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## The Ideology of European Dominance

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### Introduction

This article is intended as an admonishment against the uncritical use of social scientific theory as it is presented in academic training. The writer will look critically at Western European social thought in terms of the values and judgments which are implied therein, especially as it relates to Africans and their heritage. This writer argues, as others have done, that because of the intimate connection between the Western European world view and Western European social theory, it is either irrelevant or, as in most instances, dangerous to people of African descent. It is obvious that science is not pristine and that scientists do not exist in a vacuum. Black social theorists presumably have no use for the myth of objectivity, a myth which has served the interest of Western European political objectives. Contrary to the propaganda of academia, white social theory does not represent a universally valid and "objective" body of thought, nor a neutral tool to be used for the purpose of understanding human experience. It might be argued, instead, that it represents a particular view of the world as seen from the perspective of supposed Western European superiority, and that an image of the inferiority of African civilization is inherent in the terms, definitions, and theoretical models on which white social theory is based.

This paper will present certain key aspects of the intellectual and emotional roots of Western European social thought generally and the genesis of anthropological theory in particular. Anthropology will

emerge, not as a "science of man," but as a particular manifestation of Western European culture. The fact that these particular culturally based, theoretical models have been presented and imposed as universals is a fact of serious political consequence.

### Ideology and World View

It is possible to isolate certain seminal ideas which have served as organizing principles in Western scientific thought. These ideas emerge as a series of interrelated themes, sometimes hidden, at other periods more visible. Though an attempt will be made to single them out, they are not usually distinguishable as separate and distinct ideas, but together they help to determine the contours of the Western European world view.

These themes are intimately related to the Western European attitude towards other peoples and imply a particular relationship to them, which will subsequently be referred to as "ethos." This term is used to indicate the emotional tone of a culture, the uniqueness of its people. It refers to their collective ego, that which enables them to behave as they do and, indeed, explains that behavior. The Western European ethos appears to thrive on the perception that those who are culturally and radically different are inferior. It relates to other cultures as superior or inferior, as powerful or weak, as "civilized" or "primitive." The European world view reflects these relationships.

This analysis can begin with the "Great Chain of Being" idea. Some scholars trace its origins all the



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way to Plato, as most Western intellectual constructs are variations of the themes stated in Platonic theory. Although the idea has been expressed in many different ways, from Classical Greece to the present, it can be characterized as being consistently monolithic without sacrificing accuracy. It is a conception of the universe which holds that all beings relate as part of a hierarchy, their value increasing as they reach the top. Differences of kind imply differences of value. For Aristotle the hierarchy was based on the "powers of the soul," and each Being or organism possessed its own power in addition to those "beneath" it. For the Scholastics the most natural organisms were in the bottom ranks of the hierarchy, God and the angels held the top positions, respectively, while man had a key position being both "nature" and "spirit." Two essential ingredients presupposed in this idea were that there was an ultimate reason or rational explanation for everything that existed in the world, and that everything, every phenomenon had a place in which it existed in sequential relationship to all others.<sup>1</sup> The lineal relationships developing here form a very crucial aspect of Western thought and help to put things in a perspective necessary for the satisfaction of the Western self-image.

The writer is concerned with the ideological and cultural implications of these philosophical conceptions. First of all, "man" becomes number one in this chain since, practically speaking, God and the angels are not really in the picture. The "power" of man's soul endows him with rational abilities and this gives him control and superiority over the "lesser" beings. One does not have to speculate as to what occurs when the factors of race and culture of mankind are added to this picture. In the Western European ethos, the ranks do not skip from "higher" animals to man, instead finer gradations are discernible, with white men at the top and Black men almost always coming barely above the higher animals. (According to some theorists they did not make it that high.) The Great Chain of Being concept has had a tremendous influence on the theoretical models of Western European scientific thought. What is implied about the African heritage in this conception? How can it be used other than to distort and denigrate African civilization? But, then, its purpose is to express the Western European ethos—not the African ethos. It presents the white man with a view of the world in which he is ranked highest in a hierarchy of beings and other peoples perceived as inferiors to him.

