

## FROM THE CRISES OF WHITENESS TO WESTERN SUPREMACISM

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### Introduction

This article explores the rise of the West in relation to the decline of whiteness. It does so by comparing two Victorian intellectuals who helped articulate this transition, the English Social Darwinist Benjamin Kidd (1858–1916) and the English-born Australian politician and social reformer Charles Pearson (1830–1894).

The decline of whiteness may seem a surprising theme. Whiteness is, after all, still very much with us. Indeed, the close relationship between the globalisation of neo-liberalism and the image of the ideal consumer appears to be producing a new symbolic economy of exchange with whiteness at or near its centre (Bonnett 2000). Whiteness is being reinvented, as well as sustained, as the cornerstone of 'global racism' well into the twenty-first century.

However, the story of whiteness is one of transitions and changes. Moreover, this story is also a geography. The development of white supremacy has been highly varied, both nationally and regionally. One of the most intriguing moments of transition that we can detect from this diverse scene concerns the impact of a 'crisis of whiteness' at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. It was an international and transnational crisis. In both Australia and Britain, it provoked the desire to 'protect' and 'insulate' whiteness against those forces that were imagined to be threatening it. However, for a variety of reasons, whilst both countries saw the introduction of racialised immigration laws, the language of race was challenged (though not, of course, entirely displaced) in Britain by the assertion of 'the West' and 'western' as more acceptable and significant categories. Even as early as the end of the First World War, the explicit affirmation of white supremacy had begun to assume the contours of an embarrassment for the political and intellectual elite. Indeed, Pannikar says of this time that: 'With the solitary exception of Churchill, there was not one major

figure in any of the British parties who confessed to a faith in the white man's mission to rule' (1953: 201). In the short-term at least, the crisis of whiteness had different consequences in Australia, which had witnessed the production of a political class highly conscious of the spectre of 'Asianisation'. The policies and politics of 'White Australia' were the principle product of this sensibility. However, by the time 'White Australia' finally came to an end (it is conventional to cite the deracialisation of immigration law in 1973 and 1978 as an end point), the idea of 'the West', with its corollary of westernisation, had already been in circulation for over a century. Although John Howard can be seen to have re-asserted elements of a white Australia immigration policy, by the close of the last century the explicit assertion of whiteness had become dangerous territory for mainstream politicians. Indeed, today, in both Britain and Australia, the *overt celebration* of 'white identity' is widely construed as an anachronism; part of the 'cringe-making' repertoire of populism associated with the politically unsophisticated.

This article is an attempt to explore some of the ingredients that went into the geographically complex shift from white to western. It argues that the 'crisis of whiteness' needs to be understood as a moment of disruption and challenge to white supremacy. Moreover, that within this crisis we can find some of the reasons why 'western' identity gained ground.

These arguments do not imply the 'death of whiteness'. They form a limited intervention in the development of the much wider debate on the relationship between whiteness and modernity that is finally beginning to emerge. It is significant that whiteness experienced crisis and that it was demoted within public discourse. At the start of the last century, 'white civilisation' had a clear and important place in the lexicon of many public figures in European-heritage dominated societies, and many others beside. To imagine that its removal from public rhetoric *merely* reflects a shift to euphemism by an

unchanging, essential white racism is to dismiss the profound social and political shifts of the last century. This argument also implies that, whilst 'westerner' can and does operate as a substitute term for 'white', it may also reflect new landscapes of discrimination that have new and more fragile relationships to the increasingly widely repudiated language of race.

The twentieth century saw the rise of 'the West' as a political and social entity with what was claimed to be its own discrete history and traditions. It was employed to narrate the great political clash of the last century, that between communism and capitalism (and also, to a lesser extent, between Nazism and the capitalist democracies). In recent years it has been used to structure the conflict between the United States and its allies and 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Whiteness features relatively rarely in these debates. Of course we know that whiteness still matters, both within everyday culture and as a developing, structural aspect of the allocation of social roles and material rewards within 'post-Fordist', globalised capitalism. Yet any attempt to grasp the scope and nature of whiteness, either today or historically, cannot proceed on the assumption that it is comprehensible in isolation. It seems that, in reality, neither 'whiteness' nor 'the West' are discrete identities with their own history and sociology: they must be engaged and examined in relation to each other and other supremacist ideologies.

Pearson and Kidd are emblematic figures in the transition from white to western. Both produced books that represent seminal statements in, respectively, the discourse of whiteness in crisis and the birth of the modern idea of the West.<sup>1</sup> The publication of Pearson's *National Life and Character* (first published 1893) and Kidd's *The Principles of Western Civilisation* (1901) was separated by a mere eight years. Yet they are strikingly different in tone and content. Whilst Pearson is resolutely pessimistic, repeatedly intoning that the days of white supremacy are at an end, Kidd is aggressively up-beat, repeatedly asserting that the West is destined to be utterly triumphant now and for all time. It may seem a flip observation, but another obvious contrast is that Kidd's book is dizzyingly pompous whilst Pearson's is lucid and pithy. It is a contrast that, perhaps, provides a clue to other distinctions between the two discourses.

