

more backward"; Ruthenians are "less practical, solid, and persevering than their competitors of the north . . . but they often show a higher grade of intelligence and taste"; "Sicilians are vivid in imagination, affable, and benevolent, but excitable, superstitious, and revengeful"; and the Slav is "inequable or changeable in mood and in effort—now exalted, now depressed, melancholy, and fatalistic." Along with this "changeability," one observes "carelessness as to the business virtues of punctuality and often honesty."⁸⁸

Although the *Dictionary* is not nearly as virulent in its racism as, say, Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* (see below), nonetheless the political intent of this taxonomy of peoples is not far beneath the surface. Again and again, in various connections, the authors note the significance of the changing "source" and "character" of immigration to the United States. Italians, Hebrews, and Slavs now constitute the most numerous arrivals to American shores, and if their "difference" from old-stock Americans is cause enough for concern, their sheer numbers and the possibilities for their future numbers ought positively to sound a national alarm. Although never as blatant in its distaste for the newcomer as the adherents of "race suicide," the *Dictionary* announces an incipient but perhaps inevitable demographic apocalypse: "The immense capacity of the Italian race to populate other parts of the earth," for example, "is shown by the fact that they outnumber the Spanish race in Spanish Argentina and the Portuguese race in Brazil, a 'Portuguese' country."⁸⁹

Such concerns over the biological powers of immigrants to effect a kind of conquest by procreation led to a heightened debate over the eugenic dimensions of immigration policy, and to an increasingly high profile for eugenic experts both in the popular presses and in congressional hearing-rooms. The Immigration Restriction League now pressed the language of racial hygiene, arguing in one report submitted to the Dillingham Commission (under the subheading "Restriction Needed from a Eugenic Standpoint"), "We should see to it that the breeding of the human race in this country receives the attention which it so surely deserves." "A considerable proportion of the immigrants now coming," warned the league, "are from races and countries . . . which have not progressed, but have been backward, downtrodden, and relatively useless for centuries. If these immigrants 'have not had opportunities,' it is because their races have not made the opportunities." The secretary of the Executive Committee, Prescott Hall, added that the league opposed, not all immigration, but only that which "lowers the mental, moral, and physical average of

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our people." In this connection he noted ominously that of recent immigrants, "three-fifths were of the Slavic and Iberic races of southern and eastern Europe."⁹⁰

Among the most important and popular expressions of the rising eugenic view of immigration was Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race*, an extended diatribe against the "pathetic and fatuous belief in the efficacy of American institutions" to absorb and transform diverse populations. The book first appeared in 1916, but achieved its peak popularity only in the early 1920s, undergoing successive editions in 1920 and 1921. The old-stock American's liberal immigration policies, in Grant's view, were tantamount to "suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race." Grant took issue with Franz Boas and others who now emphasized the influence of environment and the potential for changes—even changes in physical characteristics—among newly arrived immigrant populations: what the melting pot (a biological, not a cultural, contrivance) really accomplishes, Grant argued, is best exemplified by "the racial mixture which we call Mexican, and which is now engaged in demonstrating its incapacity for self-government." Here, indeed, are the stakes of immigration policy, and the underlying peril of the "melting-pot" ideal. "Whether we like to admit it or not, the result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized and lower type. The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a negro is a negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu; and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew."⁹¹

This combination of immutable racial traits and an ineluctable tendency toward decline among any multiracial crosses spelled danger indeed for the republic. The "new immigration" consisted largely 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 hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos." As Grant saw it, in cities like New York "old stock" Americans were being "literally driven off the streets" by "swarms" of immigrants—primarily Polish Jews—who "adopt the language of the native American; they wear his clothes; they steal his name; and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals."⁹²

In assessing the traits and the relative merits of the European races, Grant sketched out a three-tiered scheme of "Nordics," "Alpines," and "Mediterraneans." Predictably, he reserved harsh judgment for American

blacks, who had become "a serious drag on civilization" from the moment "they were given the rights of citizenship and were incorporated in the body politic." But so salient are the differences among Nordics, Alpines, and Mediterraneans, that when Grant lumps them together at all, he does so only by the self-undermining phrase "so-called Caucasians." The term "'Caucasian race' has ceased to have any meaning," he argued, except where it is used to contrast white populations with "Negroes," "Indians," or "Mongols."⁹³

