

REFLECTIONS ON RACE AND MANIFEST DESTINY

By
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"...wherever they go, this inferior native population, as a result of amalgamation, and that great law of contact between a higher and a lower race, by which the latter gives way to the former, must be gradually supplanted, and its place occupied by this highest of races....[The United States] will occupy the entire extent of America, the rich and fertile plains of Asia, together with the intermediate isles of the sea, in fulfillment of the great purpose of heaven, of the ultimate enlightenment of the whole earth, and the gradual elevation of man to the dignity and glory of the promised millennial day."

Horseman, Reginald, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1981) pg. 291

This sums up much of the rhetoric of the mid 19th Century philosophy of Manifest Destiny. In re-reading the various quotes and passages in Reginald Horsman's work, I gained a clearer understanding of this very important, yet often "ignored" aspect of the creation of the American psyche. Manifest Destiny is really a multi-faceted excuse for slavery, conquest, and genocide. It is the point at which racism, religion, and politics can meet and form a unified front and a unified philosophy for the ignoble aim of world empire.

Manifest Destiny (a term coined in the 1840s by John O'Sullivan) can only be understood in the context of race and the philosophy of Anglo-Saxonism that was rampant from the mid 19th Century onward in Europe and North America. The notions of inherent human equality (biological and cosmological but not cultural) and the Biblical unity of humanity that had reigned over the Age of Enlightenment had gradually given way to theories of polygenesis and inherent human inequality.

The process of scientific classification of nature by Euroamericans, had by the 19th Century culminated in the classification of humanity itself into separate races with innate qualities of inferiority and superiority. This process is typified by the "science" of phrenology which so revolutionized the 19th Century's view of human relations. Phrenology was not simply the "scientific" examination of the relationship between skull size and intelligence -- it was also the study of brain/skull size in relation to MORALITY, both of which supposedly resided in the frontal and coronal parts of the brain; Euroamericans having the largest coincidentally enough. So Euroamericans were not only more intelligent than non-whites, they were also correspondingly more moral than other types of

humanity, with more moral institutions and laws than any other type of human beings; it, in fact, could be derived from phrenology that morality is a unique feature of the Euroamerican stock of humanity, lacking in the darker races. Any similarities between Euroamerican institutions and those produced by non-Euroamericans were explained away as being the product of white blood having been introduced at some point in their history. Science would be the explanation for the slavery of the Africans and the extermination of the Indians. "It is not our fault, we are not murderers and thieves, we are merely fulfilling scientific principles of superiority. In fact we are not killing Indians, they simply cannot survive civilization. It is an inherent fault within them, it has nothing to do with us."

This is what made Manifest Destiny such a powerful force in empire building. It placed the responsibility of the destruction of nations and peoples on the victims themselves, not on the perpetrators of it. The power of Manifest Destiny lied in the fact that it created a cosmological rationale for genocide, taking the responsibility out of the hands of the individual. When you set about to dispossess a people of their land and source of livelihood, unless you have no conscience at all, one must find an excuse to safely hide from the truth of the pain and suffering you are inflicting on innocent peoples. In the era of Manifest Destiny and Anglo-Saxonism the excuses were varied but most boiled down to the simple fact that if, indeed, these people were human beings (which is questionable), then they were in fact a lesser type of humanity who had no rights to life, land, or liberty. They could not use the land like Anglos, so they had no right to it; they had no civilizations, so they had no right to their own political institutions; their lives were not worth that of an Anglo, so they had no right to life. Any suffering felt by them is of their own making, or simply a byproduct of their inferior nature when placed in contact with the superior Euroamerican types of humanity. The fault resided with them not the Euroamericans. The fault was that they lived in contact with Euroamericans -- Natural Law dictated the rest. Present conditions were used as proof that this was indeed the divine order. Anglos were the master of the non-Anglos therefore it was their nature to be masters. Non-Anglos were subservient to the Anglos, therefore it was their nature to be servants. Circular arguments were the order of the day.

The terms used to describe the genocide are also very telling in this context -- terms such as melting, receding, shrinking, dwindling, disappearing, vanishing. Most of these have connotations of natural processes, like the melting of the snow or the receding tide. None of them have any type of active component. They are all devoid of conscious effort. They "happen" under their own auspices without any intent. These terms are used consciously or unconsciously to, again, lift the burden from the perpetrators of mass murder, thievery, and genocide and place it solidly on the shoulders of the victims, or even more

pointedly, on God. They also serve to halt any type of reflection on the realities of expansion. How can one stop the snow from melting in the sun? How can one stop the tide from receding from the shore? These are all processes that are beyond human design. They are Divine processes, natural process, scientific process, that are completely absent of human will or intent.

Another excuse to hide from genocide and global dispossession of non-Euroamerican peoples was the myth of expansion ridding the world of tyranny and despotism. It made it quite easy to think of expansion in the context of spreading freedom and civilization to the rest of the world that lived under despots and tyrants, spreading culture and philosophy, knowledge and science, to the unlearned masses -- bettering the world with Euroamerican genius and technology. The march of conquest was not genocide, slavery, and dispossession; it was the Peace Corps of the 19th Century.

There are, as one might expect, inherent contradictions in the propaganda of Anglo-Saxonism. All non-Euroamericans were savage, brute, warlike, and ferocious -- Euroamericans, contrastingly, were peace-loving, humane, civilized, moral, just, and bringers of freedom giving institutions. Yet when the mood was inviting, the formally negative attributes placed upon non-Euroamerican peoples were all of a sudden some of the most positive aspects of the Anglo-Saxon race. Instead of being brute, warlike, or savage, these attributes when used in the context of Anglo-Saxons conferred upon them heroic qualities; the heroic conqueror, the exterminator of inferior races, replenishing the world with superior institutions and peoples.

The personification of this image of the Anglo-Saxon race was Alexander The Great. The U.S. had a somewhat "boyish" quality, of impetuosity, quick temper, youthful virility, yet with a golden heart. The inherent contradictions of this dual image of the Anglo-Saxon race are clear. Anglo-Saxon aggression and violence was virile, manly, and heroic; violence on the part of Indians conversely was savage and barbaric -- proof of their animalistic qualities that in turn provided further excuse for more "manly" violence on the part of the Anglos. Indians murdered women and children, proof of their irredeemable savagery -- Anglo-Saxons simply expanded, women and children "receding" before them.

Manifest Destiny is, of course, much more than what is presented here. What I find most intriguing about it, however, is how a broad concept can combine many others into a unifying theory. This is what strikes me as being the power Manifest Destiny had on the American psyche. It gave a holistic and Divine rationale for what in any other era would have been simple conquest and empire building. It is what also made Euroamerican expansion uniquely cruel and genocidal. With the advent of racism and social Darwinism, extermination and supplantation replaced simple

imperial designs. This is only one aspect of Manifest Destiny -- mostly psychological -- there is obviously much more to it, yet I do not think one can overestimate the power philosophy plays in human affairs. A philosophy such as Manifest Destiny once internalized in the culture, is never really abolished, it merely adapts to the present conditions and transforms itself into a suitable logic for the times.

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