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PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

What's wrong with inevitable progress? Notes on Kant's anthropology today

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Abstract: My discussion in this essay begins with a short rehearsal of Kant's approach to anthropology and history in order to provide the framework for my subsequent focus on the political commentary that has surrounded the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement presents the most recent political challenge to white America's belief in the inevitability of progress and I am interested in the light that might be shed on this challenge when viewed through the lens of Enlightenment conceptions of not just history, but cultural and racial fitness for progressive development. I conclude with suggestions for the direction a new political imaginary might take, one capable of acknowledging the real history of race in America even as it makes room for the still necessary role played by our hope for progress, and the possibility of an expanded moral horizon.

Subjects: Political History; Philosophy; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Kant; history; progress; race; politics; Black Lives Matter

1. Introduction

In this essay, I am interested in a connection between universal world history—that is, history described as a narrative of humanity's progressive moral development—and discussions of the political actors caught up within that developmental history. As a Kant specialist, I am interested in this question because Kant's philosophy of history texts from the 1780s become problematic once we

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Do you believe that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice? Or that the human race is constantly improving? Such background assumptions connect us to the kind of ideals expressed by America's Declaration of Independence, with its soaring rhetoric of universal truths regarding the liberty and equality of all mankind in their rightful pursuit of happiness. Lately though, these ideals have been called into question. It's not just the fact that many of the signers of the Declaration were slaveholders that is the issue, it is the fact that the ideal of equal treatment seems to be at odds with the lived reality of black America. To make matters worse, white America appears to be mostly ignorant of this fact. This essay looks at the Black Lives Matter movement through the lens of Enlightenment theories of historical progress, diagnosing the challenge it presents as one addressed to the heart of America's creed.

start looking at the exact means by which progress is secured, and this is especially true once such progress is deemed “inevitable”. This investigation into the idea of inevitable historical progress, and into how such language of progress can come to shape political life, is part of a larger project of mine to trace Kant’s impact on the history of anthropology and, through this science, on the history of political discourse regarding identity and race. More specifically, my larger claim is that Kant’s historical and political writings during the 1780s are inseparable from his own “philosophical anthropology”, and that so far as Kant’s narrative of human progress included a well-formulated theory of racial difference, it would go on to influence not only the emergence of scientific racism in the context of pro-slavery politics, but early twentieth-century anthropologists as well.

In my view it was Kant who first provided an encompassing framework within which anthropology could orient itself both in terms of the special object of its researches, and the historical contribution it could make toward the scientific advancement of human life. This framework depended upon two conceptual innovations: the development of a philosophically grounded anthropology and a teleological approach to world history. My discussion in this essay begins with a short rehearsal of Kant’s approach to anthropology and history, therefore, in order to frame my subsequent focus on the political commentary that has surrounded the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement presents the most recent political challenge to white America’s belief in the inevitability of progress and I am interested in the light that might be shed on it when viewed through the lens of Enlightenment conceptions of not just history, but cultural and racial fitness for progressive development. I conclude with suggestions for the direction a new political imaginary might take, one capable of acknowledging the real history of race in America even as it makes room for the still necessary role played by our hope for progress, and the possibility of an expanded moral horizon.

2. Kant’s philosophy of history

It is hardly unusual to remark on the centrality of “progress”—and of the conceptually related notions of optimism, providentialism, and human perfectibility—to Enlightenment discussions of history and politics. In France, belief in human progress was endorsed by Turgot and Condorcet, by d’Holbach and Helvétius, and by Diderot and Montesquieu. Even Voltaire, who famously penned *Candide, or Optimism* as an antidote to such claims, concluded that mankind’s rational faculties at least gave hope for the possible improvement of the human race. This approach was mirrored by Gibbon in England, whose history of the Roman Empire identified Rome’s fall with its loss of civic virtues, virtues which, as Gibbon saw it, could in principle be regained given the universality of human nature and its wide capacity for constructive reasoning (a capacity at frequent odds with an unfortunate set of destructive passions sitting equally at home in the human breast). In Germany, it was Gibbon’s contemporaries, Robertson and Ferguson, who were first available in German translation and whose work was taken to be complementary to the search for causal threads or “universal history” being developed by historians working in what came to be known as the Göttingen school of history.¹

