Chapter One: The World Outside and the Pictures in our Heads

“What each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by [him] or given to him.”

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922)

Stereotype was invented in 1921. In December of that year the journalist and public intellectual Walter Lippmann first described stereotype in its modern sense. The description appeared in the second installment of a five-part serial excerpted from Lippmann’s forthcoming book, *Public Opinion* (1922). It addressed the seemingly straightforward question of how the public arrived at its beliefs. Convinced of public opinion’s great power to influence elected officials, Lippmann expressed concern that citizens routinely arrived at ill-informed opinions of people and events far removed from their day-to-day experiences and expertise. He hoped that his analysis would spur debate on the best means of producing an informed citizenry, which he deemed of paramount importance to democracies. At the heart of his thesis was a new definition of stereotype as a tool used by the public to simplify and order the complexities of the modern world.

The word “stereotype” predates Lippmann. It is a neologism from the turn of the nineteenth century that combined the Greek words for “firm” or “solid” (*stereos*) with “impression” (*typos*). It was coined as a specialized term to describe an advance in printing technology. Prior to the advent of stereotype printing, printers arranged individual movable-type letters to form lines of text. The new process of stereotyping allowed them to cast a single metal plate that contained all the letters required to print a page of text. The technology saved time and allowed for the rapid and consistent reproduction of texts. The fixed nature of the letters on the plate, which ensured identical results with each pressing, allowed for the word to take on a metaphoric meaning sometime after 1850. *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913) defined this secondary meaning as “to make firm or permanent; to fix.”
In *Public Opinion* Lippmann transformed the secondary definition of stereotype from anything that was “fixed” into a vastly more complex concept. A stereotype was a shared mental picture (of a group, event, thing, social system, or natural process) that simplified the thing represented so that it might be easily grasped. Given the impossibility of individuals gaining knowledge of everything in the world through direct experience, stereotypes provided a way of making sense of complicated and often distant things by translating them into digestible images. As he explained, “the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of the event.” And he went on to note: “what each man [thinks and] does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him.” According to Lippmann, thinking with stereotypes was an essential feature of modern life in a hyperconnected world.4

In formulating his concept of the stereotype, Lippmann consciously chose to make use of a preexisting word that possessed neutral associations. The “fixing” of something was neither good nor bad in the 1920s; it was simply a factual description of consistency. Lippmann carefully considered the word choice. He explained to readers that he chose to write of stereotypes, rather than “ideals,” because the latter “is usually reserved for what we consider the good, the true and the beautiful. Thus it carries the hint that there is something to be copied or attained.” He wanted a word that was as apt in describing unvalued as valued qualities. The largely negative associations that stereotypes hold for readers today were not a feature of Lippmann’s original conception. In his description, stereotypes could convey either positive or negative attributes, at the level of content. And as a mental shortcut, they were simply an unavoidable feature of modern society, which offered both advantages and disadvantages. In providing an efficient means of coping with otherwise overwhelming quantities of information,
they ran the risk of distancing one from the real attributes of the things represented. As he made clear, stereotypes did not offer a picture of either an ideal or imperfect world, but rather “the kind of world we expect it to be.”

In 1920 the words “caricature” and “type” both came closer than “stereotype” did to approximating Lippmann’s new definition, though each carried baggage that would have limited period readers’ understanding of the concept. Caricature was then defined as “a picture or other figure or description in which the peculiarities of a person or thing are so exaggerated as to appear ridiculous; a burlesque; a parody.” Use of the word by Lippmann would have posed two problems. First, caricature was rooted in the “peculiarities” of the person represented. It exaggerated traits that existed. Lippmann hoped to insulate stereotype from any hint that it necessarily captured the essence of things. And second, both burlesque and parody held negative connotations. Type was then understood as “that which possesses or exemplifies characteristic qualities; the representative. Specifically: (a) (Biol.) A general form or structure common to a number of individuals; hence, the ideal representation of a species, genus, or other group, combining the essential characteristics.” The word had the advantage of representing things whether they were valued or not. But as with caricature, type was problematic for presenting the lowest common denominator of the thing represented. It had the additional complication of being used extensively by eugenicists and physical anthropologists in the 1920s. The word was then strongly associated with a racial discourse and its hierarchy of races. Type came with too much baggage to serve Lippmann’s need of applying broadly to people, objects, and concepts across society.

