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**European Immigrants  
and the Whitening of America, 1890-1924<sup>1</sup>**

In this paper, I will discuss “race” as a historically-bounded concept in the context of the massive increase in immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe to the U.S. in the decades around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will focus on the conceptualization of these so-called “new immigrants” and the significance of the debate over immigration triggered by their influx for the construction of a “whiter” American identity. The debate about immigration in this period was ultimately a debate about the definition of “American” and about the racial makeup of the nation. In the words of a member of Congress, “the primary reason for the restriction of the alien stream [...] is the necessity of purifying and keeping pure the blood of America” (qtd in Michaels, 1995: 143). The passing of the National Origins Immigration Act in 1924, which significantly reduced the influx from “undesirable” countries by establishing what were at bottom racist criteria for legal admission into the U.S., represented a victory for nativists, who could now “purify” and “whiten” the “blood” of *their* America.

Words like “Celt,” “Hebrew,” “Slav,” “Mongolian,” or “Asiatic,” which were previously used to define “races”, had wide currency in the United States from the mid-19th century to the first decades of the 20th, but have since disappeared from public usage.

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> American Studies Colloquium, Institute of American Culture, University of Lisbon, on May 6, 2003.

Their disappearance is in itself a significant fact, which points to the fabricated character of racial classifications, to their boundedness in space and time.

But if racial labels have changed over time, racial labeling itself seems to have endured. Not so long ago, in 1982, a woman brought a suit against the Louisiana Bureau of Vital Statistics, asking to be reclassified as white, since she had recently found out that, according to a 1970 state law which defined precise, mathematical rules for racial classification,<sup>2</sup> she was black, although she had lived her whole life as white (Omi & Winant, 1994: 53-4).<sup>3</sup> Several conclusions that can be drawn from this account, but for the purposes of my argument I will highlight two: first, that “races” are indeed fabrications, and specifically legal fictions, created through law by the state (the US Census is a case in point); and second, that the attribution of racial labels is arbitrary, and does not necessarily depend on an individual's physical features. What then does it depend on? What are the forces behind the fabrication of races? Matthew Frye Jacobson identifies three key actors in this process: the state, science, and the images and narratives of popular culture (Jacobson, 1998: 3).

Between the last decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, a period of massive European migration to the US, science and the state formed a particularly strong alliance that led to the definition of a complex framework of racial categories on which depended immigrants' admission to the country and the rights and privileges of US citizenship. But, in point of fact, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, the question of categorizing races and determining racial identities has been for centuries at the center of “intense debates and conflicts, particularly in the US – disputes over natural and legal rights, over the distribution of resources, and indeed, over who shall live and who shall die” (54). Many examples come to mind, but in the period with which I am concerned here, the Jim Crow South stands as a paradigmatic case of the crucial issues involved in racial classification.

Thus, the vigorous debate over race in this period has a long history behind it. From the first Naturalization Law of 1790, which determined that only “free white persons” were eligible for citizenship, through the Civil War, fought over the inclusion of enslaved black

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<sup>2</sup> According to this law, “anyone with at least 1/32nd ‘Negro blood’ [was] black” (Omi & Winant, 1994: 53).

<sup>3</sup> Although the suit was unsuccessful, and the right of the state “to classify and quantify racial identity” was upheld, the law was afterwards repealed (Omi & Winant, 1994: 53, 180).

persons into the polity, to the period of the National Origins Immigration Act, which set quotas for entry into the US according to racist criteria, the definition of what an American is (to echo Crèvecoeur's famous question) has hinged on racial classification. Although the question has usually been framed in black and white terms (terms in which people still think of race), I will focus here on other shades of whiteness, on darker shades of pale, so to speak, on their prominence in this period, and on the significance of the intricate system of difference devised to exclude “whites of a different color” from the nation.