In 1772, the best known of the Göttingen historians, August Ludwig von Schlözer, published a textbook, a *Presentation of Universal History* (1772, second ed. 1775) which established ethnography as a new basis for conceiving world history. Like Leibniz and Müller before him, Schlözer believed that the world’s peoples could best be distinguished by their respective languages, and he followed contemporary counts of the number of European, Asian, African, and American languages in suggesting roughly 200 to be right the number of identifiably different human groups. According to Schlözer, the ethnographic approach to universal history differed from the more common “chronological”, “technographic”, and “geographic” approaches, not only for its focus on the language of a group, but for its attention to what Schlözer considered to be the three defining attributes for identifying members of a group: their membership in a particular “class” [*Klasse*] in a taxonomical sense, a particular “tribe” [*Stamm*] in the genetic sense, and a particular state, in a “political” sense (Vermuelen, 2016, chap. 6). With this set of distinctions in hand, Schlözer proposed an investigation into each of these groups across what he took to be the six epochs of history, epochs ranging from the primeval world—from the creation to the flood—up to the present time. Schlözer’s *Presentation* was highly influential: it was reprinted in 1773, and a second edition was commissioned and published in 1775, and, on the

basis of this success, Schlözer went on to write a primer for children, with his *Introduction to World History for Children* appearing in 1778.

What even this cursory look at mid-century German history writing reveals is that the main themes driving historians, and especially the ethnographic lens through which they viewed world history, were the same ones driving German philosophical history, particularly as it would be espoused by Kant and his former student Herder. Kant was careful, however, in drawing some boundaries between the two research programs. In 1756, Kant had begun to teach a course on “Physical Geography”—the eighteenth-century term for “physical anthropology”—which he would continue to offer every year for the next 40 years. This was Kant’s most popular course, for its wide attention to not only the geographical features of the earth, but to the varying effects had by these on its human inhabitants, made for high-interest fare. As the course developed, and Kant’s source material slowly amassed, he decided to introduce a partner course in 1772 that would be devoted to “Anthropology”. Whereas the Physical Geography course paid attention to ‘what nature makes of man’, Kant told his students that Anthropology would be dedicated to ‘what man can make of himself’. Because the Anthropology course had in large measure grown out of the Physical Geography course, however, all manner of physical considerations remained; a fact that was clearest in Kant’s examination of characteristic differences between nations, the sexes, and the races of mankind (Mensch, 2017). Kant’s Anthropology course eventually came to surpass Physical Geography in popularity, but he continued to teach each of these courses every year until he stopped teaching altogether in 1796. Between extant student notes from the two courses, Kant’s preparatory materials, his published course descriptions, and the eventual publication of his lectures, there are close to 3,000 pages worth of materials for scholars to examine when considering Kant’s wide-ranging work in this area.

A careful survey of this material shows us that Kant sought, among other things, to provide naturalists with an explanation of the geographic distribution of mankind by way of attention to the environmental and biological mechanisms responsible for the creation of racial difference. Departing from Linnaeus’s typology, Kant created an elaborate taxonomical system for identifying both pure and mixed race bloodlines and he concentrated on skin color as the “unfailing” hereditary characteristic of a given race. By developing a specialized terminology, and identifying not only environmental affects but also biological predispositions and their role in the inheritance of racial characteristics, Kant thus generated a scientific definition of race (Mensch, 2013, chap. 5). But if it was through Kant’s influence that anthropologists initially turned toward racial biometrics of color and hereditary bloodline, then they were importantly aided in this research agenda by a supporting rationale developed by Kant regarding the teleological nature of world history.