Lippmann did reference types in *Public Opinion*, but only as a foundation for the more complex stereotype. In explaining the current conditions that make stereotypes a necessity, he
wrote: “Modern life is hurried and multifarious. …There is neither time nor opportunity for intimate acquaintance. Instead we notice a trait which marks a well known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry about in our heads.” The passage acknowledges our capacity to discern actual traits, while suggesting how stereotypes distance us from the person they purport to represent. Traits conjure up a type and that, in turn, invokes a series of stereotypes. In this way the observation of a real attribute is quickly subsumed under stereotypical pictures arbitrarily associated with the type and removed from the original trait. Lippmann offers the example of a man perceived to be an agitator. The picture people see when they think about him is based less on the one observed trait than on the multiple stereotyped pictures that the type conjures up. Fixed pictures of unionists, foreigners, and communists are but a sampling of the kinds of images likely to cloud one’s understanding of anyone deemed to be an agitator.

Lippmann’s consistent reference to “images” and “pictures” in describing the workings of stereotypes was more than evocative prose. He wrote of pictures’ critical role in embodying stereotypes. “Pictures,” he maintained, “have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory.” Graham Wallas, Lippmann’s Harvard College professor and, later, close colleague, likely suggested the linkage of pictures and stereotypes. Wallas was an English social psychologist and political scientist who taught at the London School of Economics and helped found the Fabian Society, an organization devoted to socialist economic reform. He offered a course in politics at Harvard during Lippmann’s final year, which exposed the young student to the idea that human psychology must be taken into account in order to understand the workings of political systems in practice. Lippmann found Wallas’s approach to politics a revelation.
As early as 1899 Wallas described a precursor to Lippmann’s modern stereotype using art metaphors, though he gave it no name and explained its operation in vague terms. Concerned to illuminate how citizens gained conceptions of things outside of their direct experience (and, at times, beyond their mental and emotional capacities), Wallas hypothesized that people must employ “some acquired entity of the mind.” As he groped for a metaphor to explain this “entity,” he first suggested: “each of us walks through life with his head locked within a lighted box painted with the picture of the world by which he guides his steps.” In this evocative vignette, Plato’s prisoners are unchained, though each is fitted with a personal cave. But immediately after describing the painted box model, Wallas lists its limitations, noting its inability to account for how direct sensations of our immediate surroundings provide “at least the foreground of [our] mental picture.”

After discarding the painted box as a metaphor for how we visualize things beyond our experience, Wallas considered panoramic displays as an alternative model. Panoramas offered the advantage of including real objects in the foreground, which viewers experience firsthand, before their eyes drift back into the illusionistic world of a painted background that conveys a simplified picture of the things depicted. Wallas found satisfying the panoramic model’s ability to account for his sense that human beings combine concrete knowledge of material things within their immediate environment with abstract understandings of distant events that are beyond their firsthand experience. Describing a panorama of the Battle of Waterloo that he saw at a country fair as a child, Wallas cautioned that when we act in the world based on an understanding of things that are beyond our sensory perceptions, “we are often like an excited rustic at the fair who should fire a gun at the painted French army on the panorama-canvas and kill a real market woman across the square.” As he did with the painted box model, Wallas
ultimately concluded that the panoramic metaphor was imperfect. He laments that the static nature of the display, which is arranged to look naturalistic from a single vantage, cannot account for how our mental pictures evolve over time.11

Following Wallas, Lippmann introduced stereotypes to his readers by asking how it is that we come to understanding things beyond our daily experience. Lippmann did so because the epistemological issues raised by the question were so clear, not because he shared Wallas’s faith in our capacity to clearly see and understand the people and things around us. Lippmann rejected the fundamental distinction Wallas described—between the mental picture of the foreground that we form through direct experience with the material world and those of the background that we acquire through a simplified image of a distant and complex event. He believed our foreground and background pictures were equally likely to be structured by stereotypes. As a result, Lippmann was not compelled to find an art metaphor that accounted for different ways of comprehending near and distant things. He found in conventional prints and paintings an apt model for making concrete to readers how stereotypes functioned in practice.

Public Opinion turned to Sinclair Lewis’s best-selling novel Main Street (1920) to illustrate how art provided the visual raw material through which stereotypes structured thought.12 The mildly satirical novel, set in the early years of the Great War, followed the ineffectual efforts of its protagonist, Carol Kennicott, to promote culture and liberal thinking in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, the small town to which she moved after wedding the local physician. Kennicott surrounds herself with the town’s most freethinking residents, one of whom is the high school’s English and French teacher, Vida Sherman. For much of the novel, Sherman serves as the bridge between Kennicott and the native residents, as she is one of the few
characters to understand the perspectives of the newcomer, who prefers big city life, and the townspeople, who are content with Gopher Prairie in its current state.