Later works on 'the West', from Spengler (1918; 1922; 1926; 1928) and Toynbee (1922; 1931; 1934; 1953) onwards, have revelled in the potential for social abstraction that the category seems to license. By contrast, the material and prosaic stuff of the body, which is the centre of Pearson's contribution, as of other treatise on race, seems to generate a 'common sense', 'no-nonsense' approach. By the same token, once the idea of 'race' is rendered as falsehood, this very earthiness instantly appears merely ignorant, clumsy and not a little ludicrous.

### **The Crises of Whiteness**

Charles Pearson was an English historian who migrated to South Australia in 1864, and, after an unsuccessful stint at farming, achieved a name for himself as a social reformer in Victoria. Pearson occupied a series of public positions in Victoria, the first of which was as author of a report on the provision of free education in the State. From 1878 Pearson was the Liberal member for Castlemaine and, from 1883, the Liberal member for East Bourke Boroughs and Minister of Education. Pearson's political career was notable for his support of a series of liberal and progressive causes. I mention this fact because, for Pearson, his concerns to protect white dominion did not represent a departure from his generally 'protectionist' social agenda. The wide-ranging nature of Pearson's political values were apparent in the book published the year before his death, *National Life and Character*.

Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, called Charles Pearson 'the most intellectual statesman who ever lived in this country' (quoted by Lake 2004: 44). Marilyn Lake draws on Barton's assessment in her recent study of how Pearson's ideas were employed and deployed in the service of the legislative and ideological pursuit of 'White Australia' in the early twentieth century. Thus she quotes Barton, reciting from Pearson's *National Life and Character* to the federal parliament in 1901, during his contribution to the debate that led to the white Australia policy. The passage is particularly interesting for the stress it places on the end of white economic control over global markets.

The day will come, and perhaps is not so far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races, no longer

too weak for aggression or under tutelage, but independent, or practically so, in government, monopolising the trade of their own regions, and circumscribing the industry of the Europeans; when Chinamen and the native of Hindostan, the states of Central and South America, by that time predominately Indian ... are represented by fleets in the European seas, invited to international conferences and welcomed as allies in quarrels of the civilised world. The citizens of these countries will then be taken up into the social relations of the white races, will throng the English turf or the salons of Paris, and will be admitted to inter-marriage. It is idle to say that if all this should come to pass our pride of place will not be humiliated ... We shall awake to find ourselves elbowed and hustled, and perhaps even thrust aside by peoples whom we looked down upon as servile and thought of as bound always to minister to our needs. The solitary consolation will be that the changes have been inevitable (Pearson cited by Barton cited by Lake: 43–4).

Pearson had a reflexive sensibility and guessed that his own feelings of disgust at the 'inevitable' end of white supremacy were historically contingent and, perhaps, insignificant; providing just another indication of the doomed nature of his generation of whites. The next two sentences after the passage Barton cites, read as follows:

It has been our work to organise and create, to carry peace and law and order over the world, that others may enter in and enjoy. Yet in some of us the feeling of caste is so strong that we are not sorry to think we shall have passed away before that day arrives (Pearson 1894: 90).

Lake usefully sets Pearson's ideas within a wider climate of opinion at the end of the nineteenth century concerning the impossibility of multiracial democracy. She also accords him an original role in formulating a transnational white racial subject 'under siege', a figure that was felt by Pearson to be obliged to pursue liberal and socialist policies of racial solidarity.

This last argument overlaps with Hyslop's (1999) and my own (Bonnett 1998) examination of the interconnections between the politics of white racial solidarity and class consciousness. This comparison also indicates the wide spectrum of historical data that can be

used to explore the politics of white crisis. Hyslop's focus is on the formation of a transnational white labour movement that drew together workers in Britain, South Africa and Australia. My own emphasis has been on how working-class white identity was bound up with a sense of racial ownership of an emergent 'welfare state'. Such studies are useful to mention here because they make it clear that this debate can be moved well beyond the relatively conventional confines of the 'influence' and 'impact' of elite intellectuals. Such figures can be claimed to provide a convenient vantage point from which to observe unfolding attitudes to whiteness. They are less useful when we want to think through the social and political bases upon which such attitudes rested.

In fact, Pearson's importance at the time of his death appeared to contemporary observers to rely less on the uniquely transnational nature of his racial imagination but, rather, on his position as elder statesman and harbinger of an emerging genre of 'white crisis' literature. Giddings noted in his 1898 review of *National Life and Character* that Pearson's renown was as 'Chief among [the] prophets' of racial pessimism (Giddings 1898: 570; see also Giddings 1895). Pearson's principle explanation of why white expansion is at an end and white supremacy in retreat rests on demographics (notably Chinese and African fertility), geographical determinism (the unsuitability of the 'wet tropics' for white settlement) and the deleterious consequences of urbanisation on human 'character'. Pearson looked forward, albeit with reservations, to a form of 'State Socialism' which, through government intervention and social engineering, would ameliorate some of the worst consequences of these processes.

