

# The Origins of White Care

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**Cotten Seiler**

Care for the race . . . this must be the keynote of our future.  
—Henry Fairfield Osborn, *Man Rises to Parnassus*, 1928

Critics have hailed Dorothea Lange’s iconic 1936 photograph *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* as both an encapsulation of the human crisis of the Great Depression and a spur to the egalitarian reforms of the New Deal. Although Progressive-era reformers had deployed documentary photographs to mobilize political support, it was in the 1930s, as technological and industrial enhancements enabled more effective reproduction and dissemination to a mass audience, that the photograph emerged fully as a formidable political instrument. Immediately after its appearance in the *San Francisco News*, Lange’s image of the beleaguered farmworker Florence Thompson and her children began to circulate widely in public culture, complementing the thousands of Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs of the “forgotten man” invoked in center-left political rhetoric. Exemplified in Lange’s own 1933 *White Angel Breadline* and 1934 *Man Beside Wheelbarrow* and John Vachon’s 1938 *Unemployed Man*, this figure, in Lange’s words, “with his head down, with his back against the wall, with his livelihood . . . overturned,” pervaded Depression-era cultural production.<sup>1</sup>

Such representations imbued their white subjects “simultaneously [with] a sense of individual worth and class victimage.”<sup>2</sup> One crafter of such images, John Steinbeck, valorized the white Dust Bowl migrants in the West as desperate but nonetheless “resourceful and intelligent Americans who have gone through the hell of the drought.” In contrast to the “peon class” origins of the earlier migrants to the region, the more recent diaspora derived from “the best American stock” and thus could be

expected, if aided and treated fairly, to “be citizens of the highest type.”<sup>3</sup> Although the FSA photographs and other propaganda art of the 1930s also imaged people of color, they deliberately leveraged white immiseration to elicit viewers’ support for the ameliorative programs and policies of the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> *Migrant Mother* and the countless images of “downcast mostly white people patiently, lawfully, awaiting relief” traded in a beset, consanguine whiteness that would resonate with, and motivate to care-oriented political action, audiences conditioned by hegemonic conceptions of race.<sup>5</sup>

This article argues that the effectiveness of these twentieth-century representations of white abjection, which importuned their viewers to demand recuperative action by the state, owed to a nineteenth-century conceptualization of racialized whiteness that foregrounded empathy as whites’ signal evolutionary achievement and the font of their potential. This conceptualization emerged from post-Darwinian or, more properly speaking, anti-Darwinian evolutionary theory that articulated whiteness as an acquired disposition to *care*, as both noun and verb. This deep context helps us account for the rise of a statist, ameliorative new liberalism at the turn of the century and the building of a midcentury apparatus of white care: a surround of institutions and infrastructure dedicated to the education, health, security, mobility, and comfort of the white citizenry.

The New Deal and the care-oriented liberalism of the midcentury United States recruited political subjects to a mode of care that was radical in two ways: its departure from US norms of governmentality and its stark circumscription by race. White care entailed a biopolitical project predicated on what Michel Foucault called “state racism.” This principle licenses the modern state to “make live” elements of the national population who are deemed favorable and “let die” those cast as deleterious.<sup>6</sup> White supremacy, rather than a general humanitarianism, underwrote and propelled the egalitarian, reformist, redistributive politics of a transformed liberalism.

Given the traditional animus to the power of a centralized state in mainstream US political culture, New Deal liberalism required for its realization both a clearly specified population of consanguine white Americans and a catastrophe—or a series of them—sufficiently threatening to that population to justify the apparatus of care.<sup>7</sup> As the state directed itself to the reformers’ agenda in the New Deal and beyond, its policy making drew on a reservoir of thought that testified to the differing evolutionary viability of the human races and imbued whiteness with the civilization-building qualities of sympathy, benevolence, and justice. Florence Thompson (phenotypically white despite her Cherokee lineage) and her children would be made to live through a range of interventions by the biopolitical state.

## **“They Had Developed Wings in Attempting to Fly”: The Neo-Lamarckian Evolutionary Narrative**

The decade following Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* saw the hypothesis of the transmutation of species over long expanses of time displace the authoritative doctrine of special creation, which held that species were created in their fixed form, ran their course, died out, and were replaced by other species, all via successive “mental operations of the Creator.”<sup>8</sup> Transmutationists prior to Darwin, such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Darwin’s grandfather Erasmus Darwin, had regarded evolution as a teleological process of ascent, the precise mechanisms of which remained speculative: either supernaturally implanted forces in the organism transformed it along a predetermined course, or external stimuli compelled the organism to improve itself, or both. More perfect species arose when organisms obtained characteristics that enhanced their chances of survival and, somehow, passed these traits on to their offspring. Twentieth-century thinkers would deride Lamarck’s 1809 account of giraffes achieving their elongated necks over many generations of stretching to reach the leaves of trees, but the story was likely enough before the advent of genetics, and its stress on the organism’s efforts and God’s will as the drivers of species change comforted those who, even as they abandoned the doctrine of special creation, still sought design and teleology in evolution.

Darwin’s theory of natural selection thwarted such conceptions. *Origin* emphasized simply that new traits appeared and, when sustained in subsequent generations, became the “materials for natural selection to act on and accumulate.”<sup>9</sup> Perpetually shifting environments made all perfection transient and organisms’ efforts futile: only by a diversity of traits could a species hope to survive the natural violence of the world, and only then by becoming, over generations, something different. “Not one living species,” Darwin wrote, “will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity.”<sup>10</sup>

Darwin’s insistence on contingency became particularly rankling when confronting human origins, which Darwin’s 1871 *Descent of Man* traced to lower forms and primates. Many devout monotheists militated against this genealogy (and still do), but commentators of more secular stripes also excoriated Darwinism for rendering humanity bestial and the universe rudderless.<sup>11</sup> Even Darwin’s allies demurred on natural selection as the forge of the human mind and soul.