Grant's views on the hierarchy of whiteness are highly symptomatic; they not only influenced debates over immigration and restriction, but also influenced and reflected popular understanding of peoplehood and diversity. As Madison Grant and his counterparts at Cold Spring Harbor gained notoriety in the 1910s and early 1920s (due, in no small part, to the Dillingham Commission itself), the eugenic cast of the American immigration debate became more and more pronounced. During the hearings before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1922, the prominent eugenicist Harry Laughlin explained, "Social inadequacy as an effect and racial degeneracy as a primary cause go hand in hand"; therefore he had undertaken to study "the relative soundness of recent and older immigrant stocks." Laughlin unabashedly referred to his research as "investigations into the biological or eugenical aspects of immigration," and in this spirit offered up to the committee a series of "racial" breakdowns (following the scheme of races in the Dillingham Commission's Dictionary) of various types of "social inadequacy" in the United States: feeble-mindedness, insanity, criminality, epilepsy, tuberculosis, leprosy, inebriety, blindness, deafness, deformity, and a catch-all, "dependency." Amid his discussion of immigration as "a long-time national investment in hereditary traits," Laughlin, for one, was quite willing to refer to the proposed system of immigration quotas—the basis for an eventual scheme of "national origins quotas"—as "race quotas."⁹⁴

If his testimony and the voluminous writing he submitted during the key period of debate helped to bring eugenic thinking into the mainstream of political discourse, his very presence before the committee and his ubiquitous writings mark the extent to which the eugenic view had already entered popular American thinking. Looking back with approval upon this legislative victory for the eugenics movement years later, Laughlin wrote, "Henceforth, after 1924, the immigrant to the United States was to be looked upon, not as a source of cheap or competitive labor, nor as

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one seeking asylum from foreign oppression, nor as a migrant hunting a less strenuous life, but as a parent of future-born American citizens. This meant that the hereditary stuff out of which future immigrants were made would have to be compatible racially with American ideals."⁵⁵

The stakes of immigration restriction, as defined by the eugenically minded, ultimately determined the shape of the new legislation. The formula that was finally written into the Johnson Act—that is, a quota system based on 2 percent of each group's population according to the 1890 census—originally emerged in a Report of the Eugenics Committee of the United States Committee on Selective Immigration. That committee, chaired by none other than Madison Grant and including Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington (the president of the Eugenic Research Association, 1923–1924), argued that a formula based on the 1890 census rather than on a more recent one "would change the character of immigration, and hence of our future population, by bringing about a preponderance of immigration of the stock which originally settled this country." North and West Europeans, read the report, were of "higher intelligence" and hence provided "the best material for American citizenship." Although the authors of the report alleged that this was not a question of "superior" and "inferior" races, but merely a matter of admitting an "adaptable, helpful and homogenous element in our American national life," they did venture that their formula would "greatly reduce the number of immigrants of the lower grades of intelligence, and of immigrants who are making excessive contribution to our feeble-minded, insane, criminal, and other socially inadequate classes." Citing data from Yerkes's Army Intelligence Tests, the authors now poured the very old wine of fitness for self-government into the new bottle of eugenics: "Had mental tests been in operation, and had the 'inferior' and 'very inferior' immigrants been refused admission to the United States, over six million aliens now living in this country, free to vote, and to become the fathers and mothers of future Americans, would never have been admitted."⁵⁶

Exact figures concerning the probable effects of the Johnson formula varied, but the principle was clear enough. These sample figures, entered in the Congressional Record during the debate, demonstrate the stakes involved in the racial make-up of continuing immigration according to the two formulas being considered, one based on group population percentages derived from the 1910 census, the other (eugenic) derived from the 1890 census:

Country of Origin	Current law	Senate bill (1910 census)	Johnson Act (1890 census)
Greece	3,063	2,042	100
Italy	42,057	28,038	3,889
Poland	30,979	20,652	8,872
Russia	24,405	16,270	1,792
Yugoslavia	6,426	4,284	735

N = immigrants per year under the competing plans

Later in the spring of 1924, at a convocation of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, Professor Henry Fairfield Osborn succinctly pronounced upon the Johnson Act's republican intent and its reliance upon hereditary, rather than environmental, principles of "difference." It is the sovereign right of the state "to safeguard the character and integrity of the race or races on which its future depends," he declared. And further, the political dictum that "all men are born with equal rights and duties has been confused with the political sophistry that all men are born with equal character and ability to govern themselves and others, and with the educational sophistry that education and environment will offset the handicap of heredity."⁹⁷