State planning was being developed 'most fully' in Australia, Pearson noted; a country which now had 'a very extensive system of State Socialism' (1894: 102). This raft of state welfare and interventionist policies 'entirely recommend themselves to public sentiment' (103), he declared. These measures were considered vital by Pearson to prevent whiteness being economically undermined and, hence, overwhelmed. The economic ascendancy of those who Inge, following Pearson, was later to term 'the cheaper races' (Inge 1922: 227), meant that the white 'will be driven from every neutral market and forced to confine

himself within his own' (Pearson 1894: 137).

These themes had not been synthesised in such pessimistic fashion before *National Life and Character*. However, they need to be understood as part of an intellectually omnivorous debate on the causes of white decline. It is precisely because white supremacism was at its zenith in this period that such symptoms of decline were found to be so worrying and diverse. The bizarre heights of racial arrogance to which the jumble of incoherent and contradictory conceits that formed 'white supremacism' had risen led to a sense of racial vulnerability. Although more and more of the world was passing into white control, by the last years of the nineteenth century, there had emerged a ready market for those who were feeling fretful about the quality of military recruits, the poisonous influence of city life, the rise of feminism, the spectre of intra-European rivalries, the falling birth rate of the middle classes and many other things beside. These manifold worries were grouped together as a white racial crisis. Whiteness was opened out and made an object of middle- and upper-class 'worry' by these discourses.

The Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, William Inge, argued that by 1901 'the tide had really begun to turn' against the white world. The significance of this year is not explained by Dean Inge, although he does alight upon the 1897 Diamond Jubilee celebrations as the 'culmination of white ascendancy'. For Inge, the 'magnificent pageant' of the Jubilee also sounded a death-knell for white power, for

the spectators ... could observe the contrast between the splendid physique of the coloured troops and the stunted and unhealthy appearance of the crowds who lined the streets. (1922: 214)

White self-doubt appeared to be substantiated by a stunning military defeat. The rout of Italian forces by the Ethiopians at Adowa in 1896 had been greeted with consternation in some quarters (Lyll 1910). However, across much of 'the white world' it was the outcome of the Russo-Japanese war that produced the real shock. In 1904 it was generally expected that the Russo-Japanese war, begun that year, would be speedily settled once the Russian Baltic fleet arrived in East Asia. In fact, the Japanese fleet, under Admiral Togo, destroyed all but three of Russia's ships in

the Straits of Tsushima in May 1905. With the defeat of Russia, a novel phase in international relations began. The 'victory of little Japan over great Russia' explained Basil Matthews in 1924, 'challenged and ended the white man's expansion'. For Matthews it signified 'the end of an age and the beginning of new era' (1925: 28); whilst for Inge (1933: 156) it marked 'one of the turning points of history'. In *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, the American Lothrop Stoddard (1925, first published 1920) phrased the matter in even more cataclysmic terms. With 'that yellow triumph over one of the great white powers' (21), he wrote, 'the legend of white invincibility was shattered, the veil of prestige that draped white civilisation was torn aside' (154).

The significance of Russia's loss also turned on another matter: the formal alliance of Britain with Japan. In *The Conflict of Colour* (1910) Bertram Putnam Weale offered a stinging critique of the British government's 'sensational step of allying herself with Japan' (113). For Putnam Weale, the Anglo-Japanese alliance (1902) amounted to a self-defeating form of racial treason:

The secrets of supremacy have been revealed; and other countries, led by what England has done, are beginning to accept in their extra European affairs what may be called the same clumsy doctrine of *pis-aller* (117).

An ideal of international white solidarity was a logical outcome of the emergence of whiteness as a social and political force. Yet it remained a doomed and crisis-prone ideal, continuously vulnerable to the manifold difficulties inherent in employing a vaguely defined, highly idealised, yet utterly material, category as a significant geo-political identity. These difficulties are clearly illustrated by the attempt to employ the notion of 'white community' during and in response to the 'Great War'.

Within the literature of white crisis, the First World War was routinely termed a 'fratricidal war'. The danger the poet Sir Leo Chizza Money (1925) wrote about in *The Peril of the White* 'is not Yellow Peril, or a Black Peril, but a peril of self-extermination' (148) for 'whites in Europe and elsewhere are set upon race suicide and internecine war' (xx). Money's concern with white solidarity led him to attack both Stoddard and Inge for their attention to

intra-white racial differences (what Money calls 'Nordiculous theory'). '[I]t is suicidal', he told them, 'to encourage racial scorn, racial suspicions, racial hatreds amongst the small minority that stands for White civilisation' (149). However, both Stoddard and Money were in agreement on the political implications of the war: that the only way white solidarity could be secured was by creating a European political union. 'Europeans must end their differences' argued Money. It is time, he proposed, to 'federate all the States of Europe' (x).