Disagreement over human descent did not, however, prevent transmutationist evolutionism from suffusing the natural and social sciences, as well as the humanities and popular culture in the late nineteenth-century

Atlantic world. Yet this ascendant evolutionism “deserted materialism,” in the words of one approving contemporary, for the more dulcet song of “what may be called scientific theology, or theologic science.”<sup>12</sup> The era thus witnessed a “non-Darwinian revolution” that dislodged special creationism from its authoritative perch even as it “succeeded in preserving and modernizing the old teleological view of things.”<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century only a handful of diehard neo-Darwinians insisted on the natural selection of randomly generated, heritable traits as the crucial mechanism of species change, and observers spoke credibly of the deathbed of Darwinism.

In the United States, a loosely affiliated American School of Evolution blended Darwin’s ideas with those of Lamarck to confect a more ideologically useful evolutionary narrative. In this endeavor they drew from the English polymath Herbert Spencer, who in the 1840s had begun advocating what he called interchangeably the theory of evolution and the theory of Lamarck. Spencer spent the next five decades extrapolating from that theory a synthetic philosophy that united all organic phenomena in a vast process of refinement and advance. Although Spencer countenanced a role for natural selection, he continued to favor Lamarck’s principle of “functionally-acquired modifications, transmitted and increased,” as the essential mechanism of species change.<sup>14</sup>

Building on Spencer’s popular ideas, the American School of Evolution developed and retailed its neo-Lamarckian evolutionism in academic scholarship, lectures, and lay journals. Putting the transmission of acquired traits “at the very base of our theories,” in the words of one member, the paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn, the American School offered its audiences an institutionally sanctioned scientific discourse that reinscribed teleology and tempered Darwinism’s tout court animalization of humanity.<sup>15</sup> Their theories informed the evolutionary imagination of most Americans well into the twentieth century, when it was overwritten by the modern evolutionary synthesis that reaffirmed Darwinian claims.<sup>16</sup>

The neo-Lamarckians of the American School exceeded their European colleagues—indeed, Lamarck himself—in asserting that organisms performed deliberate evolutionary labor. “Wings were not given to birds to enable them to fly,” wrote Osborn, conveying the pith of neo-Lamarckism, “but they had developed wings in attempting to fly.”<sup>17</sup> Such changes, averred Osborn’s mentor, the celebrated paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope, “depend on the will.” Cope traced what he called “the origin of the fittest” to an organism’s deployment of “mind” to activate its own morphological change. “Science proves,” Cope announced in an 1887 lecture, “that mind is the creator of organisms.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the American School stalwartly asserted, to the enthrallment of audiences, what

Darwin had found risible in Lamarck: “Adaptations by the slow willing of animals.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet the neo-Lamarckians of the American School also proposed that a supernaturally implanted “ancestral form of life-energy” or “God-element within” might impel the organism’s transformation along prescribed lines.<sup>20</sup> Hence, what could be attributed to the organism’s efforts, such as birds’ wings, could simultaneously be construed as the manifest will of a deity who helped those who helped themselves. Evolution thus occurred aristocratically, as a small vanguard of organisms within each species responded to supernatural imperatives and deployed, in Cope’s words, “intelligent choice” to make their own evolutionary luck; meanwhile, the laggard members of the species remained inert—perhaps displeasing the deity and certainly consigning themselves to oblivion.<sup>21</sup>

### **Race as Capacity for Evolutionary Labor**

Neo-Lamarckian accounts of transmutation resonated powerfully as allegories of human evolutionary ascent. The geologist Joseph Le Conte averred that “man’s conscious voluntary effort is the chief factor in his own evolution.” The theist T. H. Eddy mused, “If through a monkey race, as Darwin supposes, then with pride may we look back and point to the fact that from an humble beginning, through the efforts of *the human mind*, we have evolved ourselves to be what we now are?” “We are re-creating ourselves,” declared the naturalist William Dickey Gunning; “we have worked the downward slant out of the bodily eye, and we are working it out of the spiritual eye.” Moreover, this evolutionary striving did not go unaided: the proper understanding of evolution, wrote the philosopher John Fiske, “makes [human life] seem more than ever the chief object of Divine care.”<sup>22</sup> More important, neo-Lamarckian tales of bootstrapping and divinely elected species functioned as powerful props to white supremacy, ranking races based on their evident record of evolutionary labor and their viability for further ascent.

As the transmutation hypothesis came into currency after 1840, it pressed against the unity controversy that had mired inquiry into human origins and the causes of visible physical difference since the seventeenth century. The array of human types Europeans encountered in their expeditionary ventures enfeebled the biblical orthodoxy of monogenesis, which held that humanity descended from an originally created man and woman and that variations in skin tone and other traits had been produced by different environments over countless postdeluge generations. The insurgent theory, polygenesis, attributed to God multiple creations, some of which were experimental or even botched. Enslavers and their allies flocked to

polygenesis despite its heresy, as the theory's signal move was to elaborate the humanoid to whom inhumane things could be done clean-handedly.<sup>23</sup>

The immediacy of the unity debate receded with abolition, and Darwin's assertion of *Homo sapiens*' primate descent seemed to hollow out its very premises. "The foot of the ape being proved to be the same as man's," observed an acidic 1863 commentator, "it is of no use now to show that the feet of the ape and the negro are identical."<sup>24</sup> Yet such demonstrations of nonwhite races' "approximations to the simian type," in Cope's words, continued to abound and, in fact, enabled the hypothesis of human descent to gain traction.<sup>25</sup> "Those who adopt the Darwinian hypothesis and believe that we are first cousins of the ape," another 1863 voice proposed, "may perhaps with some consistency go on to represent the African as not only a different but an essentially inferior race."<sup>26</sup> Into postbellum human biology and the new fields of ethnology, sociology, and anthropology slithered a secularized polygenesis that substituted narratives of racial development, stasis, and retardation for those of multiple creations. Ensclosed in the neo-Lamarckian framework that stressed evolution as a progressive condition earned by striving, elect organisms, the conceptualization of race as a continuum of animality mitigated the affront that the thesis of primate descent leveled against "civilized" whites, whose social, political, and economic supremacy the disdained Darwinian narrative judged to be, like every evolutionary outcome, haphazard. By contrast, the neo-Lamarckian narrative delivered a bildungsroman of the emergence and rarification of humanity's white portion.