While Kant had been teaching elements of natural history for years, for literally decades in the case of the Physical Geography course, he only began to publish his ideas for a philosophical history in the 1780s. This began in 1784 with two of his best-known, and indeed best-liked pieces: “What is Enlightenment”, and “Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent”. He continued to refine his approach in his critical, two-part review of Herder’s *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, which was itself published in two parts during 1785. In 1786 Kant took on Herder directly by publishing a “Speculative Beginning of Human History”, an essay that both satirized his former student’s account, and offered what Kant took to be a necessary corrective to Herder’s approach (Mensch, 2018). Philosophical or “speculative” history, as Kant called it, sought to uncover an underlying teleology at work within the history of the species. With organic development as his background model, Kant understood history to be progressive and humanity to be constantly moving toward a more matured state. The means for this progress was two-fold. When viewed from the perspective of empirical history, Kant argued, what we saw was a species full of enmities and conflict: resentful and biased, sour-tempered, vain, and competitive, this was the character of a species compelled to make war and have little patience for peace. But here, Kant explained, is precisely where a teleological lens could put things in their proper perspective. It was true that the injustice and cruelty done to individuals had been terrible, but it was just as valid to see that inequality

provided history with a necessary mechanism for the moral progress of the species as a whole. And it was here, at precisely this point in the argument, that a hierarchy of races could be not only explained but also defended, as a necessary moment in the long moral arc of the species.

With this explanation in view, Kant was able to develop the grounds for a second stage of human history, a stage that could easily overlap the first, given staggered rates of development among the world's various populations. Despite the general nastiness of human character, as Kant saw it, there was still hope to be held out for the positive role played by education and culture in the improvement of humankind. The key to this stage of "providential" history was the formation of uncorrupted political institutions that were led by politicians of moral character. While Kant is perhaps most famous today for his advocating a version of the Golden Rule, an injunction recast by him as the "categorical imperative", it still bears reminding that moral character could not, as he phrased it, be "grafted onto crooked wood"; that is, that only in a state overseen by a politically just constitution would the crooked wood of humanity be finally made straight, and develop, "as it were, a second nature", one that had goodness, instead of the evils of self-love, as its guiding force (Mensch, 2014). The rub here, as in the prior stage of historical development, was that some populations were temperamentally, which is to say biologically, incapable of self-governance, and would thus never be able to develop the political institutions required for the complete moral progress of their race; their lot, according to Kant's account, was thus to remain in sway of a superior race.

3. Black Lives Matter: Progressive discourse and the discourse of progress

What I would like to explore in the next piece of this discussion is the manner in which we can connect Kant's particular conception of historical progress to a set of contemporary accounts of political life that have been appearing in the mainstream press. The trajectory of these discussions, as I trace them, begins during the US presidential race of 2016 and the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in the wake of two police killings of unarmed black men.² Americans had just finished celebrating their July 4 holiday, a day which revolves around America's "Declaration of Independence"—a document not simply demanding freedom *from* a despotic England, but *for* American self-determination—when the murderous events began to unfold. On July 5, Alton Stirling was killed in Baton Rouge and Philandro Castille was killed the next day on July 6 in St Paul. The events surrounding each man's death were captured on video and viewed by millions. There were 88 protests in the subsequent four-week period, many with more than a thousand participants, and sympathetic media coverage played on a variety of mainstream platforms, particularly with respect to the story of Castille. White audience members seemed to identify with him—in part, perhaps, because he worked at a Montessori school—they were horrified to know that his partner's four-year-old daughter had been in the back seat of the car when he was shot, and they were outraged to learn that Castille had been pulled over by the police some 52 times over the course of 16 years, in most cases for non-existent infractions. As the narrative at the time had it, Castille had been guilty only of "driving while black". The national mood turned, however, in the wake of police officers being targeted and shot by a black military veteran in Dallas and Baton Rouge. In an instant, Black Lives Matter organizers became political targets, particularly in Republican discourse, with prominent politicians seizing the opportunity to co-opt the message by declaring their support instead for "Blue Lives Matter".³

Even before the month of protests began, op-ed pieces by black intellectuals began to appear in left-leaning newspapers, including the New York Times. One of the first of these to appear in the Times was written by Georgetown University sociologist Michael Eric Dyson, whose piece appeared the day after the back-to-back killings. Dyson's editorial was precise in reproaching white liberal America for its political smugness and false innocence. Describing the history of this bad faith, Dyson explained to whites that "At birth you are given a pair of binoculars that see black life from a distance, never with the texture of intimacy. Those binoculars are privilege; they are status, regardless of your class", explained that,