If the system of "difference" governing the logic of the Johnson Act seems novel and the policy of "racial hygiene" seems distasteful from the standpoint of the late twentieth century, neither aspect was a point of much squeamishness at the time. Eugenicians were as frank in their laudatory assessments of the act's import as they were in their assertions as to the soundness of its core principles. Harry Laughlin, among the most visible experts called upon by Congress during the debates, explained the eugenic project of which the Johnson Act was a part in a later tract, *Immigration and Conquest*:

Racially the American people, if they are to remain American, are to purge their existing family stocks of degeneracy, and are to encourage a high rate of reproduction by the best-endowed portions of their population, can successfully assimilate in the future many thousands of Northwestern European immigrants . . . But we can assimilate only a small fraction of this number of other white races; and of the colored races practically none.

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Laughlin identified the act as an important "turning point" in immigration policy, in that it squarely set state policy on "a biological basis"; "the American people began to look upon immigration as the importation of human seed-stock." (Laughlin supplied not only much of the thinking behind the eugenic policy, but also its most vivid analogy: "In the rat world the record is not one of conquest by direct war and formal battle, but one by the quiet immigration—a few at a time—of members of the invading species, which established itself, reproduced at a high rate . . . [and] succeeded to the ownership of the invaded territory.")⁹⁸

Other eugenicists were hardly more charitable toward the "new immigrants." Thurman Rice, in *Racial Hygiene* (1929), viewed them as "immigrants of unrelated blood," and argued that perhaps quotas—even under the eugenic formula of the 1924 legislation—were not enough: "Members of the Slavic or Alpine sub-race should be allowed to enter only in exceptional cases, since we now have all of this blood that we can absorb, and probably more than is good for us." On the fundamental, hereditary traits of the new immigration in general, Rice commented, "A man may be made physically clean for the moment by the use of soap, water, and disinfecting and delousing agents, but the habits of a lifetime which allowed him to become dirty and lousy, and those traits of a defective germ plasm which permitted him to be contented in remaining so, cannot be changed by soap and water, and disinfecting and delousing agents."⁹⁹

Two points bear particular emphasis here. The first is that the eugenic view met vigorous opposition in this period from immigrants and natives alike. Eugenic outlooks on immigration and other social questions were in ascendance, but their hegemony was not without ruptures. During the congressional debate, for instance, one representative called Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* "as fine an example of dogmatic piffle as has ever been written," and lamented that the committee had granted so much time to the likes of Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, and Harry Laughlin, and so little to the cooler scientific voices of Franz Boas or Ernest Hooton. Another objected to the eugenicists' contention that their bill was not discriminatory: "If the bill does not discriminate against south and east Europeans, deliberately so, why the report of Dr. Laughlin, why all the scientific investigation under the Carnegie Foundation to prove that those races were inferior, socially and nationally; that they were inferior stock?" It should never be said to some Americans, he insisted, "You come from

an inferior race. Your race is practically barred now from this country, and we today regret that we let you in." "That," he concluded, "is not the America I want to be a part of. [Applause]."¹⁰⁰

Opposition to the proposed restriction bill was led in Congress by the New York delegation, and in particular by Fiorello LaGuardia, Nathan Perlman, and Samuel Dickstein; Dickstein's dealing with the Committee on Immigration had made it clear to him that its members "did not want anybody else in this country except Nordics." A series of popular rallies and demonstrations further manifested widespread opposition. Giving the lie to the public fiction of inferior and superior white races, Rabbi Stephen Wise told an immense audience at a Carnegie Hall rally, the "Nordic race" was no more than a convenient political invention, simply "devised to prove its [own] superiority, and in order to prove the inferiority of some of the great races of the earth which are unacceptable to the inventors of the Nordic."¹⁰¹

As had been the case in the nineteenth century, however, there was a troubling aspect to much of this opposition. Like earlier arguments on behalf of this or that group which left intact the core principle that the incapacities of *some* groups did indeed require their exclusion from the nation's political life, the opposition in 1924 embraced exclusion as an acceptable tradition in American politics. Like their forerunners, the dissidents of 1924 asked simply which groups were properly to be the target of exclusion. Representative Clancy of Michigan, for example, attacked the "fearful fallacy of chosen peoples and inferior peoples" with an argument that rested upon an implicit foundation of white supremacism: "The fearful fallacy is that one is made to rule and the other abominated," he objected, "all Caucasians and worshipping the same God." The question that had been posed overtly in 1870 now merely lingered between the lines: what of groups who were not "Caucasian" or did not worship the same God? Or again, a letter of protest by Max Kohler decried the de facto exclusion of Greeks, Italians, Poles, and Jews by this trickery of basing the immigration quotas on the 1890 census: "Will any thinking man dare to put these races among the relatively inferior races of the world?" he wanted to know, thereby endorsing the notion of racial superiority.¹⁰²