Yet, such a clear solution to the crises of whiteness was immediately undermined by these authors' ruminations on the traitorous nature of huge swathes of white people, most notably Russians and the working classes. Other authors added women and effeminate men to this list of suspects (Whetham & Whetham 1911; Curle 1926; Champly 1936; Rentoul 1906). Even the physical environment could not be relied upon to support white ambitions. During the same period academic geographers had become preoccupied with the 'limits of white settlement' across the 'hot tropics' and other climatically unsuitable parts of the colonial world (Trewartha 1926; Woodruff 1905).

The grand aspirations of white dominion and solidarity, and the consequent scale of white vulnerability, made any specific attempt to see a solution to the crises of whiteness appear inadequate. It was within the arena of class conflict, though, that the literature of white crisis exposed the limits of white community most thoroughly.

The literature of white crisis is a literature of white supremacy. Yet it is also a literature in which the mass of white people are treated with suspicion. Despite Pearson's assertion of whiteness as the key to national identity, it is clear from *National Life and Character* that not all whites are equally-prized racial subjects. In particular 'the city type' (1894: 165) is painted by Pearson in fearful colours. This paradox provides the clearest evidence that this is not merely a literature about crisis, but in crisis: its central myth is constantly found to be failing, to be unworthy. Whiteness is, unintentionally, exposed as an inadequate category of social solidarity. For, if the white nation is split between the 'British sub-man' (Freeman 1921) and Stoddard's 'neo-aristocrats', then the idea of white community necessarily appears, at best, a memory of a bond now passed into history.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the suspect nature of most white people is not a minor chord within any of the texts under discussion. It is usually the key site of argument and evidence. For Inge (1922) civilisation is always the property of a small elite: it is 'the culture of a limited class, which has given its character to the national life, but has not attempted to raise the whole people to the same level' (228). Without this cultured few, whiteness is an empty vessel, deprived of intelligence and direction. The 'brainy and the balanced have always controlled our world', agreed Curle; 'when they cease to do so, our White Race must pass into its decline' (1926: 213).

The elite are represented as an inter-breeding group possessing different values to the masses; almost a race within a race. Thus the most profound challenge for whiteness located by these authors concerns the weakening of this group's grasp on power. Indeed, the imminent possibility of being swamped by inferior whites is identified time and again. Money (1925), echoing a concern made familiar by the eugenics movement (Pearson 1897) and sustained across the political spectrum, noted that: 'In Europe and America alike, the White races appear to be dying off from the top downwards', adding: 'In Britain, in especial, the most intelligent people are refraining from rearing families'.

Freeman's (1921; also 1923) 'sub-man', is the same person as Stoddard's (1922) 'Under-Man' and Curle's (1926) 'C3' type. He is white yet the enemy of whiteness; an enemy who is both a racial throw-back and harbinger of an anarchic future. In *The Revolt Against Civilisation*, Stoddard (1922) offers a detailed depiction of the 'Under-Man' as a discrete group, with his own traditions, interests and agenda. '[T]he basic attitude of the Under-Man', says Stoddard, 'is an instinctive and natural revolt against civilisation' (22). The Under-Man 'multiplies; he bides his times' (23), waiting for his opportunity. This time, Stoddard concludes, has now come: the 'philosophy of the Under-Man is to-day called Bolshevism' (151), which is 'at bottom a mere "rationalising" of the emotions of the unacceptable, inferior and degenerate elements' (203; see also Armstrong 1927). For Curle 'the masses', or 'the Unfit', although less prey to communism than Stoddard suggests, are equally as primitive. A new class and racial

war is in the offing he tells us, between the masses who will 'soon ... be in control of legislation' (215) and who, out of a sense of self-preservation, seek to thwart eugenic legislation, and 'the one man or woman in twenty-five' who possess 'what is good in the British' (62).

The difficulty of asserting both white solidarity and class elitism was resolved, in part, by asserting that the 'best stock' of the working class had long since climbed upward. Thus the white elite's racial connection to the white masses could be claimed to be real but atrophied. For Ireland:

over a period of several centuries there has occurred a striking and progressive decline in the cultural contribution from the 'lower' classes in the United Kingdom, and, of course, a corresponding relative increase in the contribution from the 'upper' and 'middle' classes (Ireland 1921: 139).