Two other seminal ideas are even more closely related; that of unilinear, or universal, evolution and the "Idea of Progress." During what Europeans have

called their Renaissance, the Chain of Being idea was expressed in a new form. With God and the angels apparently diminished in significance, "man," *white European man*, is placed solidly in a dominant position. Subsequently, the idea of progress came to the fore. From Biblical eschatology came the idea of a meaningful historical process, but the Western European ethos could not express itself comfortably within a religious conceptualization. It needed the "freedom" of a secularized view of history, one which said that there were no holds barred and openly stated the ascendancy of man. In a rapidly expanding industrial society, for a culture whose imperial drive was meeting with success after success, this concept fitted perfectly. It said that man, "white men," were advancing in the right, the only direction. What allowed European whites to do this above all was their ability to rationalize the universe, to apply the principles of "science." Since this progressive movement was a good in itself, as Francis Bacon had helped them to see, science was indeed above moral scrutiny. Progress was a new morality. It encompassed a mood of arrogance, superiority, power, and, most certainly, expansion. The idea of progress is essentially expansionistic, incorporating all that has past, gathering it up and carrying it towards an infinite and undefined future. "Progress" will never be reached, it will continue indefinitely, and what continues indefinitely means the growth of the empire and the mechanization of the society. The idea was embraced at the same time as the Protestant Reformation was making way for the triumph of capitalism in the West. In terms of the Western European ethos, it was the perfect ideological mode for the acquisitive instinct, expansionism, the white man's burden, and the exploitative imperial quest: the conquering mentality.<sup>2</sup>

For the philosophers of the "Enlightenment," progress was the blessed unfolding and unleashing of man's capacities for reason and goodness. The Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century struggled to formulate "inevitable" laws of a "universal history" into which all human experience could be fit, thereby making it intelligible. It was out of this effort that the peculiarly Western European concept of culture was born: universalistic, elitist, and chauvinistic. Given their political relationship to the rest of the world, these Europeans were precisely the wrong people to formulate the so-called universal laws of human nature or to construct a universal science of man. The concept of a "common humanity" became a tool which was used to impose Western European ideology on the world rather than a vehicle for the recognition of and therefore validity of other cultural

experiences.

And so the stage was set for the dominant evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century. Spencer and Comte state that if one accepts the fact that progressive historical movement is that which propels humans through time, then it becomes logical that society must have progressed through stages which relate to each other in a lineal sequence of the less to the more progressive. Society can be understood as having progressed through certain evolutionary stages, representing increasing stages of enlightenment, rationality, propriety, mechanization, and so forth. The point of reference was always European society, which represented the most evolutionarily advanced stage at any given point. The next predictable addition to this picture is that *again*—at any given point—the other cultures and societies of the world are fitted within the evolutionary scale to relate lineally to the most evolved society. In this way evolution becomes universal and unilinear. Humanity is moving through the same stages *in the same sequence*. Human beings are all therefore judged by the same ideology since this is after all an ideological and not merely a theoretical construct. The result is a more up-dated version of the Great Chain of Being.

Taken together these ideas present a view of the world in which Western European man becomes the "most progressive" and therefore "superior" man. He relates, then, to others who represent varying degrees of inferiority. Quite properly he "teaches," "controls," "orders," and "exploits" them. Since the European white man knows best, his blessings he confers, through slavery, colonialism, expansionistic imperialism, and neocolonialism. Thus, Africa becomes a victim of exploitation. Africans are made to believe that their victimization is *just* since the African heritage is "backward," "primitive," and "underdeveloped." Africans become victims of an imposed world view.

These theories are not really totally distinct models or concepts, but threads of one ideological construct. They have in common the fact that they all help to create a spectrum, or scale, that judges or rates races and cultures, the Western European always being that model which is most valued according to the logic of these schemes, and those cultures which are most different from white Western Europe being lowest in value.

Africanists are obligated to make it clear to social theorists that all of these ideas mentioned above are but theoretical models, not "proven" truths, but tacitly accepted presuppositions which form the white Western European frame of reference. These are their

givens, not argued for, but assumed. There is no reason for African peoples to assume a view of the world which places them hopelessly in a position of inferiority and justifies their powerlessness. Yet as Africans have inherited these forms of thought from the European, they have tended to accept them as givens, not realizing their inherent implications.

## The Uses of Anthropology

It is now necessary to turn to the subject of anthropology to see how it relates specifically to the foregoing discussion. The writer will consider anthropology only in its history as an academic discipline, but it must be understood that this endeavor reaches back to the beginnings of the Western consciousness. Anthropology might indeed be born out of the Western European consciousness, and it is always projected when European people study "the strange," "the exotic," or that which is different from and therefore considered less than Western culture.