I would like to start the main part of my argument with a story. In 1891, a reporter from the *Detroit News* asked a black whitewasher whether he had any white co-workers. The man replied: “No, dere's no wite men. Dere's some Polacks, but they ain't wite men, you know” (qtd in Jacobson, 1998: 4). According to popular conception and perception,<sup>4</sup> then, “Polacks” were not “white”. But neither were Magyars, Russians, Slavs, Italians, Greeks, or Portuguese,<sup>5</sup> among many others from southern and eastern Europe who came in increasing numbers to the US after the 1880s, reaching the all-time high of 6.5 million in the first decade of the 20th century (Daniels, 1991: 188).<sup>6</sup> As we can gather from many different contemporary sources (congressional records, works of literature, political and scientific tracts, newspaper and magazine articles), “white” was no longer the monolithic category it had been in 1790, when the first Naturalization Law was drafted. If “white” was at the time of the early Republic interchangeable with “American”, this broad racial classification soon became problematic, as the 19th century wore on and hordes of “wild Irish” (Jacobson, 1998: 38) began to knock on the “golden door” just before mid-century.<sup>7</sup>

The case of the Irish provides an early instance of the fracturing of whiteness, and allows us to see that the principles underlying the equation “white equals American” are “civilization” versus “barbarism” or “savagery”, with all its attendant corollaries: fitness versus unfitness for self-government, rationality versus irrationality, and even morality versus depravity (cf. Jacobson, 1998: 31, 48, 54, 59). Thus, Irish immigrants, often referred

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobson argues that “race is not just a conception; it is also a perception.” The perception of difference is conditioned by the cultural traditions and codes in which individuals are reared (Jacobson, 1998: 9-10).

<sup>5</sup> These are some of the groups mentioned in Edward Ross's *The Old World in the New* (1914) as “inferior” Europeans (299).

<sup>6</sup> The total number of immigrants in the period between 1901-1910 was 8 million (Daniels, 1991: 188).

<sup>7</sup> Although my focus is on immigrants from Europe, I should mention the extreme discrimination faced by the Chinese from the time they began arriving in California around 1850. They were seen as “the most debased people on the face of the earth”, and were the target of the first immigration restriction law in US history (Gosset, 1997: 290-91).

to as “Celts”, came increasingly to be defined in opposition to native white Anglo-Saxons, as in the following 1896 *Atlantic Monthly* article: “A Celt [...] lacks the solidity, the balance, the judgement, the moral staying power of the Anglo-Saxon” (qtd in Jacobson, 1998: 49). In other words, they were not only unfit for “participation in the governance of the nation”, but were also seen as a threat to Republican institutions and traditions (Jacobson, 1998: 48-9).

From the last quarter of the 19th century, as immigration increased exponentially, the debate over the threat posed to the nation by certain groups of immigrants became more strident. Proponents of immigration restriction had their first victory with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. If excluding the Chinese, who were classified as “Mongolians” and, in the words of President Rutherford Hayes, members of “weaker races”, like “Negroes and Indians” (Takaki, 1993: 206), was a relatively easy matter, excluding certain groups of immigrants from Europe proved to be more problematic, as the saga of the literacy test bill showed. This bill, which was first introduced in Congress in 1895 by Henry Cabot Lodge as a means of keeping out “undesirable aliens”, finally passed only in 1917 over Woodrow Wilson's veto (Daniels, 1991: 276-7; Higham, 1992: 101-2). From here to the temporary immigration restriction law of 1921 and the definitive law of 1924, which would remain in force until 1965, was but a small step. What changed in the meantime?

In the four decades between the Chinese Exclusion Act and the National Origins Immigration Act of 1924, science became a powerful ally of the restrictionists. From the long list of authors whose studies are relevant to the understanding of the meanings of “race” and racial classifications in this period, we can mention two: Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1775), who divided the world's population into five “varieties” (Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malay, and American) and coined the term “Caucasian” to designate “the most beautiful race of men” (Pereira, 1993: 18; Gossett, 1997: 37-8; Williams, 1985: 249);<sup>8</sup> and Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (1853-55), who established a hierarchy of three races (white, yellow, and black) and proposed the idea of a superior

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<sup>8</sup> It may be relevant to note that the US Immigration Commission used Blumenbach's taxonomy in *A Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, volume 5 of its 42-volume report on immigration published in 1911. But it also pointed to the fact that “the bureau recognizes 45 races or peoples among immigrants coming to the United States, and of these 36 are indigenous to Europe” (2).

“Aryan race”, which, at the turn of the century, was restricted to a “Nordic race” (Williams, 1985: 249; Pereira, 1993: 23-4).