Two origin myths of the white bourgeoisie were employed by Pearson to secure this argument. One identifies their geographical and social roots in the hardy and muscular country life of pre-industrial rural England. The other locates them as the progeny of natural winners, that is, as being the inheritors of a fighting stock that was able to demonstrate superiority before the struggle for existence was compromised by state welfare and interference. The former position is commonly encountered through depictions of the degenerative nature of the city, a position expressed concisely by Galton in 1883: [T]he towns sterilise rural vigour' (14; see also Masterman 1901; White 1901; Haggard 1905; Cantlie 1906). Pearson explained that the towns 'have been draining the life-blood of the country districts', the 'vigorous countryman' becoming absorbed into 'the weaker and more stunted specimens of humanity' who fill the towns (1894: 164-5). Thus the 'racial gift' that rural migrants bring to the town is soon squandered. It is an analysis that both roots the elite firmly within a white, rural past and condemns urbanisation and industrialisation as enemies of the race.

Once the bulk of whites had been dismissed as, in some way, inadequate, the problem of how to construct a positive program to save white society became acute. Indicative of the seriousness of the problem is the fact that many of the texts under discussion conclude with utopian

flourishes; far-fetched proclamations of racial re-birth (Pearson was far too gloomy for such flights of fancy). Freeman's (1921) and Inge's (1922) plans for 'experimental communities' of superior whites are illustrative. Freeman envisaged such settlements in Britain, whilst Inge warned that they would need to be established in remote colonies (he suggests, Western Canada, Southern Chile or Rhodesia) in order to avoid cross-class contamination. In either location, the settlements would consist of non-degraded whites who could live, work and reproduce in isolation. Such plans clearly suggest that the only way of saving 'the race' is to escape white society. In so doing they condemn whiteness as inadequate to the task of defining a meaningful identity for the elite.

Marilyn Lake draws a straight line between *National Life and Character* and 'White Australia' policies:

Australia's federal fathers drew on these new histories and were constituted by their transnational identification as white men under siege. In drawing up a constitution for White Australia, they considered they were at the cutting edge of world-historic thinking (2004: 58).

It is clear that the literature of white crisis was available to be interpreted as a racial call to arms. However, this is not the only way this discourse can be seen to unfold. In Australia, it may be seen to have reinforced and, by legislative means, ossified, the place of whiteness within 'national life and character'. However, this is unlikely to have been the only consequence of white crisis, either in Australia or elsewhere. In other parts of the 'white world', such as Britain and France, we see, from the 1930s, whiteness demoted within public life (relative to its position pre-1930s). The spectre of Nazi racism contributed to an *existing* disposition to wonder about the public value of racial discourse.

At root, the literature of white crisis showed the limits of white supremacism. It illustrated the difficulty of sustaining commitments to racial solidarity, racial supremacism and social anti-egalitarianism as a coherent and stable belief-system. Such a world view is not merely prone to crisis but manacled to it. As such, the potential and the need to signal that whiteness needed to be 'moved beyond' was created wherever this crisis was

experienced. The geographical contortions required to claim Australia as western proved an insignificant barrier. The twentieth century saw a capitalist 'free world' form and come together, under United States leadership, as a political entity that contained 'westerners' who espoused 'western values'.

This shift was also enabled by a developing association between racial identification and social conflict. In *The Crisis of Liberalism* Hobson had warned that: Deliberately to set out upon a new career as a civilised nation with a definition of civilisation which takes as the criterion race and colour, not individual character and attainments is nothing less than to sow a crop of dark and dangerous problems for the future (Hobson 1972: 244; first published 1910).

The theme that Hobson stresses—that racial ideology breeds contempt and conflict—provided one of the most potent challenges to the explicit assertion of the white ideal. Summarising his research on British scholarly and popular attitudes to colonialism in the 1930s, Frank Furedi notes that 'a clear correlation was drawn between those who were racially conscious and those who were anti-white' (1998: 121). What Furedi is highlighting is an increasing tendency to associate 'racial consciousness' with a consciousness of racial oppression. Thus it became the task of British colonial policy, not merely to rhetorically 'deracialise' colonial encounters but, at least to appear, to oppose the meaningfulness of the very idea of racial hierarchy. This process was considerably encouraged by a desire to challenge the global influence of the Soviet Union, whose anti-racist credentials were taken seriously, even by ardent anti-communists. Thus, later attacks on racism—more specifically, on Nazi racism—were able to draw on an existing desire to 'move on' from race as a centre-piece of public discourse. As this implies, opposition to Nazi racism did not create the official acceptance of anti-racism. But it did help secure it. 'There is', noted one senior British official in the wake of the clear opposition to race discrimination offered in the United Nations Charter (1945), 'something like official unanimity of opposition to this species of primitive prejudice' (Corbett 1945: 27).

### The Birth of the West

Hegel gave an influential fillip to the ancient notion that ideas and events travel westwards when, in the early nineteenth century, he outlined his occidentalist vision of Enlightenment. In a famous passage from *The Philosophy of History* (1991, first delivered as lectures in 1822) Hegel explained that '[t]he History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History' (103). The notion that human freedom cannot exceed its modern, western incarnation emerged from Hegel's association of Protestantism with rationalism. The Reformation was 'the all-enlightening Sun' (412), ensuring that '[t]he German Spirit is the Spirit of the new World' (341). When Hegel talked about 'History' travelling to the West, it was towards a Protestant horizon that he saw it going.