Nowhere was this underside of the protest as clear as in the following exchange on the floor of Congress, when one representative led another through a catechism on the principles of self-government. "Is it the gen-

tleman's idea," the questioner asked, "that the primary object of this bill is to discriminate against certain people?"

Mr. O'Connor of New York: I believe that the committee and the proponents of this bill believe that, in order to preserve the ideals of this country, it is necessary to discriminate against certain races.

Mr. MacLafferty: That is fairly put. Would you discriminate against Asiatic races?

Mr. O'Connor of New York: I believe that is a well-founded tradition of America.

Mr. MacLafferty: Is it discrimination?

Mr. O'Connor of New York: It is.

Mr. MacLafferty: Is it necessary?

Mr. O'Connor of New York: It may be.

Mr. MacLafferty: Is necessary discrimination ever justified?

Mr. O'Connor of New York: Sometimes.

Mr. MacLafferty: Very good.¹⁰³

This brings us to the second critical point regarding the position of eugenic ideas in American political culture at this moment in the twentieth century: the triumph of eugenic logic in 1924 was not a political anomaly, the fleeting victory of so many cranks and crackpots. Although acceptance of eugenic premises was not universal—as is demonstrated by much of the congressional wrangling—neither had some mad eugenic fringe momentarily seized the reins of government. The terms of debate and the Johnson Act itself expressed a fear for the well-being of the republic and asserted a philosophy of "fitness for self-government" that were deeply embedded in American political culture, and that extended all the way back to the Revolutionary generation and its own naturalization law of 1790. The exclusionary logic of the 1924 legislation represented not a new deployment of race in American political culture, but merely a new refinement of how the races were to be defined for the purposes of discussing good citizenship. "Fitness for self-government" had been a concept intimately linked to race from the advent of the new nation, and the eugenicists almost certainly could not have won this battle had their program represented a complete departure from the tenets of inclusion and exclusion that had long characterized the nation's political conduct. They could not have won in 1924, that is, had their argument on behalf of "justifiable," "necessary discrimination" been a new idea under the sun.

Eugenicists probably could not have gained a hearing at all, moreover, had their views of racial hygiene violated the common assumptions of human diversity as "difference" to begin with. The Johnson Act did not invent the hierarchy of white races, but merely formalized a refined understanding of whiteness that had steadily gained currency since the early Celtic famine refugees had dragged themselves ashore in "Black 'Forty-Seven." The eugenic program behind the Johnson Act may have been bold in its positive use of the state, but it was founded upon an understanding of "difference" which was neither bold nor terribly unusual. Although it may be tempting in retrospect to identify the likes of Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, Harry Laughlin, and Albert Johnson as extreme in their views, it is critical to recognize that figures far more central to American political and intellectual life shared many of their basic assumptions—Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Edward A. Ross, Frederick Jackson Turner, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are among them. Herbert Hoover's Committee on Social Trends could enthusiastically laud the immigration act as selecting "a physical type which closely resembles the prevailing stock in our country."¹⁰⁴

Even more important than the compatibility of eugenic thought with accepted scientific wisdom was its firm rooting in notions of racial difference that had become familiar in a number of less rarified cultural venues as well. The Celts *were* Celtic during these years, and Hebrews *were* racially Hebrew. The Slavs were Slavic in ways that even Madison Grant's political enemies perceived. It was not just a handful at the margins who saw certain immigrants as racially distinct; nor did the eugenic view of white races emerge in a vacuum. The consensus on this point was impressive. In a Fourth of July oration at Narragansett Pier in 1906, for instance, Brander Matthews (then in a pro-immigrant phase) had repudiated those who were "willing enough to welcome Teuton and even Celt, [yet] see peril to our citizenship in granting it to Slav and to Scythian, with 'tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.'" Matthews went on, in a logic based no less upon race than the most virulent eugenic tract, to develop a passionate argument regarding the non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants' potential contribution to the republic. "It is true that the latest newcomers are not altogether Teutonic or even Celtic," he conceded; "they are Latin and Slav and Semitic . . . [But] the suave manner of the Italian may modify in time the careless discourtesy which discredits us now in the eyes of foreign visitors. The ardor of the Slav may quicken our appreciation of music and of the fine arts." Quoting the sociologist