What I want to highlight here are some of the ideas that were articulated by Gobineau, which, in conjunction with Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species (1859), became widespread in the second half of the 19th century both in Europe and America: the association between people or nation and race, the idea of the inequality of the races, of “pure racial stocks”, and of competitive race struggle as the basis of the development of history and civilization (Pereira, 1993: 23-25; Williams, 1985: 249). Thus arose a racist worldview which, taking the conceptual construct of race as a *fact*, was founded on the following set of premises:

- 1) the actual existence of races conceived according to the model of animal species;
- 2) external physical characteristics correspond to inner intellectual, moral or temperamental traits;
- 3) “race traits” predetermine the behavior of individuals;
- 4) these traits are inherited and cannot be changed or transcended; and
- 5) races are not only different, but superior or inferior in relation to each other; in other words, there is a hierarchy of races).<sup>9</sup>

In short, all of this implies a form of essentialism which establishes a causal nexus between “biological characteristics and cultural creations”, in Miguel Baptista Pereira's words (9), and which, “under the custody of power, [...] reads social differences as immutable biological phenomena” (Pereira, 1993: 11).

In the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the so-called native Americans, and particularly what Randolph Bourne calls “the ruling class of Anglo-Saxon descendants” (96), felt they were being “swamped and submerged by an overwhelming tide of latecomers from the old-world hive” (Ross, 1914: 282). If Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen claimed that true “Americanism”, based on the “democratic [...] theory of government” (Kallen, 1915: 125), meant the acceptance of difference, people like Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Sociology Professor Edward Ross, or the patrician pseudo-scientist Madison Grant heartily disagreed, and wrote extensively on the essential “race traits” that

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<sup>9</sup> See Pereira (1993: 9) and Jacobson (1998: 32).

distinguished what they called “native Americans” from southern and eastern European immigrants.

One of these “native Americans”, Henry James, in his observations on the ubiquity of immigrants in New York and Boston at the beginning of the 20th century, reveals his profound anxiety about the present and future of an America where “the alien was truly in possession”, “in serene and triumphant possession” (117, 231). Incapable of establishing any kind of relationship with them, he “gasp[s] with the sense of isolation” (125). But what is most significant is the frequent comparison of “aliens”, as James constantly refers to them, to animals – fish (131), squirrels and monkeys, ants (134), snakes and worms (132) – thus representing immigrants as a non-human species.

This type of conception frequently appeared in this period, as well as the quite widespread idea that southern and eastern European immigrants constituted a primitive stage of the human species. The words of Edward Ross, in his 1914 tract *The Old World in the New*, illustrate both points:

[T]he blood now being injected into the veins of our people is “sub-common”. To one accustomed to the aspect of the normal American population, the Caliban type shows up with a frequency that is startling. Observe immigrants [...] in their gatherings, washed, combed, and in their Sunday best. [...] They simply look out of place in black clothes and stiff collar, since clearly they belong in skins, in wattled huts at the close of the Great Ice Age. These oxlike men are descendants of those *who always stayed behind*. (117-8; italics in the original; my emphasis)

Associated with primitivism, disorder, irrationality, depravity, and disease, the new immigrants were considered constitutionally incapable of assimilation (Higham, 1992: 137-8, 140) and, thus, their presence threatened not only the political and cultural traditions of the nation, but also its “racial purity”. Immigration restriction was imperative, “so that the physical stock shall not degenerate” (qtd in Higham, 1992: 138).

The idea of “racial purity” and of the supremacy of the “great Nordic race” would find its “purest” expression in Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, which was first published in 1916, and had revised editions in 1918, 1921, and 1923 (Higham, 1992:

201, 218, 271).<sup>10</sup> Subtitled an attempt to elucidate the meaning of history in terms of race”. Defining race as the *The Racial Basis of European History*, this work is described in the Introduction as “immutable “physical and psychic structure of man” (Introduction), Grant distinguishes race from nationality and language and associates it with social strata, stating that “in the beginning all differences of class, of caste, and of color, marked actual lines of race cleavage” (Part I, ch. I). All his subsequent argumentation, based on the clichés of evolutionism, on racist anthropological studies, and on nebulous interpretations of the history of the world in general and the West in particular, seeks to demonstrate the importance of the laws of heredity for the maintenance of an actual caste system. At the same time, Grant attacks all environmentalist theories, but especially the theory of the melting pot, in the parts of the book in which he deals with the specific case of the United States:

There exists to-day a widespread and fatuous belief in the power of environment, as well as of education and opportunity to alter heredity, which arises from the dogma of the brotherhood of man, derived in turn from the loose thinkers of the French Revolution and their American mimics. Such beliefs have done much damage in the past, and if allowed to go uncontradicted, may do much more serious damage in the future. (Part I, ch. 2)

According to Grant, one can already see the damage done in Mexico, where the melting pot of “the Spanish conquerors” and “the native Indian population” produced “a mongrel race”, incapable of “self-government” (Part I, ch. 2).