Postbellum evolutionists thus became preoccupied with chronicling the formation of the races, an enterprise that explicated and confirmed the profundity of present-day racial difference. Disseminated in university classrooms and by scholarly journals, popular magazines, literature, museum exhibitions, and fairs, accounts that stressed the antiquity of the races reconciled the "perpetual challenge to the dogma of unity" posed by nonwhites by positioning and tracking the latter along a spatiotemporal "progress from brute to man."<sup>27</sup> Although evolutionists acknowledged the "Rubicon" that separated *Homo sapiens* from its primate cousins, they held that a wider chasm cleaved the civilized from the primitive races.<sup>28</sup> Many suggested that races be classified as species, so ancient and distinct was their "race plasma."<sup>29</sup>

Claims that *longue duree* racial formation had produced differences that were now insurmountable both vied with and issued from what Kyla Schuller has called "impressibility discourse," whereby racialists evaluated each group on "the degree to which [its] hereditary material was embedded in time and retained the capacity to be affected in the future."<sup>30</sup> Physiological features as well as behavior and culture indexed each race's capacity for receiving, absorbing, and warding off impressions from the

natural world and human society, and for transmitting refinements to its offspring. Schuller argues that this Lamarckian discourse, which emphasized the mutability rather than the fixity of bodies, characterizes the nineteenth-century racial imagination.

Scientists' assessments of groups' impressibility, like the evaluations of their evolutionary labor, could render certain races "outcasts from evolution" with a finality that matched polygenetic apologia for slavery or, later, hard-hereditarian eugenics.<sup>31</sup> As neo-Lamarckian racialism flattered white audiences that their evolutionary journey amounted to, as the English author Samuel Butler put it, "transmitted perseverance in well-doing," it also reassured them that nonwhites were frozen in a self-inflicted and likely permanent evolutionary stagnation.<sup>32</sup> "The germ-cells are so well protected," Cope wrote, "that long periods of time and long-continued influences are required to produce appreciable changes of character in a family or a race."<sup>33</sup> Calling in 1890 for the expulsion of African Americans from the United States, Cope reminded his readers that "evolution is not possible under all circumstances," and warned of the threat to the republic posed by the Black presence "as it appears to the student of species-characters in body and mind."<sup>34</sup> He pleaded agnostic as to "what the negro may become after centuries of education" but remarked that "he has had as much time in the past as any race, and he has not improved it, or been improved by it"; in his limited educability "he is like other members of the animal kingdom."<sup>35</sup>

However, Cope also affirmed that "growth in intelligence and ethical knowledge and practice" could occur "even in the most ill-favored of the Indo-European stock, if they only have the chance; for it is in the race." The innate "fine nervous susceptibility [and] mental force" in whites derived from their "hundreds of centuries of toil and hardship." The biocultural achievements of this population merited protection, Cope insisted, the most pressing act of which was the quarantine to Africa of the liminally human mass of "dead material in the very centre of our vital organism."<sup>36</sup>

### **Sympathy as White Evolutionary Accomplishment**

Neo-Lamarckians heralded whites' rarefied "ethical knowledge and practice" as the most transformative of their evolutionary achievements. They argued that this particular excellence tracked with the growth of "representative capacity," a faculty that enabled, in Fiske's words, the "resuscitating [and] combining relations not present to the senses."<sup>37</sup> Whites' development of representative capacity had won them intellectual superiority over other races but also generated new "psychical" faculties that drew on but were distinct from mere ratiocination: sympathy, benevo-

lence, justice. Cope regarded the capacity for sympathy “an outgrowth of natural mental constitution” and perforce differently “distributed in the different types of mankind.” Race reliably predicted “what to expect of men in an ethical direction”; only whites could inhabit “the ethical life [that] expresses the highest development of humanity.”<sup>38</sup>

Fiske attributed whites’ exceptional psychological traits to their “gradual prolongation of a period of infancy,” which exempted children from performing subsistence labor and thus enabled the fuller expansion of their representative capacity via observation and imaginative play. Moreover, the “sympathetic feelings” routinized and hypertrophied by a long infancy, during which one either received (as a child) or gave (as a parent) care absolutely, would then extend to objects beyond the reproductive family unit, eventually “generat[ing] an abstract moral sense . . . free from the element of personality.” “Without the circumstances of infancy.” Fiske wrote, “we should never have comprehended the meaning of such phrases as ‘self-sacrifice’ or ‘devotion.’”<sup>39</sup> Experiences of care, repetitively performed and lodged in the race plasma, had aggregated to whites’ evolutionary advantage.