As a recognized theoretical endeavor, anthropology grows out of the Spencerian-Comtian milieu. This mental environment was itself a manifestation of the Western European ethos which reached its heightened and matured expression in the nineteenth century, and it must be understood as part of a continuum traceable from Classical Greece to contemporary American society. The Western European ethos and consciousness seeks expression in the theory of white racial and cultural superiority and is manifested in the political control and economic exploitation of peoples who are not of this race or culture. The discipline and activity of anthropology has, therefore, a particular relationship to the projected image and behavior toward and treatment of civilizations, cultures, and people who are not white and who are not Western European.

It was the Western European ethos which created "the savage," then explained his existence by giving the Chain of Being a historical dimension, so that in terms of world view African peoples were placed spatially and temporally in relationship to whites in a scheme which explained *their* superiority. The task of anthropological theory was to explain cultures as part of a series of sequence of evolutionary events, in genetic relationship, in an hierarchical structure. The fact that social phenomena are all thought to be explainable in terms of these principles of order is a legacy from Plato via Scholasticism and Neo-Platonism.<sup>3</sup>

It is this realm which Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Wilmot Tylor entered in the late 1800s. The way had been paved for them through the combined

efforts of a tradition of undeclared physical anthropology and social evolutionism. The outlines of subsequent anthropological theory had already been drawn. Writing in 1803, Saint-Simon, architect of a nascent sociology and socio-technical order, said that "the Negro, because of his basic physical structure, is not susceptible of rising to the intellectual level of Europeans."<sup>4</sup> In his efforts to unify Europe he argued that:

the surest means of maintaining peace in the confederation will be to keep it constantly occupied beyond its own borders, and engaged without pause in great internal enterprise. To colonize the world with the European race, superior to every other human race; to make the world accessible and habitable like Europe, such is the sort of enterprise by which the European parliament should continually keep Europe active and healthy.<sup>5</sup>

For all European social theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "civilization" was the reserve of whites, and the "problem of race" simply meant to them the theoretical problem of how different races came to be and how they were evolutionarily related to one another. The monogenists with their heavy Biblical loyalties, said that white Adam and Eve were the parents of all people, but that other races represented degeneration from the original stock. The polygenists argued that God created other "species" of man besides Adam. This view hinted at as early as the seventeenth century continually gained ground and flourished in the mid-nineteenth century. The proponents of polygenism said that differences could not be accounted for by environment, and that, indeed, the differences were so great that races constituted separate species. Polygenism was the prevailing opinion of physical anthropologists in the mid-nineteenth century, and, in the late nineteenth century, racial craniology was the order of the day. The structure of the crania was said to determine racial achievement, and there was much measuring of brain size to predict mental capacity. The French anthropologist Gratiolet in 1856 said that Black inferiority was due to the fact that the cranial sutures of Africans closed earlier than whites.<sup>6</sup> These ideas dominated the American School of Physical Anthropology of the nineteenth century.

Herbert Spencer mapped out the stages through which society evolved; again it had to be the white man who happily was the agent of its evolution, and all men did not reach the top of the evolutionary scale, since mental capacities were determined by race and the "savage" peoples lacked abstract ideas. It was all right that certain groups (the Tasmanians, for instance) had become extinct since this was a law of evolution.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to piece together the threads and the trends of white racist thought that was to become sociology and anthropology. Civilization was progressing. It was moving not only through time, but it was advancing rationally. It was getting "better." It was the culture of the whites of Western Europe that always advanced it. Why? Because they were physically constructed so that they could *think* better. Brain differences accounted for cultural differences. Culture must be analyzed in conjunction with anatomical and physiological differences. All of this would help the European to determine the universal laws of progress in human civilization. It is not incidental that such reasoning resulted in a scientific hierarchy of "superior" and "inferior" races. It is the Western ethos that turns human diversity into "raciology."

What one often fails to understand is that the "racial" and the "cultural" are not really two isolated aspects of human experience in the white man's mind; they are not two separate methods of explaining and comparing human differences. To the contrary, race is *both* physical and cultural, and when raciology ceased to be heavily physical in nature, if it ever really did, it did not cease to *be*. The socio-cultural component of the ideology went hand-in-hand with its physical aspect.