Franklin Giddings to the same effect, he argued that “a mixture of elements not Anglo-Teuton ‘will soften the emotional nature’ and ‘quicken the poetic and artistic nature’ of the American people; gentler in our thoughts and feelings because of the Alpine strain . . . we shall find ourselves ‘with a higher power to enjoy the beautiful things of life because of the Celtic and the Latin blood.’ ”¹⁰⁵

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, such racial depictions of white immigrant groups fully saturated American culture, providing the necessary ideological soil for the eugenicists’ vision to triumph. As Thomas Gossett has argued, “No American writers have done more to publicize race theories and to glorify the Anglo-Saxons than have Frank Norris, Jack London, and Owen Wister.” Literary naturalism was in large part defined by the very notions of race that drove the immigration debate. On the positive end is Wolf Larson in Jack London’s *Sea Wolf* (1904), the very embodiment of regeneration and strenuous life. In a debate between Larson and Humphrey Van Weyden on Spencerian philosophy—a man should act for the benefit of himself, then his children, then his race—Larson declares flatly, “I cut out the race and children.” And yet it is his race that sets him apart as an *Übermensch*: “the face, with large features and strong lines, of the square order . . . The jaw, the chin, the brow rising to a goodly height and swelling heavily above the eyes . . . seemed to speak an immense vigor or virility of spirit”; “he is oppressed by the primal melancholy of the race”; he is akin to the “white-skinned, fair-haired savages” of old. At the negative end is the “old Jew” Zerkow, in Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899): “He had the thin, eager cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long searching amidst muck and debris; and claw-like, prehensile fingers—the fingers of a man who accumulates but never disburses. It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man.” (Later, when Zerkow and Maria have a baby who soon dies, Norris describes the child as “a hybrid little being . . . combining in its puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard.” Perhaps it was also because of their racial degeneracy that “neither Zerkow nor Maria was much affected by either the birth or the death.”)¹⁰⁶

Nor was it only naturalist writers like London and Norris who imbibed and popularized the racial truth of divisible whiteness. A character in Charles Chesnutt’s *Marrow of Tradition* (1901) speaks comically of “de Angry-Saxon race—ez dey call deyse’ves nowadays”; and, later, noting

the bearing of a certain Jewish merchant during the Charlotte race riot, Chesnutt muses, "A Jew—a God of Moses!—had so far forgotten twenty centuries of history as to join in the persecution of another oppressed race!" Although James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is founded upon the unforgiving cultural (though not biological) dyad of black-white, Johnson nonetheless remarks, "In the discussion of the race question the diplomacy of the Jew was something to be admired." The Jew "knew that to sanction Negro oppression would be to sanction Jewish oppression." With an essentialist flourish typical for the period, he added, "Long traditions and business instincts told him when in Rome to act as a Roman." In 1903 John R. Dos Passos heralded the coming of "The Anglo-Saxon Century," and traces of this view of a hierarchy of white races informed his son's *U.S.A.* trilogy years later.¹⁰⁷

In the decades bracketing the eugenic triumph of the 1924 immigration act such conceptions of the white races and their "difference" had surfaced in the lurid reformist writings of figures like Jacob Riis; in political debate over an Anglo-Saxon alliance of the United States and Great Britain; in reviews of the (alarming) popularity of the exotic Rudolph Valentino; in critical discussions of "mongrelized" Jews like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin in the business of making "Negro" music; in the language of metropolitan dailies and their account of urban criminality; and even in the nationalist discussions of many immigrant groups themselves.¹⁰⁸

In a 1921 contribution to the immigration debate carried (appropriately) in *Good Housekeeping*, Calvin Coolidge had remarked, "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With the other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides." In June 1924 Coolidge issued his proclamation setting the terms of the new, eugenic immigration law into effect that summer, thus closing the debate and presaging the end of the most fractious period in the political history of whiteness in the United States, the period that had begun with the massive influx of undesirable "white persons" from Ireland and Germany in the 1840s.¹⁰⁹ In the decades following the 1924 legislation, the problem posed to the United States by the non-Nordic races of Europe would lose salience in public concern, to the extent, finally, that their perceived "difference" would cease to register as racial at all.

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