But how can we explain this contradiction between the superiority of certain races and their vulnerability to “inferior races”? In this period, the answer was found in the concept of “reversion”, according to which latent characteristics inherited from remote ancestors can reassert themselves in subsequent generations. The discovery of Mendel's studies on plants around the turn of the century led to the dissemination of the Mendelian laws of heredity, and this gave a fundamental weapon to racists like Grant, who were concerned with maintaining the purity of the white Nordics (Higham, 1992: 155). Grant's

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting piece of information about this book, which reveals its longevity and popularity among racist circles, is that it is available online through a site named God's Order Affirmed in Love (GOAL) Reference Library for Reconstructing a National Identity for Christian Whites. Among the several documents that can be easily accessed is *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, published in 1920 by one of Grant's disciples, Lothrop Stoddard. Also very popular at the time, Stoddard's book called attention to the threat posed to Nordics by the high fertility rates of “inferior races”. The quotations from Grant's book are from the online text accessed at <http://melvig.org/pgr-toc.html>.

direct source was the work of an MIT Economics professor, William Z. Ripley, whose interest in geography and anthropology led him to study the interplay between race and environment (Higham, 1992: 154-5). It was from Ripley's 1899 work *The Races of Europe* that Grant derived the classification of European peoples into three distinct races: the Teutonic (which Grant changes to Nordic), the Alpine, and the Mediterranean (Grant, 1916: Intro. and Part I, ch.2). But it was in 1908 that Ripley gave a lecture in which he focused on the concept of reversion as a possible scenario for the present mixture of races in the US, thus providing “a thoroughly biological explanation of the foreign peril” (Higham, 1992: 155).

In his grand sweep of American history, Grant reinvents a mythical past in which the whitest of the white held undisputed sway over the land until the Civil War, which marks the beginning of the invasion of the “foreign peril”. The Civil War, then, represents a watershed in the evolution of the “master race”, the “distinct type” of “native American” derived from the “Teutonic part of the British Isles”, since it destroyed “great numbers of the best breeding stock” (Part I, ch. VII). But the greatest problem came after the war with the so-called “new immigration”, which brought “a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken, and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans, together with the hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos” (Part I, ch. 7). The result of this invasion can already be seen in New York, which “is becoming a cloaca gentium which will produce many amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors”. The open-door immigration policy of the US and the belief in the influence of education and American institutions and environment to change “immemorial hereditary tendencies” (Part I, ch. 7) are leading to the extermination of the “pure” native American, which leads Grant to conclude that:

We Americans must realize that the altruistic ideas which have controlled our social development during the past century, and the maudlin sentimentalism that has made America “an asylum for the oppressed”, are sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss. If the Melting Pot is allowed to boil without control, and we continue to follow our national motto and deliberately blind ourselves to all “distinctions of race, creed, or color”, the type of native American of Colonial descent will become as extinct as the Athenian of the age of Pericles, and the Viking of the days of Rollo. (Part II, ch. 14)

Consequently, Grant proposes specific measures to halt this apocalyptic scenario. Besides immigration restriction, he advocates the prohibition of miscegenation (Part I, ch. 5), as well as eugenic measures that include the elimination of “defective” individuals, and the segregation and sterilization of “undesirables”. Anticipating the results of the application of a rigorous state system of eugenic selection, Grant raves about the unlimited possibilities of extermination with the aim of improving the “race”:

A rigid system of selection through the elimination of those who are weak or unfit – in other words, social failures – would solve the whole question in one hundred years. [...] This is a practical, merciful, and inevitable solution of the whole problem, and can be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased, and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types. (Part I, ch. IV)

The question of biological reproduction, and specifically the reproduction of the “fittest”, i.e., the white Anglo-Saxon or Nordic Americans, was at the heart of the matter for racists like Grant. The declining fertility rate among the upper classes, in contrast to the high fertility rate of the poorer classes and immigrants (two largely overlapping categories), contributed to the nativist and racist hysteria in this period. In the mid-1890s, Francis A. Walker, former superintendent of the US Census, raised the issue in a statistical study of the decline of the “native stock” in New England. Attacking the new immigrants as “beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence” (qtd in Gossett, 1997: 303; cf. Jacobson, 2000: 156-7), Walker argued that they represented a source of degradation and corruption, and were the real reason behind the declining birth rate of native-born Americans, who “became increasingly unwilling to bring forth sons and daughters who should be obliged to compete in the labor market and in the walks of life with those whom they did not recognize as of their own grade and condition” (qtd in Gossett, 1997: 302). This rather convoluted thesis, which came to be called “race suicide” by Edward A. Ross in 1901, gained wide currency in the following years, especially after Theodore Roosevelt began using it in his campaign for fecundity

