for both the Peabody Education Fund and the John F. Slater Education Fund, was also, in 1899, one of the two surviving organizers of the Confederate Government (Small 1901:847). Curry, still an influential leader in the South, shaped the philanthropic policies for Negro education (Wish 1964:185). He (1899) shared his expertise on the

Negro with the audience of *Popular Science Monthly* in an article entitled "The Negro Question" (Curry 1899). In it, he explained the differences between "The Caucasian and the negro," marshalling evidence to support disenfranchising African Americans. The differences between the Caucasian and the Negro, Curry explained, were born from "irreconcilable racial characteristics and diverse historical antecedents" (1899:178). He introduced the article with a short historical description of what he called the Negro menace from colonial times through Reconstruction. He asserted that Negroes were racially inferior and did not possess the moral and intellectual fortitude to participate in the political process. To support this assertion, he turned to mainstream anthropological discussions of race and declared that

Ethnologically they are nearly polar opposites. With the Caucasian progress has been upward. Whatever is great in art, invention, literature, science, civilization, religion, has characterized him. In his native land the negro has made little or no advancement for nearly four hundred years. Surrounded by and in contact with a higher civilization, he has not invented a machine, nor painted a picture, nor written a book, nor organized a stable government, nor constructed a code of laws.... For thousands of years there lies behind the race one dreary, unrelieved, monotonous chapter of ignorance, nakedness, superstition, savagery. All efforts to reclaim, civilize, Christianize, have been disastrous failures (Curry 1899:179).

The bureaucrats and legislators who wrote for the illustrated magazines also used anthropology to defend their policies toward Native Americans. For example, Henry L. Dawes, author of the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, wrote "Have We Failed the Indians" for *The North American Review*.² In this 1899 article,

Dawes (1899) defended the policies of the U.S. government toward Native Americans during the preceding twenty-five years. He then outlined the rationale for the policies of the current administration toward Native Americans.

It was plain that if he were left alone he must of necessity become a tramp and beggar with all the evil passions of a savage, a homeless and lawless poacher upon civilization, and a terror to the peaceful citizen.... Inasmuch as the Indian refused to fade out, but multiplied under the sheltering care of reservation life ... there was but one alternative: either he must be endured as a lawless savage, a constant menace to civilized life, or he must be fitted to become a part of that life and be absorbed into it. To permit him to be a roving savage was unendurable, and therefore the task of fitting him for civilized life was undertaken.

This is the present Indian policy of the nation,—to fit the Indian for civilization and absorb him into it (Dawes 1899:281).

Theodore Roosevelt also wrote for the popular magazines. In his review of Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* (1894) for the *The North American Review*, Roosevelt revealed his theoretical views on progress and evolution. His main criticism of Kidd's argument was the way he connected the struggle for existence with racial progress. Roosevelt explained that the "great prizes are battled for among the men who wage no war whatever for mere subsistence, while the fight for mere subsistence is keenest among precisely the classes which contribute very little indeed to the progress of the race" (1895:95). Roosevelt's arguments echoed the sentiments of mainstream anthropologists—such as Daniel Brinton and W. J. McGee. Roosevelt was optimistic about the progress for most races but saw no hope for African Americans. Roosevelt felt that "A perfectly stupid race can never rise to a

very high plain; the negro, for instance has been kept down as much by lack of intellectual development as by anything else" (1895:109).

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Politicians, bureaucrats, and budding presidents were not the only ones who contributed to the discourse on race in the fifteen-cent illustrated monthlies. A variety of scientists-cum-popular theorists used their own renditions of anthropological theories on race to transform the popular medium into a bully pulpit to champion ideas of American progress and racial inferiority.³

As Sandra Harding (1991:10-12) has observed, science is created in political struggle; it is politics. Science is embedded in the socio-political milieu which it at once reproduces or challenges. Anthropology is no exception. Anthropologists, like other intellectuals engaged in advancing political agendas conduct science against a backdrop which lends meaning to the scientific problems they pose as well as the solutions they find. However, that backdrop is not stable and science does not function as an 'impartial observer.' The United States has undergone a series of structural and cultural transformations which have changed the very backdrop against which scientists execute their research; in addition, the advancement of 'science' itself has been integral to the cultural, social and structural transformations which have occurred during the 20th century. In this respect, anthropology is not only conducted against a social and cultural backdrop; anthropology, in part, creates it.

NOTES

1. Morgan, a U.S. Senator for thirty-one years, was a staunch segregationist and advocate of states rights. He was a longtime member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and shaped many policies concerning peoples in the Pacific and Caribbean. He aggressively pursued a scheme to resettle African

Americans in the Philippine Islands (Baylen and Moore 1968:66).

2. The Dawes Severalty Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1887, stipulated that Native Americans give up their tribal lands in return for individual land grants. Sponsored by Senator Henry L. Dawes, it was intended to advance the "progress" of Native Americans toward civilization by forcing them into a homesteading way of life. The main effect of the law was opening up the Indian Territories of Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas to white settlers.

3. For examples, see Blyden 1895; Scribner 1895; Smith 1897; Evans 1894, 1897; Morris 1895; Harley 1895; Stone 1903; Weir 1896; Bean 1906a, 1906b; Michaud 1904; and Lombroso 1896, 1897.

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