Those binoculars are also stories, bad stories, biased stories, harmful stories, about how black people are lazy, or dumb, or slick, or immoral, people who can't be helped by the best schools or even God himself. These beliefs don't make it into contemporary books, or into most classrooms. But they are passed down, informally, from one white mind to the next. [...] You cannot know how we secretly curse the cowardice of whites who know what I write is true, but dare not say it. Neither will your smug insistence that you are different – not like that ocean of unenlightened whites – satisfy us any longer. It makes the killings worse to know that your disapproval of them has spared your reputations and not our lives. (Dyson, 2016)

Dyson's remarks were picked up in different ways in subsequent columns. Christopher Lebron's piece appeared a few days later, focusing on the existential distance—Dyson's "binoculars"—between white and black America's approach to the issue of racial justice. A philosophy professor at Yale, Lebron tried to articulate the lived basis for this divide. "While ideology and self-interest have something to do with our differences on racial truth", Lebron argued, "it crucially has more to do with the moment at which my experience enlivens my perception of how the racial past makes the racial present and how your experience leaves race in the past and renders the present as something unrecognizable to me but comforting to you". Lebron followed Dyson in calling out white liberals for their complacent sense of innocence in the face of racial injustice. As Lebron traced the history of this complacency, it stemmed from a disjunctive reality experienced by Americans once the civil rights movements of 1964 had been transformed into laws for equal opportunity, desegregation, and voter's rights. For white America, as Lebron put it, "that day in 1964 made it all right—the law said it could not happen, and thus, it must not be happening. Your sense of America is predicated on the assumption of a reliable and stable democratic system", of a system founded on the guarantee of equality, and because of that, black America "cannot possibly speak about the same thing given these conditions" (Lebron, 2016).⁴

The Times' regular columnist, Nicholas Kristoff, picked up the other strand of Dyson's piece regarding the implicit biases at work in white perception. By this point Trump had received the Republican nomination for president, and his total disdain for the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter protesters had become routine fodder at his rallies. Kristoff's piece, "Is Donald Trump a Racist?" investigated Trump's troubling history when it came to such matters. Reminding readers that,

In 1991, a book by John O'Donnell, who had been president of the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, quoted Trump as criticizing a black accountant and saying: 'Black guys counting my money! I hate it. The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day. ... I think that the guy is lazy. And its probably not his fault, because laziness is a trait in blacks. It really is, I believe that. Its not anything they can control'. (Kristof, 2016)

Although Trump repeatedly pestered O'Donnell to fire the black accountant, the man resigned a few months later in the face of what can only imagine to have been an hostile workplace environment.

The common threads running through these three pieces are familiar enough as a description of contemporary America. My rehearsal is meant in the first instance to identify the manner in which the implicit biases of this type of anti-black racism—as perceived by Dyson, and articulated by Trump—have not changed since the eighteenth century. While there is no record of Kant ever having met a black person, he was comfortable in concurring with Hume's sense that blackness was an immediate report on an individual's innate stupidity.⁵ More than this, however, Kant developed an account of environmental determinism which explained not only the physical grounds for skin color variation, but a theory capable of linking temperamental characteristics such as "laziness" to the geographic distribution of a given race. The Southern climes were both enervating and full of natural abundance, two facts which explained, for Kant, the chronic indolence of the "South Sea Islanders" and other inhabitants along the equatorial line. Kant's twin theses of environmental determinism and progressive development, fed naturally into a philosophy of history, in other words, in which

there would be not just staggered rates of development but a geographically driven hierarchy of the races (Mensch, 2017). A hierarchy that was on easy display by virtue of a person's looks. To be clear, I am not here pretending to offer an historical argument according to which Kant's philosophy can be causally linked to any one person's attitudes, to Trump's view of his former black accountant, for example. But a philosophical archeology does permit just this sort of connection, since the conceptual framework within which attitudes like Trump's have been created can indeed be traced back to the Enlightenment.