By the time Edward Tylor, the "Founder" of anthropology, began to write, it was easy to speak of "lower" and "higher" races in scientific discourse. His dichotomy is between "savage man" and "cultured man." Differences in cultures are due, not to different tastes, values, or commitments, but to different evolutionary stages. There are no "cultures"; therefore, there are only *stages* of culture (in the singular). This implication and this image of non-European cultures did not die with the nineteenth century, but persists now. There is still a tendency to compare peoples at "stages" of development, in spite of the fact that these "stages" are manufactured and exist only in the mind.

For Tyler, the "lower races" were "the same from Dahomey to Hawaii."<sup>8</sup> They were at the same evolutionary stage of culture. The value of studying them was to show European man what his prehistoric ancestors must have been like. Such analogy or comparison is unfounded, but again it supports the Western ethos. This is, in fact, recounting the construction of a culturalist and racist mythology; each aspect supporting and reinforcing the other, so as to build a systematic scheme expressing the tenets of white Western European ideology. This objective is that which gave birth to Western anthropology—to lay the strongest scientific basis possible to the mytho-

logical system—to provide the theories ("and facts") which demonstrated white, Western European physical and cultural superiority. In this tradition, "science" itself becomes "myth."

Symptomatic of the disciplines of Western social science is the penchant for erecting schemes which other cultures can be "fit" into. This, of course, helps to satisfy the urge to power and the need to control. The unilineal evolutionary scale did, intellectually, academically, in scientific terms, what Europe was doing politically in the nineteenth century—expanding borders of control and seeking new methods of exerting ever-greater power over conquered peoples.

As a Victorian evolutionist, Tylor's mission was ostensibly to discover the successive stages of the human intellect. Primitive culture represented man at a crude intellectual level, with an underdeveloped brain. Civilized man could think better and use his brain more efficiently. The superior intellect of the progressive races had raised nations to heights of culture. It is partly a misunderstanding, partly an over-simplification to say that Charles Darwin influenced the social sciences, or, as the apologia usually goes, "they took his theories and misapplied them—in ways that he did not intend." The relationship is reciprocal, circular, and very close between the biologist, the physicist, and the social theorist of this time. They all influenced and used each other, for, after all, they were of one mind; their goal was the same. Darwin used not only the Great Chain of Being concept to support his theories, but he also used the racial theories which were being offered by the anthropology of his day. It was believed that men like Tylor, John McLennan and Sir John Lubbock had demonstrated that man had progressed from a lowly condition to the highest civilized state. Darwin said that the gaps in the forms represented by various evolutionary stages in the physical development of man were explained by extinction. In the future, he said, they could expect Africans to become extinct, then the evolutionary gap between civilized man and animals would be much wider, instead of as it was then—between the "Negro" and the gorilla.<sup>9</sup> If it could be shown that human history had progressed in terms of a single evolutionary development, from savagery or barbarism to civilization; and if white people could accept the idea of being descended from barbarians or savages, argued Darwin, then they should be able to accept the idea of being descended from the baboon. It was anthropology which had developed racist thought most successfully and could therefore help Darwin's theorists gain acceptance.

If a physical scientist is to be singled out as being

most influential in terms of anthropological racist theory, it is the work of Chevalier de Lamarck which must be chosen. The doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics coming one-half century before Darwin's theory of evolution was perfect. It was just what was needed to seal the "marriage" of race and culture.

Lewis Henry Morgan, the most prominent American anthropologist of the nineteenth century, said that as men created new institutions, made inventions and discoveries, the cerebral portion of their brains enlarged. This improvement was, of course, passed on. His work, *Ancient Society*, explicated his evolutionary theory of human society in an elaborate scheme. The amazing thing about Western social theorists is that as long as their theories suit the purposes of Western European ideology, there are few holds barred, and imaginations are free to run rampant. Morgan's scheme was a very imaginative creation indeed. In its stages of culture were neatly lined up in order of evolutionary advancement, not only technologically, but economically, morally, religiously, socially, and politically. Even the terms by which people addressed their relatives and even languages were either savage, barbarian, or civilized. For the Western European it all worked out very well and was self-fulfilling. Monogamous marriage systems were more civilized than others, and that made sense because Morgan was writing for an audience whose society he used as the model of what it meant to be civilized. (It is significant that Engels found his scheme very useful in explaining the origin of the family, private property, and the state.)