According to the neo-Lamarckians, experiences of and dispositions toward care had also crystallized in modern institutions and the modes of sociality with which they were built and maintained. Spencer marveled at the “new emotions making their appearance in the most advanced divisions of our race” and how modernity seemed to accelerate their spread. Among whites, he wrote in 1864,

there has been a development of those gentle emotions of which inferior races exhibit but the rudiments. Savages delight in giving pain rather than pleasure—are almost devoid of sympathy. While among ourselves philanthropy organizes itself in laws, establishes numerous institutions, and dictates countless private benefactions. . . . We know that emotional characteristics, in common with all others, are hereditary; and the differences between civilized nations descended from the same stock show us the cumulative results of small modifications hereditarily transmitted. And when we see that between savage and civilized races, which diverged from each other in the remote past, and have for a hundred generations followed modes of life becoming ever more unlike, there exist still greater emotional contrasts; may we not infer that the more or less distinct emotions which characterize civilized races, are the organized results of certain daily-repeated combinations of mental states which social life involves?<sup>40</sup>

Practices of sociality, which effected a heritable “increase of fellow-feeling,” amounted to the most crucial evolutionary labor whites could perform: such “daily-repeated combinations of mental states” produced “the difference between the cruelty of the barbarous and the humanity

of the civilized.”<sup>41</sup> The quantity and force of the “altruistic sentiments resulting from sympathy”—pity, generosity, and justice—in each race foretold its “possibility of social progress.”<sup>42</sup> The abundance of these traits in whites did not just favor the latter “in a contest with another race destitute of such feelings.”<sup>43</sup> Rather, what Fiske isolated as “the tender and unselfish feelings, which are a later product of evolution,” would secure whites’ passage across the next Rubicon.<sup>44</sup>

Like all useful fictions of race, the conception of the evolutionarily achieved moral and ethical superiority of whites required immense work across a range of institutional sites to both flesh it out and conceal its ideological impetus. It circulated in turn-of-the-century literature, popular culture, politics, religion, and social science. It suffused, for example, the anthropological and medicopsychological literature of marriage and sexuality, which plumbed the outsized capacities of whites for love in its many forms. And love, from the sexual to the filial, was ultimately what *made* civilization, according to the sexologist Ernest Crawley. Love’s “relative intensity decreases from the sexual to the social,” he wrote, “but, as this decreases, extension increases, and more and more persons are comprehended. . . . In all its forms love plays a part in society only less important than that of the instinct to live. It brings together the primal elements of the family, it keeps the family together, and it unites in a certain fellow-feeling all members of a race or nation.” And the “primitive races” possessed “forms of love both less intense and less complex” than those that animated and bound civilized whites.<sup>45</sup> Modern medical and psychological authorities prescribed, as the literary scholar Julian Carter has argued, a normative white erotics of care as healthy and conducive to citizenship as well as companionate marriage. Carter shows how the refined sympathetic feelings Fiske traced to white child-rearing informed the conjugal bed’s “truly white sex,” which “required the evolutionary achievement of tender concern for one’s mate.”<sup>46</sup>

White capacities for sympathy also entered into everyday parlance, as in one compliment that registered the speaker’s gratitude for another’s magnanimity: “That’s mighty/awfully/damn white of you,” which etymological accounts trace to the US South in the early 1900s.<sup>47</sup> Belief in the rarefied “intelligence and morale” that Osborn and others imputed to whiteness informed the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and other feminists, the popular literature of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and a range of drama, music, and film.<sup>48</sup> Some texts emphasized white affective superiority by plumbing the depths of its inverse, biological Blackness. These asserted the latter to be “infinitely lacking in the high mental, moral, and emotional qualities that are especially characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon.”<sup>49</sup> Tragic stories of mixed-race characters in particular affirmed a view of the different moral valences of white and nonwhite race plasma.

The 1902 novel *Blood Will Tell*, for example, concludes with its phenotypically white protagonist lamenting that he possesses “every outward and visible sign but the inward and spiritual grace of the white race is not and can never be mine.” He soliloquizes his own abject embodiment of a Blackness “toggled out in the dignity, education, and culture of the white race, but . . . only aping the natural, self-evolved civilization and culture of the whites.”<sup>50</sup>

### Neo-Lamarckism and the New Liberalism

“Races not arrested in their growth, and becoming emancipated from the thrall [of nature],” rhapsodized William Dickey Gunning, “will reach the cerulean heights and create a heaven of earth.”<sup>51</sup> Such extravagant rhetoric expressed the utopian progressivism of neo-Lamarckian thought and its capacity to restore for its adherents, after the Darwinian assault on teleology and agency, “full scope and sweep of vision” for “the emotional and imaginative side of man.”<sup>52</sup> Its uplifting tale of evolution as the organism’s conscious manipulation of self and environment as it propelled itself toward perfection fairly cried out for a corollary politics. If, as Fiske predicted, “the development of the sympathetic side of human nature will doubtless become prodigious . . . as the sphere for [its] exercise is enlarged,” might the state enable that enlargement?<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in the neo-Lamarckian framework that makes biocultural advance a matter of will, mind, and capacity, we can sight a through line to the twentieth-century statist liberalism of the New Deal and beyond. Neo-Lamarckism offered the imaginative means by which the state might exert a progressive evolutionary force through the provision of care for the population—or, rather, for the most evolutionarily vigorous subset of the population.

By contrast, no intelligible politics could be articulated on the foundations laid by Darwin: even if the theory of natural selection could be made to speak in terms of something as evanescent as a population, it dismissed the prospect of managing or transforming that population toward some preferred evolutionary end: some new selective pressure, some shift in the environment, would always thwart such plans. Thus, the ideology of social Darwinism, which (mis)interpreted the narrative of natural selection as a guide to how state power ought to be deployed, stood as neo-Lamarckism’s opposite number in extrapolating a politics from the prescriptive vacuum that Darwinian theory represented.

Most neo-Lamarckians condemned the vulgar selectionist program of social Darwinism that had gathered force by the last decade of the nineteenth century and that prescribed the demise—by active destruction, neglect, or some mixture thereof—of the disabled, nonwhite, poor, and other populations seen as injurious to the flourishing of the species.