The second point that I want to make regarding these pieces concerns the shared sense of bad faith on the part of white liberal America. Lebron diagnosed this as the result of incongruent histories, as a failure on the part of whites to share the same realities inhabited by their fellow Americans.⁶ As this theme was developed in subsequent analyses, however, it began to be investigated in terms of its connection to an unwavering belief in progress. As historian Annette Gordon-Reed captured it,

It is a commonplace that being an American is a matter neither of blood nor of cultural connections forged over time. It is, instead, a commitment to a set of ideals famously laid down by the country's founders, and refined over generations with a notion of progress as a guiding principle. The Declaration of Independence, with Thomas Jefferson's soaring language about the equality of mankind and the right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' is the most powerful statement of those ideals. It is sometimes called America's 'creed'. (Gordon-Reed, 2017a)

This creed has been historically called upon in different ways, whether serving as a vehicle for pointing out the hypocrisy of the powerful—as in the widespread use of a papier-mâché "Liberty Bell" during rights marches held by both Native American Indians and Suffragettes at the turn of the twentieth century—as much as its faith in progress has worked to buoy the hopes and dreams of the disenfranchised. One of the most famous expressions of this second aspect would be issued by the civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during his famous "Where do we go from here?" speech in 1967, with King declaring that "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" (King, 1967). In this speech King had taken up the notion of a necessary arc toward justice from a nineteenth-century sermon, by Theodore Parker, on the inevitable success of the abolitionist movement. Of this Parker had written,

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered God is just. (Parker, 1853, pp. 84–85)

Such views notwithstanding, dismayed discussion of failed progress began to appear with increasing frequency in the wake of Trump's election, with a chorus of voices reminding readers that history contained no trajectory of its own, that the future would always be the result of our choices and actions. Suddenly there was a sense of liberal democracy's vulnerability to the forces opposed to progressive values, a sense that was only heightened as nationalist support for Brexit, Marine Le Pen, and Alternative für Deutschland, seemed to be mounting. In America, Trump's victory had pushed the Black Lives Matter movement off the front pages and seemingly out of mainstream white America's conscience altogether.

Here it is instructive to consider the pendulum displayed in even this brief review of recent history. Progress can be safely viewed as inevitable so long as things seem to be more or less working out; justice might be slow, but it will come. For Parker, arguments for the inevitable triumph of good over evil, of the abolitionists over the slave holders, grew out of his belief in the existence of God's justice. For today's commentators, by contrast, even progress enshrined by law is recognized to be vulnerable under a changed administration. As Marcia Angell recently reported on current efforts to

defund Planned Parenthood, “In the last fifty years women have made great strides in inequality but they have not reached parity”.

Moreover, further progress is not inevitable, and change does not move in only one direction. We can go backward as well as forward—something Iranian women experienced in 1979, and Afghan women in the 1990s. It will take awareness of the fragility of progress, as well as political action, to stop the Trump administration from turning back the clock. (Angell, 2017)

The great shock with which Trump’s victory was met by the many pollsters, pundits, and politicians who had failed to predict it, has been diagnosed, moreover, as an example of the specific manner in which Americans have been harmed by their naïve faith in an inevitable, and ineluctably forward-moving progression of values. In historian Jelani Cobb’s words, “We are largely adherents of the state religion of optimism—and not of a particularly mature version of it either”. As he goes on to explain,

It is this state-sanctioned sunniness from which the view of the present as a middle ground between an admirable past and a halcyon future springs. [...] The sense of history as a chart of increasing bounties enabled tremendous progress but has left Americans—most of us, anyway—uniquely unsuited to look at ourselves as we truly are and at history for what it is. Our failure to reckon with our past and the centrality of race within it has led us to broadly mistake the clichés of history for novelties of current events. (Cobb, 2017)

Here Cobb picks up a point raised earlier regarding the failure of many Americans to integrate the everyday realities of black America into a culture of white optimism, a culture colluding with white America’s ignorance of the ongoing legacy of slavery and the pervasive existence of institutional racism. In a nod to such collusion, the historian Ibram Kendi asks, “What if there have been two historical forces at work: a dual and dueling history of racial progress and the simultaneous progression of racism?”