However, despite elaborating at length on the Oriental world, Hegel had little to say about the West as a unity. When he turned to the Occident in *The Philosophy of History* he promptly fragmented it into three distinct civilisations: Greek, Roman and German. Hegel had little use for any explicit or overarching sense of western identity. The ease with which Hegel dispenses with the West is indicative of its continuing marginality as an idea. In Britain, throughout the early- to mid-nineteenth century there appears to have been little serious interest in elaborating the idea of the West or imagining something called 'western civilisation'. Nevertheless, the association between the West and social dynamism and progress can be witnessed developing into a stereotype. The phrase 'the Western world' is used by Marx (1992: 319) in 1853 when commenting upon British colonial policy in Asia. The same context, if different political conclusions, occasioned the use of the term by Macaulay 18 years earlier, in 1835 (Macaulay 1970). These were not merely descriptive usages. Clichés of eastern social rigidity and conservatism and western dynamism had already become firmly entrenched. It is a stereotype to the fore in Marx's depiction, in *Capital*, of Asiatic 'unchangeableness'. The radical British member of parliament, Joseph Cowen, summed up these stereotypes pithily in a speech to the House of Commons (4 September 1880) when he depicted 'the conflicting civilisations of East and the West—the one iconoclastic and

progressive, the other traditional and conservative' (Cowen 1909: 87).

What we have by the mid-nineteenth century is a word and an idea of growing but still unclear power and potential. It carries traditional religious and political connotations and these were, fitfully, being put to use to interpret Europe's rise to global power. What we do not have is an explanation of why, from the late nineteenth century, and particularly from the first two decades of the twentieth, the West, became a *central* idea, a ubiquitous category in the articulation of the modern world.

The notion that 'Western society is a unity' (Toynbee 1923: 4), that the West has its own discrete history, that it is 'an intelligible field of study' (Toynbee 1934: 36); that it is, moreover, a 'perspective', an ethno-cultural repertoire, is a creation of little more than the last 100 years. It is a relatively recent invention that exceeds the term's older meanings. The development of this contemporary West can be explained in terms of the impact of specific events. The Bolshevik revolution, the rise of United States hegemony, and the loss of colonial power are the most important of these; each acting to make the idea of the West seem more important, more necessary. An emphasis on these three events is favoured by Christopher GoGwilt (1995) in his valuable genealogy of the idea of the West. However, what such an approach tends to miss is that new identities emerge in the context of existing ones. Neither people nor nations are blank slates upon which 'events' are written. Rather it is through and in the context of existing identities that new ones develop. Such a *relational* approach to the topic of the West produces different points of focus depending upon where in the world one is looking. But one of the clearest paths is through whiteness.

### Western Supremacism

It cannot be claimed that the contemporary notion of the West emerged out of the literature of white crisis, certainly not in any direct or simple fashion. However, this old word for a new idea did represent a partial resolution of this literature's failed attempts to marry social elitism with racial solidarity. The idea of the West had clear advantages. Usually defined as a civilisation, rather than a race, the West could connote a socially-exclusive

cultural heritage as well as a broad territorial community. This function is apparent both within the literature of white crisis and from the emerging literature about the West that also developed from the 1890s.

The idea of the West that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a varied concoction. It has the bubbling energy of something new and urgent, the miscellaneous character of an idea not yet refined by years of use. The West at this time could be made to mean many things. Before the Bolshevik revolution, its political character was highly mobile: the acme of Western civilisation was imagined to be, amongst other things communism, *lassiez-faire* capitalism, anarchism, authoritarian statism and many other positions besides. However, within English-speaking countries, Benjamin Kidd has a special place in this tumult. GoGwilt claims Benjamin Kidd to be the first English-language author to employ a recognisably contemporary idea of the West. Kidd's reference in *Social Evolution* (1894) to 'our Western civilisation' is the 'first clear instance' of the use of the term 'Western' as a discrete society with its own history, notes GoGwilt (1995: 54) and, as such, 'an idiosyncratic formulation'. Moreover, Kidd's *Principles of Western Civilisation* appears to be the first serious attempt to define this new entity and, whatever one may think of its leaden prose, it is no less intellectually ambitious that Spengler's later, far more famous and more pessimistic, contribution.

The British civil servant and, in the words of his biographer, 'spiky individualist' (Crook 1984: 3), Benjamin Kidd, made a name for himself with what is, perhaps, the most famous tract of Social Darwinism, *Social Evolution* (1894). Kidd's aloof disdain for the survival of anything and anybody he considered 'unfit' renders *Social Evolution* one of the most pungently racist books of its time. He carried this high-brow strain of viciousness over into *Principles of Western Civilisation*. Yet shorn of the racial rhetoric of *Social Evolution* and employing the full sonorous lexicon of 'Western culture', 'the Western mind' 'Western technology' and so on, Kidd's later book appears almost contemporary in its concerns. Samuel Huntington's (1997) *The Clash of Civilizations* makes no mention of Kidd, yet he is essentially working through and with some of Kidd's principal intellectual building blocks.