A strain of social Darwinism, the hard-hereditarian eugenics pioneered in the 1880s by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, sought to regulate reproduction—artificially selecting for the “fittest” varieties of “germ plasm”—and breed a better species. After 1890, selectionists' rejection of the possibility of societal evolution on a mass scale through nurturing environments grew more authoritative, buttressed first by a largely European neo-Darwinism, which denied absolutely the heritability of acquired characteristics, and then with greater force in the next decade by Mendelian genetics.

Peter Bowler has noted that Lamarckians' rhetoric grew increasingly sunny in the early twentieth century, a shift that saw their traditional “concern for consciousness and design” in evolution “converted into a more humanistic optimism related mainly to social problems.”<sup>54</sup> We must see this pivot of neo-Lamarckism to explicitly political appeals as compelled by the challenges it faced from selectionist opponents both in and outside of the laboratory at the turn of the century. It marks the moment at which neo-Lamarckian evolutionism shades, via its penetration of the social sciences, into the statist-democratic strain of the “New Liberalism” that took root in US political culture after 1880. New liberals sought to apply social-scientific knowledge in constructing nurturing and uplifting environments and institutions—in the words of one new liberal, to make “the law of love . . . part of the true political economy.”<sup>55</sup>

Neo-Lamarckians warned audiences what would become of civilization should selectionism gain hegemony. The choice between mechanisms of evolution, Osborn cautioned in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891, “profoundly affects our views and conduct of life.” Should neo-Darwinism triumph,

it will be in a sense a triumph of fatalism; for according to it, while we may indefinitely improve the forces of our education and surroundings, and this civilizing nurture will improve the individuals of each generation, its actual effects will not be cumulative as regards the race itself, but only as regards the environment of the race; each new generation must start *de novo*, receiving no benefit of the moral and intellectual advance made during the lifetime of its predecessors. It would follow that one deep, almost instinctive motive for a higher life would be removed if the race would only be superficially benefited by its nurture, and the only possible channel of improvement were in the selection of the fittest chains of race plasma.<sup>56</sup>

The same year, Lester Frank Ward expressed similar trepidation to his audience of biologists:

If nothing that the individual gains by the most heroic or the most assiduous effort can by any possibility be handed on to posterity, the incentive to effort is in great part removed. If all the labor bestowed on the youth of the race

to secure a perfect physical and intellectual development dies with the individual to whom it is imparted why this labor? . . . In fact the whole burden of the neo-Darwinian song is: cease to educate, it is mere temporizing with the deeper and unchangeable forces of nature.<sup>57</sup>

“Alas,” cried Joseph Le Conte in the *Monist* that same year, “for our hopes for race-improvement, whether physical, mental or moral!”<sup>58</sup>

To these commentators’ chagrin, scientific authority would increasingly, and then definitively, side with the selectionists over the decades that followed. Nevertheless, the neo-Lamarckian narrative, with its themes of volitional transmutation, the heritability of acquired traits, and the disparate evolutionary viability of the races, persisted in popular understandings of evolution, often complementing the newer narrative that spoke in terms of superior and inferior genes.<sup>59</sup> Most crucially, as evidenced above, neo-Lamarckism informed the worldviews of progressives, socialists, and new liberals—all political orientations that charged the state with “the duty of providing such an environment for individual men and women as to give *all*, as far as possible, an equal chance of realizing . . . a moral and *human* life.”<sup>60</sup> The blueprint for an “administrative state” that could discharge this duty emerged from Ward’s neo-Lamarckian sociology, which formed the armature of the new liberalism—described by Dorothy Ross as “a revision of classical liberalism that expanded its conception of individual liberty, social conscience, and public powers”—that would dominate US politics in the Progressive Era and beyond.<sup>61</sup>

As late as 1924, the year hard-hereditarian eugenicists secured passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, which throttled immigration to the United States for the next four decades, the Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer made it clear that cleaving to Lamarck meant believing in progress of the most noble sort:

If acquired characteristics are occasionally inherited, then it becomes evident that we are not exclusively slaves of the past—slaves helplessly endeavoring to free ourselves from our shackles—but also captains of the future, who in the course of time will be able to rid ourselves, to a certain extent, of our heavy burdens and ascend into higher and ever higher strata of development. Education and civilization, hygiene and social endeavors are achievements which are not alone benefiting the single individual, for every action, every word, aye, even every thought may possibly leave an imprint on the generation.<sup>62</sup>

This dispatch from the neo-Lamarckian redoubt betrays a hedging (“occasionally inherited,” “to a certain extent,” “may possibly leave an imprint”) absent from the dauntless rhetoric of earlier neo-Lamarckians. Nevertheless, Kammerer, like other Lamarckian holdouts, conjured a

state equipped to shoulder the “intensified responsibility” that came with knowing that the population’s upgrades and regressions will deposit in the genetic material of future generations. That responsibility, he asserted, “rests most heavily upon the powers which direct education and government” protecting the population “against misrule, against exploitation.”<sup>63</sup>

“It is within our power,” declared Charlotte Perkins Gilman, also in 1924, “to make this world such an environment as should conduce to the development of a noble race, rapidly and surely improving from generation to generation.” Gilman and other feminist evolutionists condemned the Darwinian narrative of natural selection as a masculinist allegory of combat and conquest—“one universal row,” as Gilman described it. By contrast, the evolutionary journey of the white races could be read as a feminist telos: human evolution amounted to progressive acquisition and intensification by the human species as a whole of the care-oriented qualities immanent in women and the suppression of men’s “inherently combative” nature. Gilman and others urged their audiences to recognize the evolutionary profits to be gained by feminizing state and society, as “whatever constitutes the distinctive qualities of the species is found fully developed in the female: she is the race type.” An ethos of care, feminine in origin but taken up by evolutionarily advanced men, would anchor the coming civilization. Gilman affirmed that evolution “can be greatly assisted by cultivation. . . . One would think that agriculture would long since have taught us the way to improve any living thing is to take care of it.”<sup>64</sup>