We can longer parade the exceptional twin, and try to hide away the other history. If we do, Americans will continue to be stunned when they behold voter restriction policies, the millions in prisons, the police shootings of innocent human beings, and the election of someone like Mr. Trump. Americans will not expect, let alone have the wherewithal to combat, the progression of racism that historically has come after racial progress. (Kendi, 2017)

As Lebron put it already, the false innocence espoused by the many good Americans who are “stunned” to learn of over-zealous cops, lead-tainted water in Flint, and the chronic failure of government to allocate money for infrastructure spending—on schools, decent housing, or the levees in New Orleans—in communities of color, is simply hard to understand. Lebron’s explanation is compelling: ‘discrimination is illegal, therefore it must not be happening’, and it illuminates an interesting circularity in such reasoning since it is progressive law-making that has done the most to support belief in socio-political progress. That is, we must heed Angell’s point regarding the fragility of socially progressive laws, just as we must remain cognizant of the fact that not only were many of the worst parts of American history performed according to the law, but that the laws themselves are only useful so far as they are enforced by unbiased police, lawyers, judges, and jailors.⁷ It is still the case, however, that for most people the law remains the best hope for the kind of justice imagined by Parker and King. As Vernon Jordan expressed it in a recent essay on the importance of black lawyers during the civil rights movement, “The laws that defined and circumscribed life in the Jim Crow South were warped, but it was also the law – farsighted, fair-minded jurisprudence – that gave us the tools to dismantle segregation, piece by rotten piece. And it has been lawyers who have bent that arc of the universe toward justice” (Jordan, 2017). Jordan is surely right, but then the key to avoiding any circularity of the kind identified above, must lie in a refusal to look away, to look away from the lives of others once a law has been passed, or to assume that vigilance is no longer necessary when it comes to safeguarding any set of hard-won protections under the law.

4. The legacy of Kant's anthropology today

It is an indisputable fact that black Americans continue to be racialized by their skin color, physiognomy, and class, and that their communities are still located on scales of progression: if no longer “degenerate” then still not advanced; if not biologically unfit, then at least culturally so. These are Enlightenment criteria, however, and they are bound up with Enlightenment notions of progressive development against a specific ideal; it is my contention, moreover, that no person did more to advance these notions, than Immanuel Kant. There are two conceptions have done the most to shape Kant's Enlightenment legacy: the universal character of rationality, and the teleological nature of human development. Taken together these arguments suggest that not just history but the human species itself can be understood to be purposively organized, to be in fact progressing according to rational ideals. This creates criteria for groups to be judged on a scale of human progress. These criteria are declared to be universal and objective, such that the “fact” of a racial hierarchy can be seen as just one more demonstration of nature's inherent rationality. It was this sense of an inherent rationality that could be methodized by science, but a science that was borne, therefore, on presuppositions regarding man's progressive development and, as it would later come to be framed, the “staggered evolution” of the races of mankind.

Throughout Kant's anthropological discussions he combined a theory of racial difference with a teleological account of geographical distribution and sociocultural progression. He focused on skin color as a key racial biomarker, and combined this with humoral theory to explain the relationship between blood, character and race. In a move that would come to characterize racial science, Kant developed taxonomies of color and temperament according to racial blends, a biometrics meant to yield bloodlines of quadroons, octoroons, and the like. When this biometrics was combined with Kant's conception of teleology, patterns of racial hierarchy emerged. The races whose conception of rationality fell short of the Enlightenment ideal were deemed less advanced, with skin color and temperament serving as external markers of their less developed state. When this was integrated into Kant's social and political philosophy during the 1780s, colonialism was excused and inequality made necessary for the advancement of the species. And while Kant dropped the language of racial hierarchy in the 1790s and removed his account of racial difference from the pragmatic anthropology published by him in 1798, he by no means retracted his scientific essays offering a physiological anthropology of racial difference, agreeing instead to multiple republications. Thus although Kant became newly critical of colonialism, and explicit in rejecting chattel slavery, it cannot be overlooked that the ideal of perpetual peace, or rather the form such peace would take, was thoroughly conditioned by Kant's philosophy of history, and that Kant's anthropology, so far as it centrally informed his approach to history, could not be eliminated from his cosmopolitanism.