(Gossett, 1997: 171; Higham, 1992: 147).<sup>11</sup> For Ross, the low fertility rate that ensured the higher standard of living of the “superior race” constituted “a fatal weakness” in the context of competition with a “race that multiplies on a lower plane” (Ross, 1901: 211). In rather elegiac terms, he goes on to say that:

For a case like this I can find no words so apt as “race suicide”. There is no bloodshed, no violence, no assault of the race that waxes upon the race that wanes. The higher race quietly and unobtrusively eliminates itself rather than endure individually the bitter competition it has failed to ward off from itself by collective action. (212-3)

Thus, state intervention in matters of immigration restriction was essential for preventing this state of affairs.

Scientists and social scientists, as we've seen, were quite clear about the need for vigorous state action – after all, it was a matter of life and death. As the pressure for immigration restriction mounted from all sides, the alliance between science (and specifically eugenics) and the state found its “natural breeding ground” in the House Committee on Immigration, which was in charge of drafting the bill that would finally become the National Origins Immigration Act of 1924. Significantly enough, Republican Congressman Albert Johnson, the chair of the Committee, enlisted the help of Madison Grant and other immigration restrictionists, as well as that of eugenicists, for the elaboration of the final bill (Higham, 1992: 313-14).<sup>12</sup> An important victory had already been won in 1921, with an emergency law which had temporarily restricted immigration from Europe according to the quota system that would prevail from 1924 onwards. However, this system had to be refined, since a significant number of “inferior whites” were still allowed admission to the country (Higham, 1992: 311). The problem would be

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<sup>11</sup> Madison Grant uses Walker's thesis in ch. 7, Part I, of *The Passing of the Great Race* to explain the decline in the population of colonial descent. He also uses the concept of race suicide in the section in which he advocates that eugenic measures should be applied to the development of the “desirable” social classes, calling attention to the fact that “[t]o attack race suicide by encouraging indiscriminate breeding is not only futile, but is dangerous if it leads to an increase in the undesirable elements. What is needed in the community most of all, is an increase in the desirable classes, which are of superior type physically, intellectually, and morally, and not merely an increase in the absolute numbers of the population” (Part I, ch. 4). He might be hinting at the misguided aims of Roosevelt's campaign.

<sup>12</sup> The “eugenic connection” was quite strong in the early 1920s. Johnson became president of the Eugenics Research Association in 1923 (Gossett, 1997: 406), and Harry H. Laughlin, director of the Eugenics Record Office, was nominated “expert eugenics agent” of the House Committee on Immigration in 1920 (Gossett, 1997: 401; Higham, 1992: 314).

solved quite ingeniously: instead of using the 1910 census for calculating the immigrant quotas from the number of the diverse groups of nationalities present in American society, they would use the 1890 census and reduce the quotas from 3 to 2%, with the argument that the “racial preponderance” of “the basic strains of our population” needed to be maintained (Higham, 1992: 321; cf. Jacobson, 1998: 83). These “basic strains” were obviously derived from northwestern Europe, which received high quotas, as opposed to southern and eastern Europe, whose quotas were severely limited (Gossett, 1997: 406; Higham, 1992: 324).

Thus, the 1924 National Origins Act manifested the strength of the ideas of Nordic supremacy, and, one might add, the strength of fabricated traditions. By establishing an intricate system of racial classifications, it not only defined a hierarchy of races according to which admission to the country would henceforth be determined, but it also gave a clear answer to Crèvecoeur's question, though not in his terms. The “strange mixture of blood” which, according to Crèvecoeur, could be found in no other country at the end of the 18th century (Crèvecoeur, 1782: 897) had been wiped out from the nation's memory by the early decades of the 20th century. The invention of a mythical past in which the original settlers were “not only purely Nordic, but also purely Teutonic” (Grant, Part I, ch. 7) was the basis on which the law set its blueprint for the future, putting an end to “the day of unalloyed welcome to all peoples, the day of indiscriminate acceptance of all races” (A. Johnson, 1927, qtd in Daniels, 1991: 284). From this time forward, the “foreign peril” could be controlled, the darker shades of white could be eliminated, and the whitening (or should one say the re-whitening?) of America could begin.

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