The protests of the neo-Lamarckians against the selectionist claim that “environment is impotent” should not obscure the fact that the two camps sought the same objective: a national population in perpetual evolutionary ascent.<sup>65</sup> This goal required not the parsimonious, laissez-faire state and society the social Darwinists promoted as preserving natural conditions but robust societal instruments of, in Osborn’s words, “civilizing nurture.” Yet in their desire to proliferate the “best” of humanity and have the “worst” perish, the neo-Lamarckians stood shoulder to shoulder with the most draconian selectionists. “For the savage,” concluded Gunning, “we can do nothing. His opportunity is past. He is chronic.”<sup>66</sup> Only whites, they premised, merited a surround of care in which they might leverage their gains for the benefit of the species. Nonwhites, whose arrested development stemmed from, in Samuel Butler’s estimation, “the absence of the wish to go further,” merited either pity or scorn, but certainly not investment.<sup>67</sup> The neo-Lamarckians’ prescriptions amounted to a “soft” eugenics in which the state did its utmost to make the “civilized races ascend into evolutionary perfection” while, offstage, “the primitive fade[d] quietly into extinction.”<sup>68</sup> Such were the biopolitics of the twentieth-century liberalism that neo-Lamarckism so profoundly influenced.

## Consanguinity and Catastrophe

In the twentieth century United States, neo-Lamarckism seized the state. It had elaborated the population—"a set of coexisting living beings with particular biological and pathological features"—that the new liberalism sought to "make live."<sup>69</sup> Two questions remain as we turn to the biopolitical intervention that the New Deal represented. First, who, specifically, composed this evolutionarily enterprising population, the security, safety, and equilibrium of which emerged as the key function of the state; that is, who counted as "white"? Second, under what circumstances could liberalism, a political philosophy that, as Foucault observed, emerged and flourished "as a critique of the irrationality peculiar to excessive government, and as a return to a technology of frugal government," expand its statist machinery?<sup>70</sup> Both questions merit fuller attention than this conclusion can give, but let me gesture toward "consanguine whiteness" to speak to the question of population and "beset whiteness" as the necessary condition for the reorientation of liberalism.

The US context of mass immigration from Europe between the 1840s and 1924 frames considerations of population as, in Foucault's words, "a problem that is at once scientific and political."<sup>71</sup> As Matthew Frye Jacobson and other scholars have documented, the turn-of-the-century racial imagination envisioned a hierarchy of multiple white races.<sup>72</sup> Evolutionists valorized the Anglo-Saxons as the consummation of the intelligent evolutionary labor of what Cope called "the subspecies caucasian."<sup>73</sup> The differences between the white races were indeed figured as biocultural but never as deep and abiding as those between white and nonwhite. Evolutionary capacities remained vital, as Cope had noted, "even in the most ill-favored of the Indo-European stock."<sup>74</sup>

These "probationary" whites' path to achieving full whiteness, and thus eligibility for care, entailed assimilating to Anglo-Saxon cultural practices and avoiding congenial association with nonwhites. This process of racial (re)formation accelerated as the restrictions on immigration imposed by Congress in 1924 began to ease many white elites' anxieties that recent southern and eastern European immigration would overwhelm them culturally, politically, and genetically. Now that the nativists had triumphed and the golden door had been all but shut, natural and social science, popular culture, and the state began to enfold a wider racial variety into the evolutionarily viable white population. Paul Kammerer proclaimed in 1924 that Anglo-Saxons and the newer immigrants had amalgamated into "color-fast Americans." Even Lothrop Stoddard, erstwhile chronicler of the swamping of "Old Stock America," had by 1927 gladdened at the "increasing number of individuals from the 'New Immigrant' stocks who have been genuinely converted to Americanism."<sup>75</sup>

The white immigrant groups described in 1897 by nativist reformer Frances Willard as “the scum of the Old World” began to garner more flattering representations over the early 1900s.<sup>76</sup> Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918), Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and Gladys Carroll’s *As the Earth Turns* (1933) were among the texts that encouraged those citizens in possession of a “conclusive” whiteness to embrace as full biological kin members of the formerly derogated “other white races.” Transfiguring biological difference into the lighter garment of ethnicity, this consanguinizing process enabled people racialized as white to see one another as objects of affective and, consequently, material investment. Kammerer allowed that the prejudice that remains “exists only against the most alien races”; white Americans felt toward one another “the good will to replace the struggle of life with mutual help” and (he quoted Jack London) the “altruism and comradeship that have helped make men the mightiest of animals.”<sup>77</sup> Consanguinity established the conditions, in other words, for the growth of a public in whose name care-oriented legislation, institutions, and infrastructure could be initiated and sustained.

*Migrant Mother* participated in the construction of this robust collectivity by consanguinizing Florence Thompson, whom Oklahoma tribal records document as Cherokee.<sup>78</sup> But Lange’s image of Thompson also typified the beset whiteness ubiquitously represented during what Franklin D. Roosevelt described as the Great Depression’s “days of crushing want.”<sup>79</sup> Building the surround of white care required, given the context of the resolutely antistatist political culture in the United States, a series of traumatic blows to the health and security of white citizens. As the legal historian Michele Landis Dauber has argued, the architects of the New Deal made their case for the transformative program as a large but nevertheless customary response by the federal government to disaster. The economic catastrophe of the Depression resembled the epidemics, floods, fires, and so forth, that had regularly afflicted the population since the founding of the republic; or, rather, the Depression as a painstakingly constructed text was made to resemble catastrophes more generally accepted as natural. Dauber shows how New Deal advocates crafted the Depression as a disaster through the accumulation and careful framing of the testimony and images of its victims.<sup>80</sup>