Though many of Morgan's conclusions are now out of vogue, his evolutionary theory of society, along with that of Comte and Spencer, formed the basis of the assumptions and presuppositions with which socio-cultural and racial phenomena are approached. Conservative, liberal, and leftist alike. Western Europeans generally assume an evolutionary hierarchy in which certain forms are superior and have evolved from other, inferior forms. It should be obvious that such a view of social history does not allow for a pluralistic conception, nor admit of the validity of cultural diversity. It explains away diversity—uses it to create, sustain, and reinforce the white self-image.

Victorian evolutionism encouraged by Morgan, Tylor, and, above all, Spencer, made itself felt in Western social theory avowedly until the 1920s, and tacitly it still remains. The reason is clear if one looks at the content of this theory. Only white-skinned, large-brained races had reached the top of the evolutionary scale and because they had created and participated in this higher culture their brains devel-

oped further. Darwin's descent of man succeeded in placing Africans, like other living "savages," as he called them, in a chain. A racial hierarchy of universal evolution that went from ape to European. All of this was to give a new rationale to the theory of white superiority. During the period of 1890 to 1910, evolutionary social theory was being incorporated into the establishment of the social sciences as part of official academia, with all that that honor implies in Western society.

Politically, with the end of chattel slavery, new methods were needed by which to assure control. Relinquishing the slave clearly did not imply surrendering the white self-image or the image of the Black man on which it depended. That self-image and its dialectical opposite had to depend on a new mode of control. This is where Western social science came into play. In the earlier stages the burden fell most heavily on anthropology, later on sociology and psychology. Intellectual, ideological control was the order of the day. The objective was to prove racial inferiority to the Africans, not with a whip, but with a textbook.

## Conclusion

The writer has offered these arguments out of a specific concern for the Black anthropologist, who is especially concerned with anthropology in relation to Africa and to the needs of African peoples' self-determination.

The contemporary white anthropologist has allowed himself to become irrelevant by typically focusing attention on small, powerless cultures, which he theoretically and superficially abstracts from the political context surrounding them. The culture concept, depoliticized, Europeanized, is then used to make "objects" of African peoples, while placing white people above ethnological scrutiny. It was this misuse and limitation of the concept of culture that made the cultural and intellectual imperialism of Western social science possible, while at the same time it helped to sell the image of the "uncommitted

scholar." An intimate relationship exists between the conventional stance of white Western anthropology and the political fact of Western imperialism, and as European domination is successfully challenged, as white men lose their political subjects, the white anthropologists loses his "objects" of study. It is Pan-Africanism and other self-deterministic ideologies which tend to expose Eurocentrism in anthropological conception. Either anthropology will be redefined or it will become obsolete.

If Black anthropologists are to be legitimate contributors to the redemption of Africa then it would seem that they must create a "new" anthropology, one which severs the ties between social theory and white supremacist ideology; one that no longer serves the interests of Western European imperialism in any of its forms. Africans must emphasize the political significance of the culture concept, focusing on the relationship between ideology and group commitment, value, and the mobilization of human energies. The Black anthropologist must be a politically committed one, who uses his or her sense of culture to change what needs to be changed in the interest of African self-determination.

The writer ends by reiterating the caution made by a colleague, Professor George Bond, in 1971.<sup>10</sup> It is not enough to repudiate the negative images of the African heritage which whites have produced, assimilated, and exported. Rather, African social scientists must look more critically at the theoretical assumptions and presuppositions on which these disciplines are founded. It would appear to be the mission of all African social scientists, at home and in the diaspora, to devote their energies to the radical reconstruction of the disciplines in which they have been trained. Without such an approach, African peoples run the risk of incorporating the theoretical, mythological, and ideological models of white social science into their own methodologies, thereby unknowingly internalizing the values of Western European society, including the negative image of Africa which white racialism and culturalism has created.

## NOTES

1. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 58-59. This work constitutes an excellent critique of a dominant theme in the European philosophical tradition.
2. For a very rare and perceptive discussion of this concept see: Henryk Skolimowski, "The Scientific World View and the Illusions of Progress," *Social Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), pp. 52-82.
3. Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 389. She presents a good in-depth discussion of the intellectual and emotional origins of anthropology.
4. Quoted in George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 38.

5. Henri de Saint-Simon, *Social Organization, The Science of Man and Other Writings* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 49.
6. Stocking, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
8. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London, 1871), p. 6.
9. Stocking, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
10. George C. Bond, "A Caution to Black Africanists," *Phylon*, Spring, 1971.