It is immediately apparent from *The Principles of Western Civilisation*, that the 'principles' to which Kidd refers are as hostile and damaging as anything concocted by the white supremacists of the era. The West is defined as a form of spirit or consciousness that is intellectually far-seeing and militarily enforced. Kidd regards the true promise of the West to lie in its potential to subjugate the present in the service of the future. '[T]he significance of Western civilisation' he argues,

has been related to a single cause; namely, the potentiality of a principle inherent in it to project the controlling principles of its consciousness beyond the present (289).

It is to the principle of Projected Efficiency of the social process that every other principle whatever must ultimately stand in subordinate relationship (396).

Like Pearson, Kidd was inclined towards socialism. Laissez-faire, for Kidd, was 'a surviving form of barbarism' (455) because it was unable to look beyond present needs. Kidd predicted the

gradual organisation and direction of the State ... towards an era of such free and efficient conflict of all natural forces as has never been in the world before (469).

Kidd's 'western principles', then, are those that ensure the West's total victory in a world of ceaseless struggle and domination: 'We are par excellence the military peoples, not only of the entire world, but of the evolutionary process itself (458).

Kidd's racial vocabulary is vague. It can be inferred that he sees a racial content to being western and that western civilisation for Kidd is, for some unstated reason, white. However, Kidd's West is a decidedly non-corporeal, non-material entity. The 'Western mind', he writes

is destined, sooner or later, to rise to a conception of the nature of truth itself different from any that has hitherto prevailed in the world (309).

Kidd's propensity for such cloudy abstractions led to his contribution appearing marginal to what was, at the time, the more mainstream debate on whiteness. Inge (1922) accused him of being an 'irrationalist' and *The Principles of*

*Western Civilisation* bewildered and annoyed many of its reviewers (see Crook 1984). Yet Kidd's aversion to empirical detail and fondness for sweeping theorisations enabled him to render irrelevant the contradictions that were causing such anguish within the white crisis literature. By bypassing direct engagement with race, Kidd was able to ignore issues of racial purity, solidarity and sustainability and, hence, questions of class character and quality. For Kidd, 'Western principles' and 'our western civilisation' were transcendental forces whose inherent superiority lies in their orientation to the future, as well as in their, literally, merciless enforcement. The success of the West in 'the modern world-conflict' was thus certain: '[I]t is the principles of our Western civilisation ... and no others, that we feel are destined to hold the future of the world' (340).

It is the *confidence* of Kidd's vision that is so striking. He looks at 'the West', not as something limited by such things as human fertility and social conflict, but as a 'big idea' that is turning history into a mirror of itself. 'The West' appears to Kidd to have escaped the bounds of nature: it is not something prosaic but something that has shot out of the earth-bound orbit of traditional culture and become god-like in its destiny and judgement.

We appear, in short, in Western history to have reached the stage when the intellectual process is about to overtake the meaning of the evolutionary process which has pursued a course hitherto in advance of it; a stage at which all the stress and strenuousness of the modern world-conflict, instead of being considered as something external to that system of belief which is associated with our civilisation, will be regarded by science as a natural phenomenon inherent in it from the beginning, and coming at last actually and visibly within the sphere of its highest meaning.

The historical process in our civilisation has reached the brink of consciousness. This is the pregnant fact which it is necessary to take into consideration in endeavouring to estimate the character of the impetus likely to be behind it in the stage in which it moves towards the great struggle of the modern era; the struggle inherent in, and proceeding from the development described in the preceding chapters; namely, that in which there is ultimately involved the challenge of the ascendancy of the

present in the economic process throughout the world. That the result is destined to be enlarging and reconstructive beyond that associated with any previous period of transition in our history, no mind which has grasped the principles of the situation can ultimately doubt (401-2).

The idea of the West helped resolve some of the problematic and unsustainable characteristics of white supremacy. Yet it carried its own burden of tensions. One of the most fundamental of these exposes a similarity of outlook between the proponents of whiteness and the West. For these are both projects with an in-built tendency to crisis. From the early years of the last century (Little 1907; Spengler 1926), through the mid-century (Warburg 1959; Beus 1953; Burnham 1964) and into the present day (Buchanan 2003; Coker 1998; Barzun 2001), we have been told that the West is doomed (see also Herman 1997). Although specific causes for this fate are usually at hand, a more general reason may also be adduced. For like whiteness, the idea of the West has been conflated with modernity and global mastery. These vast ambitions create a state of vulnerability. When western colonialism was at its height, it was said that the West was in its death-throws. When communism spread in East Asia, and as Asian and African countries achieved independence, it was said, perhaps with more justification, that the West was in retreat. Yet even minor phenomenon, like the rise of youth culture or the decline of classical music, have been interpreted as signalling the end of western civilisation. As with the white crisis literature, almost everything and anything, big or small, has been fed into the omnivorous pessimism of the West's doom-mongers.