The political utility of victims’ images and stories was tied to the degree to which they rendered the victims blameless, honorable, and redeemable, people suffering a “curious and terrible pain” inflicted by the wanton forces of capital.<sup>81</sup> Victims’ embodiment of these qualities authorized, in the eyes of their fellow citizens, their claim on the resources of the state. It was under these conditions that the US state amplified its power to “make live” a valorized portion of its population. For some three decades after 1930, themes of precarity, mutual obligation, and empow-

erment suffused policy acts, cultural production, and academic inquiry, underwriting an environment of care that sheltered its white charges. This environment included New Deal legislation such as the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933), the Social Security Act (1935), the National Labor Relations Act (1935), and the later GI Bill (1944); bodies such as the Federal Housing Administration (1934), the Resettlement Administration (1935), the Works Progress Administration (1935), and the Federal Security Agency (1939); educational reform initiatives such as the California State Master Plan for Higher Education (1960); and infrastructural projects such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (1933) and the Interstate Highway System (1956).

During the apogee years of white care, roughly 1935 to 1965, state-crafted environments, resources, and institutions elevated the standard of living and material equality of most of the white US population to unprecedented levels. It is true that the American welfare state operated as an emaciated version of the social provision edifices other industrialized societies built for their citizens. Even at its zenith, this surround of care never matched those of postwar Europe, where “homes, health, education, and social security” assumed the status of, in the words of one British health minister, a birthright.<sup>82</sup> Even so, for the consanguine white population of the midcentury United States, never were the benefits of citizenship so bountiful and capacitating. The redistributionist policies and the public things—schools and universities, power, water, sanitation, communications and transport infrastructure, libraries, and parks, to name a few—put in place or augmented by the liberal administrative state equipped the nation to move closer than it ever has to social democracy. The possibility of inducting Americans of color into the population eligible for care, which emerged with antiracist activism, court rulings, and legislation in the decade after 1954, would be foreclosed by an ascendant neoliberalism that would eviscerate all state-superintended care, if it could no longer be white.

## Notes

1. Lange, quoted in Goggans, *California on the Breadlines*, 94.
2. Harriman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 55.
3. Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 3, 33.
4. FSA images of African Americans and other nonwhite groups tended to recapitulate “the white tendency . . . of treating the black millions as a monolithic mass” (Natanson, *Black Image in the New Deal*, 247).
5. Dauber, *Sympathetic State*, 91.
6. See Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” chap. 11.
7. The historian Jan Goggans has described the progressive economist Paul Taylor as exemplary of “a group of thinkers who emerged from World War I believing that catastrophic devastation could create the hope of a new world order and for

whom the Crash, and the economic, political, and social conditions that followed, became the mechanism by which to achieve it" (*California on the Breadlines*, 13).

8. Agassiz, *Structure of Animal Life*, 118.

9. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 67.

10. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 647.

11. See Ellegard, *Darwin and the General Reader*.

12. E. P. Powell, quoted in Stockwell, *New Modes of Thought*, 145.

13. Bowler, *Non-Darwinian Revolution*, 5. "The doctrine of Descent remains," wrote Eberhard Dennert. "Darwinism passes away" (*Deathbed of Darwinism*, 142).

14. Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, 449.

15. Osborn, *From the Greeks to Darwin*, 163

16. Lester Frank Ward observed that, although an entomologist had coined the term *neo-Lamarckism* in 1885, Spencer had articulated the concept much earlier (Ward, *Neo-Darwinism and Neo-Lamarckism*, 53). See also Daniels, *Darwinism Comes to America*. Kyla Schuller writes that "the popular notion of Darwinism in the nineteenth-century United States . . . was notably Lamarckian" (*Biopolitics of Feeling*, 143).

17. Osborn, *From the Greeks to Darwin*, 163.

18. Cope, "Theology of Evolution," 1128; Cope, *Theology of Evolution*, 25. See also Cope, *Origin of the Fittest*. Fellow neo-Lamarckian Alpheus S. Packard observed that Cope surpassed Lamarck in "unhesitatingly attribute[ing] consciousness to all animals" (*Lamarck: The Founder of Evolution*, 353).

19. Darwin to J. D. Hooker, January 11, 1844, in Darwin, *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 384.

20. Cope, *Theology of Evolution*, 26; Stockwell, *New Modes of Thought*, 34. Cope dubbed this force *bathmism*. The German neo-Lamarckian Ernst Haeckel testified to the "primitive form of soul-activity . . . already present even in the lowest animals" (*Monism as Connecting Religion and Science*, 41). And the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote of the "vital impulse" by which organisms activated their own "creative evolution" (*Creative Evolution*, 133).

21. An animal's "intelligent choice," Cope averred, "may be regarded as the originator of the fittest, while natural selection is the tribunal to which all the results of accelerated growth are submitted" (*Origin of the Fittest*, 40). Decades later, Osborn would posit "aristogenesis," in which vanguard elements in an organism's gene plasm effect "the orderly creation of something better" ("Aristogenesis," 700).

22. Le Conte, *Evolution*, 91; Eddy, "Thoughts on Evolution," 464; Gunning, *Life-History of Our Planet*, 357; Fiske, *Destiny of Man*, 107.

23. See, e.g., Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*; and Nott and Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth*.

24. Quoted in Ellegard, *Darwin and the General Reader*, 74.

25. Cope, *Primary Factors of Organic Evolution*, 159.

26. Quoted in Ellegard, *Darwin and the General Reader*, 75.

27. Gunning, *Life-History of Our Planet*, 333; Fiske, "Progress from Brute to Man."

28. "The crossing of the Rubicon," observed John Fiske, "was the point at which natural selection began to confine itself chiefly to variations in psychical manifestations" ("Progress from Brute to Man," 283). "Cultural and psychological differences that separate the highest developed European peoples from the lowest savages," insisted Haeckel, "are greater than the differences that separate the savages from the anthropoid apes" (quoted in Gasman, *Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, 134). Cope classified those of African descent as "a species of the genus

Homo, [but] as distinct in character from the Caucasian as those we are accustomed to recognize in other departments of the animal kingdom” (*Origin of the Fittest*, 147). Fiske concurred: “The gulf between the cerebral capacity of the Englishman and that of the non-Aryan dweller in Hindostan is six times greater than the gulf which similarly divides the non-Aryan Hindu from the gorilla” (“Progress from Brute to Man,” 280).