American political life today is inseparable from the history of governmental policies meant to either aid or block the assimilation of racial and ethnic minorities. But while this much is well known, the role played by anthropology in shaping the history of modern race relations, and more specifically, the conceptual grounds upon which anthropologists routinely testified on behalf of previous governmental interventions of one kind or the other, is less familiar. In the context of mid-nineteenth-century America, unhappy Southerners were determined to undermine any possibility of the enfranchisement of former slaves, and thus worked throughout Reconstruction to both enact laws that would segregate the now emancipated blacks from Southern society, and undo their efforts at political self-determination. The end of Reconstruction (1865–77) thus, brought a multiplication of Jim Crow laws meant to segregate whites from blacks. While this was consonant in Southern states with endemic racism, proponents were increasingly able to tie their efforts to the new “science of heredity” being promoted by European eugenicists. The history of Reconstruction, captured most convincingly for much of white America by the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), is full of imagery suggesting a native inability on the part of the black population for self-rule, and it self-consciously played against the background of the emergence of the American eugenics movement as an established scientific program, one with both institutional and governmental support. In this way governmental policies combined with cultural messaging to shape the direction taken by race relations in the following years. And it was in this context that anti-miscegenation laws were able to invoke

biological laws of descent, with many states subscribing to a “one drop rule” by the mid-1920s, and the remainder determining degrees of “black blood” up to four generations removed. The fact that it still requires emphatic demonstration to show that Black Lives Matter as much as white ones do, reveals the disturbing extent to which many Americans continue to regard racial identity through the lens of twentieth-century blood laws and their call for races to be separate and in fact unequal.⁸

In light of all this, what I want to suggest in closing is that social justice cannot be achieved so long as we as a society continue to believe in inevitable progress. There are two main reasons why this is the case. First, the notion that historical progress is guaranteed, or that the moral arc of history will somehow inevitably bend toward justice, allows people—especially white people, who enjoy every short-term advantage by maintaining the status quo—and their institutional representatives to remain passive, to avoid the kind of hard work required for the achievement of a real peace and justice. Second, while a post-Enlightenment history could refocus our gaze on the tragedies faced by individuals, and resist thereby the comforting pull of a fictional “long view” when regarding historical development, teleological history leaves no space for discussion of failure as a counterbalance to the idea of inevitable progress, and it creates a politics that will always struggle to accept an empirically proven need for reconciliation as a first step toward social stability. Think here, for example, of the difference between German efforts to integrate the historical lessons of the Holocaust versus American denial regarding the ongoing legacy of slavery: Germans have memorials everywhere, Americans are still arguing about what to do with the statues and monuments dedicated to racists and slave-owners.⁹

If cultural sensibilities have been dominated since the Enlightenment by an unreflective faith in historical progress and the moral advancement of humankind, then I think that we must be clear-eyed in assessing the damage such faith might have done. What are the social benefits that could be generated by an approach to history that was focused on the realities of non-integrated, disenfranchised, and racialized groups—groups such as those supporting the Black Lives Matter movements today? What are the barriers still bearing the imprint of the Enlightenment’s legacy when considering the current state of historical self-determination in these communities, barriers that in the US context amount to a lack of investment in the poorest communities: schools, housing, lead-free drinking water? It is precisely because Enlightenment philosophy has had a radically determinative influence in the way that social issues have been politically determined so far, that we need to reinvestigate the roots of this philosophy, and recover key notions—such as those articulated by Kant’s twin narrative of environmental determinism and progressive history—if we are to mount an historically grounded counter-narrative, one capable of working toward a nation-state that could be described without hypocrisy as advancing “equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for all of its citizens, regardless of the color of their skin.

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Notes

1. Kant kept copies of both Ferguson’s (1767) *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (translated into German in 1768) and Robertson’s (1777) *History of America* (translated the same year as its appearance in English in due to wide-spread attention to events surrounding the American revolution). And he owned several works by Göt-