The dread of decay that arises from the West's global claim closely echoes the panicky sensitivities of the white crisis literature. However, this similarity should not be pushed too far. The literature of white peril was not mirrored by a contemporaneous white triumphalist literature. But this is exactly what we see in the case of the West. For every book announcing its death, another is published claiming its ascendancy. In its own prolix way, Kidd's *The Principles of Western Civilisation*, was the first British example. Later, more hesitant fanfares from the height of the Cold War, such as *Must the West Decline?* (Ormsby-Gore 1966) and *Is the Liberal West in Decline?* (Kohn 1957),

were contemporaneous with more vigorous statements on *The Rise of the West* (McNeill 1963). However, even McNeill's portrait of the West's flexibility and receptivity to cultural influences is tame compared with the triumphalism of end of century announcements, such as *The Triumph of the West* (Roberts 1985) and *Why the West has Won* (Hanson 2000; see also 'The West has won', Fukuyama 2001). The mood of strutting confidence is elaborated in other recent titles, such as *The Ideas that Conquered the World* (Mandelbaum 2002) and *The End of History* (Fukuyama 1992). The contrast with whiteness is stark: only military effort and direct domination would allow the white supremacists a sense of conquest and finality. For the majority of western triumphalists, though, all that needs to happen is that world 'opens up', begins to see things 'our way' and acts accordingly.

### Conclusions

Interrupting the polite hum of dinner party conversation, Tom Buchanan, the wealthy cad at the heart of *The Great Gatsby*, is moved to exclaim that: 'Civilization's going to pieces'. The startled guests are treated to Buchanan's particular view of world events: 'If we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved'. F Scott Fitzgerald has his character cite as evidence a book called "'The Rise of the Colored Empires" by this man Goddard'.

On one level this incident is evidence merely of Fitzgerald's familiarity with one of the many incendiary racial tracts of the early 1920s (namely, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* by Lothrop Stoddard) However, Buchanan's opinions are clearly designed to evoke something bigger. They are employed by Fitzgerald to create a tone of moral panic, a pessimistic atmosphere sustained by the existence of a far-reaching debate on the collapse of white prestige.

One of the distinctive attributes of this debate, in the United States as in Britain, was that it signalled both a crisis for, and the zenith of, white identity as a public ideal. Whiteness was celebrated before 1890 but rarely with such concerted fervour and never with such an elaborate repertoire of scientific and social justifications. Whiteness was celebrated after 1930 but, increasingly, those who did the celebrating were not drawn from the leading social and political commentators

of the day. That white identity's moment of triumph should also be its moment of peril is no coincidence. Having become established as the symbol of extraordinary achievement and superiority, as the talisman of world-wide social authority, whiteness was vulnerable to any sign of challenge or social disturbance. The fact that white supremacism relied on the authority of the natural, of biological 'fact', compounded its unsustainability. For once the white race is accepted as an objective reality its attributes must be represented objectively, without the interference of social factors, such as class prejudice. In other words, all white people have to have the characteristics of whiteness: they must all be superior, they must all be fit to rule. Yet there was no subject that the white supremacists discussed in this article felt more strongly about than the inadequacy of the masses. Their racism demanded social egalitarianism; their social elitism demanded something quite different. Something like the idea of the West perhaps?

There is some truth in the latter contention but it is also too neat, too glib. We cannot assume that, because it was in the context of the crisis of white identity that the idea of the West began to become attractive, that this crisis therefore 'produced' or 'led to' the idea of the West. This point needs to be insisted upon, whilst at the same time the contemporaneous and novel character of the concept of the West that was emerging is recognised. Something new was being born. The literature of white crisis illuminates some of the reasons why, as well as nearly all the reasons why whiteness was inadequate to the challenges, not merely that lay ahead, but of the moment.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stuart's comparison of the two men looks at both men's racial theories, a focus which reflects the fact that Kidd is most well-known as the author of *Social Evolution* (1894); see Stuart 1996.

“White supremacy makes it so that white people can’t see the world they have created,” Bebout told The Post. It’s a culture so pervasive that living in it, subscribing to it and upholding it feel as natural to most Americans as breathing air. Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author of “Between the World and Me,” is one of the writers who will be featured on the syllabus of Lee Bebout’s whiteness studies course at Arizona State University this spring. (Andre Chung/The Washington Post) In fact, he said, the field is meant to divert attention away from the acts of individual white people and toward the systems that privilege them. “Everybody can be individually bigoted,” Bebout said. “But not every group can have systemic power.”