29. Osborn, “Present Problem of Heredity.” In 1927 Osborn still clung to the belief that “the three or more absolutely distinct stocks” called races could be more accurately “be given the rank of species, if not genera” (*Man Rises to Parnassus*, 201).

30. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 71.

31. Haller, *Outcasts from Evolution*.

32. Butler, *Luck, or Cunning*, 114.

33. Cope, “Inheritance [*sic*] of Subserviency,” 254.

34. Cope, “Two Perils of the Indo-European,” 2053; “Return of the Negroes to Africa,” 2110.

35. Cope, “Two Perils of the Indo-European,” 2053.

36. Cope, “Two Perils of the Indo-European,” 2053–54.

37. Fiske, “Progress from Brute to Man,” 283.

38. Cope, “Ethical Evolution,” 1523.

39. Fiske, “Progress from Brute to Man,” 312, 316, 319.

40. Spencer, *Illustrations of Universal Progress*, 312–14.

41. Spencer, *Illustrations of Universal Progress*, 236. Cope similarly diagnosed in “the lowest races . . . a general deficiency of the emotional qualities, excepting fear” (*Origin of the Fittest*, 387).

42. Spencer, “Comparative Psychology of Man,” 18–19.

43. Salter, “Darwinism in Ethics,” 77.

44. Fiske, *Destiny of Man*, 101.

45. Crawley, *Studies of Savages and Sex*, 78, 94. Crawley and other sexologists lauded whites’ more evolved, “intense,” and “complex” erotics.

46. Carter, *Heart of Whiteness*, 95.

47. Partridge, *Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, 204.

48. Osborn, *Man Rises to Parnassus*, 202. See, e.g., Gilman’s 1915 novella *Herland*, Burroughs’s *Barsoom* and *Tarzan* series of novels (beginning in 1912), and D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

49. Collins, *Truth about Lynching*, 58.

50. Davenport, *Blood Will Tell*, 250, 265. Intellectuals of color militated against claims that in African Americans’ natures “very few of the finer feelings [could] find any lodgment” (William Morrow, quoted in Chas. Carroll, *The Negro a Beast*, 64–65). The mathematician Kelly Miller, for example, denied that there was “a single intellectual, moral or spiritual excellence attained by the white race to which the Negro does not yield an appreciative response” (*As to the Leopard’s Spots*, 5–6).

51. Gunning, *Life-History of Our Planet*, 356–57.

52. Stockwell, *New Modes of Thought*, 136.

53. Fiske, *Destiny of Man*, 102–3.

54. Bowler, *Eclipse of Darwinism*, 95.

55. Lloyd, *Men, the Workers*, 263. On new liberalism, see Furner, “Policy Knowledge: New Liberalism.”

56. Osborn, “Present Problem of Heredity,” 363.

57. Ward, *Neo-Darwinism and Neo-Lamarckism*, 65.

58. Le Conte, “Factors of Evolution,” 334.

59. As Bowler has observed, “The development of modern genetics involved

considerable conceptual changes that were not easily popularized” (*Eclipse of Darwinism*, 96). Sigmund Freud, for example, maintained a belief in the transmission of acquired characteristics well into the 1930s, as an explicitly political bulwark against Nazi racialism. See Slavet, “Freud’s ‘Lamarckism.’” “It may be,” observe Milford H. Wolpoff and Rachel Caspari, “that Lamarckism [*sic*] was retained for so long (until the modern evolutionary synthesis of genetics and Darwinism in the 1940s) because of its progressive social implications” (*Race and Human Evolution*, 94).

60. Ritchie, *Principles of State Interference*, 150–51.

61. Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, 91. The progressive Frederic C. Howe told Ward in 1912 that “the whole social philosophy of the present day is a formative expression of what you have said to be true” (91).

62. Kammerer, *Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics*, 31.

63. Kammerer, *Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics*, 358–59.

64. Gilman, *His Religion and Hers*, 6, 93, 92, 82, 93.

65. Bailey, “Neo-Lamarckism and Neo-Darwinism,” 673.

66. Gunning, *Life-History of Our Planet*, 354.

67. Butler, *Life and Habit*, 201.

68. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 145.

69. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 367.

70. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 322.

71. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 245.

72. See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*; and Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

73. “I felt in my pocket yesterday & ran against these grim molars,” Cope wrote his daughter after a visit to the dentist. “On examination I concluded that they belonged to the species *homo sapiens*, and the subspecies *caucasian*, and particular marks show that they belonged to a representative of a civilized branch of that race!” (Box 5, 1889–96, letter 437, April 8, 1889, Edward Drinker Cope Papers, American Museum of Natural History).

74. Cope, “Two Perils of the Indo-European,” 2053–54.

75. Kammerer, *Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics*, 272; Stoddard, *Re-forging America*, 340.

76. Quoted in Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, 87.

77. Kammerer, *Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics*, 281.

78. See *Tahlequah Daily News*, “‘Migrant Mother’ May Be One of Tahlequah’s Most Famous.”

79. Roosevelt, *Public Papers*, 649.

80. See Dauber, *Sympathetic State*, esp. chaps. 4 and 7.

81. Steinbeck, quoted in Goggins, *California on the Breadlines*, 140.

82. *Time*, “Medicine Man,” 29.

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