- tingen historians, including Meiners' (1781–82) "History of the Origin, Advance, and Fall of the Sciences in Greece and Rome", and Gatterer's (1785) "World History in its Entirety: From Adam to Cyrus, a Period of 3,652 years". The influence had by German history writers on Kant's own development has not as yet received much treatment but see Zákutná's essay for discussion of Kant and Ferguson (Zákutná, 2015).
2. Of the many first-wave books documenting this movement, two stand out already: Keeango-Yamahta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016), and Christopher Lebron's *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (2017). For broader discussion of the political reality facing contemporary black life in America see especially, Threadcraft's *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (2016), and Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). My thanks to Jameliah Shorter for bringing Taylor's book to my attention.
 3. Comparisons between the militancy of Black Lives Matter protestors and early defenses of violent political confrontation were made from the start of the movement. The best-known statement of this remains *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967).
 4. The classic forerunner to such a conclusion is the report made by Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, who spent the early 1940s documenting life in the Jim Crow South (Myrdal, 1944). Myrdal was continually struck by white Americans' denial of any tension between the American creed of equality and the wretched conditions experienced by black Americans as a result of legal segregation. In contemporary society this sort of denial forms the background to assessments which assign the lack of black upward mobility to black culture, but not to race, given that "equal opportunity" is now enshrined in law. Shifting the blame in this fashion contributes to mainstream ignorance of racist systemic practices regarding political districting, public housing, mortgage lending, and de facto segregated education which continue to have political support in states like Alabama. Regarding the last point see most recently Hannah-Jones (2017). The fact that "whiteness" as a social-political category has had its own evolution from WASP to European to non-Hispanic, etc., has been well-documented. López's *White by Law* (2006) and Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* (2012) remain the best place to start on this issue.
 5. After reporting comments made by a "Negro carpenter" Kant writes, "There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this scoundrel was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid" (Kant, 2007, p. 61). Kant's remarks, appearing in 1764s *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime*, were heavily influenced in these parts of the discussion by David Hume's essay "Of National Characters". Kant cited Hume's piece directly when remarking on the overall lack of talent or even ambition toward self-improvement on the part of the many thousands of freed black Africans; this in contrast to those whites "who rise up from the lowest rabble and through extraordinary gifts earn respect in the world. So essential is the difference between these two human kinds, and it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to colour" (Kant, 2007, p. 59). For Hume's original remark see his essay "Of National Characters" (1985, p. 197, n. 10). Kant self-consciously styled the *Observations* as a piece of popular philosophy and the piece was in fact both popular and successful in making Kant known beyond university circles; subsequent editions appeared without emendation by Kant in 1766, 1771, 1797, and 1799.
 6. See also the excellent work done on this issue by Bonilla-Silva (2017) and Harrison (1995).
 7. The justice and incarceration system is still woefully far from this. One popular effort devoted to publicizing this is Ava DuVernay's film, "13th" (2016), which traces the rise of for-profit incarceration after the passage of the thirteenth amendment to the American constitution outlawing slavery. An excellent academic account of this is in Alexander (2012).
 8. I am hardly the first one to suggest this (e.g. Sanneh, 2010, p. 71), but more importantly it explains the fact that Barack Obama, who was born to a white single mother, and who grew up surrounded by his white family and relatives, was nonetheless always and only referred to as the first black man to become President of the United States of America.
 9. See, however, the excellent recent remarks by Mitch Landrieu (2017), Mayor of New Orleans, during the removal of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue. Violence by white nationalists protesting the planned removal of Lee's statue in Charlottesville, Virginia in August this year led to the death of one counter-protestor and the injury of dozens. Gordon-Reed (2017b) was one of many voices reminding Americans afterward that renewed faith in ideals such as those espoused by the Declaration was required in the face of such hate. As she put it, "I cannot help thinking that the menaced people [the counter-protestors] standing around the statue, no doubt holding many different views about Jefferson the man, symbolize the fragility of the idea of progress and aspirations for the improvement of humankind [...] American ideals have always clashed with harsh American realities. We saw that clash on the grounds of UVA. But how do we continue in the face of depressing realities to allow ourselves to hold fast to the importance of having aspirations, and recognize that the pursuit of high ideals—even if carried out imperfectly—offers the only real chance of bringing forth good in the world?" Gordon-Reed suggests that understanding the paradox of Jefferson, signer of the Declaration and owner of slaves, is what it will take to understand America. But the resonance of her question, from a Kantian perspective, lies in the demand for hope and the maintenance of belief in the good, for these were central to Kant's own ethical program, and the paradox facing those who would seek to understand Jefferson is just as much the case for those who would seek to know Kant (Mensch, 2014, 2017).

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