The Natural Order of Things: Social Darwinism and White Supremacy

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This article examines racial theories of development in connection with Kant; America exceptionalism, nationalism, and nativism; and the transformation of manifest destiny into a racial destiny. It then focuses on the forms of social Darwinist thinking that pervaded and dominated American intellectual life toward the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the chief ideological uses to which this new racial imaginary was put in domestic and foreign affairs. Finally, it sketches the decline of this dominant ideology and its replacement with a nearly equivalent cultural theory of development and difference.

In his sharp analysis of contemporary American imperialism, Cornel West traces its roots to the arrested development of democracy in America.1 The latter, he argues, can only be understood historically; and a, if not the, principal lens under which it must be examined is the pervasiveness of white supremacy in our history. The failure to come publicly to terms with the deeply racist and imperialist strains in our national past remains a fundamental weakness of our political culture.2 Until critical historical consciousness of that past informs political discourse in the present, the “self-deceptive innocence” and avoidance of “painful truths about ourselves” so characteristic of debate in our public sphere will persist.3 Accordingly, in Democracy Matters, West offers a narrative sketch of the profound intrication of race and empire in our nation’s history. He highlights the constitutive tensions between freedom and domination, inclusion and exclusion, national independence and imperial expansion in that history, and the racialist worldview that informed them. “The fundamental paradox of American democracy in particular is that gallantly emerged as a fragile democratic experiment over and against an oppressive British empire ... even while harboring it’s own imperial visions of westward expansion, with more than 20 percent of its population consisting of enslaved Africans.”4

On these points I find myself in full agreement with West. And so, in a spirit of collaboration, I want in this paper to offer a more detailed reading of one chapter of the critical history of the present he sketches. It is centered around the period from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the First World War, and it is focused on only one strand of the intellectual history of that
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period: the ascendancy of social Darwinist thinking about race and empire, though I also offer a few, brief remarks about some relevant earlier developments and a few, equally brief concluding remarks about some subsequent ones.

In the wake of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859), and through the intermediation of Herbert Spencer and his American disciples, social Darwinism became the dominant ideology in a period that saw the establishment of a racial caste system in the South, the completion of Indian removal in the West, the shift from continental expansion to international imperialism in the war with Spain, and the rise of organized opposition to immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe in the Northeast and from Asia, especially China, in the West. “Race” played a critical role in the public discourse about each of these formative processes; and in contradistinction to the racial ideologies of the antebellum period, it was conceptualized in explicitly evolutionist terms. As we shall see, this formulation provided a particularly potent and protean version of the hierarchical scaling of difference that has been characteristic of liberalism from Locke to the present.

In section one, I begin with a sketch of one of the first fully articulated theories of race and development in the modern sense, that of Immanuel Kant, for it already displays the basic structure and essential elements of such theories, which are then continually reworked and rearranged in ever-shifting configurations over the next century. Section two then sketches some relevant background concerning the development of race theory in America and connects it with the enduring sense of American exceptionalism, the shifting spirit of American nationalism, the fusion of the latter with an increasingly racialized nativism, and the transformation of manifest destiny into a racial destiny. Section three then focuses on the forms of social Darwinist thinking that came to pervade and dominate American intellectual life toward the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the chief ideological uses to which this new racial imaginary was put in domestic and foreign affairs. Finally, section four sketches the decline of this dominant ideology and its replacement with a nearly equivalent cultural theory of development and difference.

1.

A full-fledged theory of race had already been worked out within the tradition of natural history during the eighteenth century. Kant, who was not only at the forefront of the emerging discipline of anthropology in Germany but was also fully abreast of contemporary discussions of the natural history of the human species, formulated an “idea of universal history” that included an anthropological account of the different “characteristics” of the various races of mankind. In collaboration with Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, often regarded as the founding father of physical anthropology and the inventor of the modern theory of race, Kant proposed a classification of the human species in terms of its basic permanent “varieties.” He explained the latter by postulating in our