Using Sherman as an archetypal educated citizen, Lippmann reflects on how someone who “has never been to France, and . . . never been along . . . the battlefront” is likely to understand the World War that was then raging. Lippmann writes: “if you could see what she sees with her mind’s eye, the image of [World War I] in its composition might not be unlike an eighteenth-century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind.” She “knows” the war not as a collection of statistics, dates, and battles either described in the local paper or narrated by veterans, but foremost as an image. Her picture transforms the messiness of the war into a coherent narrative, one that has more to do with nascent conceptions of eighteenth-century nationalism, romanticism, and imperialism, than the modern war that was then tearing Europe apart. At the center of her picture is a strong military leader who meets the viewer’s gaze, exudes confidence, and implicitly controls the endless stream of soldiers that disappears into the landscape. Shared by millions of Americans, such pictures of war—whether based on engravings of popular paintings by artists such as Charles Willson Peale or Antoine-Jean Gros—brought order to a maddeningly complex war without having any necessary connection to the reality of the conflict.13

Lest we assume that Sherman thinks in stereotypes merely because of her physical distance from France, consider that Lippmann also explored the propensity to stereotype of the French statesman Georges Clemenceau, who played a major role in guiding his government’s prosecution of the First World War. As he did with the fictional Sherman, Lippmann speculated on the pictures that Clemenceau was likely to have held about the conflict. If during the
negotiations for the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, Lippmann asks, “could anyone have penetrated the mind of M. Clemenceau, would he have found there images of the Europe of 1919, or a great sediment of stereotyped ideas accumulated and hardened in a long and pugnacious existence? Did he see the Germans of 1919, or the German type as he had learned to see it since 1871?” Answering his rhetorical questions, Lippmann wrote of Clemenceau: “He saw the type.”

Stereotypes are an inevitable part of shaping one’s understanding and experience, whether one is a civilian thousands of miles from the conflict, an elected official responsible for guiding war policy, or a soldier serving in the trenches. While proximity to the front surely affected the type of the mental pictures each group held, it did not diminish a fundamental reliance on stereotyping.  

Art played an obvious role in furnishing Sherman with her picture of the war—a mass-produced engraving served as the point of reference by which the veracity of newspaper reports, first-person accounts, and political debates of the conflict was judged. With Clemenceau, the links between his mental picture and art are less clear. Lippmann, however, saw art connected to stereotypes in two distinct ways. Art furnished many of the mental images that solidified into stereotypes; it was often the visual source material. Given Lippmann’s broad definition of art, he was comfortable seeing the pictures drawn from painting, sculpture, prints, moving pictures, plays, cartoons, and literature, but he explained that mental pictures were also generated by “moral codes and our political philosophies and our political agitations.”  

In addition to supplying source material, art supplied a metaphor for making stereotypes concrete and, through the discipline of art history, a guide to understanding their operation. Sherman and Clemenceau both held pictures in mind and their respective pictures adhered to a governing logic that art historians were best positioned to illuminate. It did not matter that one image was likely derived
from high art and the other from a political philosophy, since in Lippmann’s estimation, internalized images functioned in a like manner regardless of their source.

The discipline of art history overtly enters *Public Opinion* through the writing of one of the early twentieth century’s most influential art historians, Bernard Berenson. Lippmann quoted at length from Berenson’s *Central Painters of the Italian Renaissance* (1897), a popular book that was the third volume in the art historian’s loosely organized series on Italian Renaissance art. Berenson was then known for putting art history on a more scholarly footing. He sought to reform a discipline dominated by men committed to the authentication of masterworks through the often-arbitrary judgments of an expert “eye.” Berenson promoted himself as a scientific connoisseur—someone deeply invested in making attributions that were scientifically verifiable. As Berenson explained in his *Three Essays in Method* (1927), the approach required “average powers of observation, and concentration and reasoning of the kind that the botanist or anatomist is supposed to have. It calls, besides, for training in the historical method, that method which teaches not only how to weigh evidence . . . but how to recognize what is relevant when it appears, and how to look for it when it hides.”

Lippmann introduced Berenson to his readers with the following quote from *Central Painters*: “what with the almost numberless shapes assumed by an object. …What with our insensitiveness and inattention, things scarcely would have for us features and outlines so determined and clear that we could recall them at will, but for the stereotyped shapes art has lent them.” The passage provided backing for several of Lippmann’s claims: the complexity of objects in the environment proves to be overwhelming to viewers; human failings make it challenging to see what is before us; and art can bring order to the world by teaching one how to see in standardized ways. As with the previously quoted passage on Berenson’s method, it also
suggested that what we see is but a partial glimpse of the world; significant aspects of it “hide” from view.

Because Berenson wrote in 1897, he necessarily used “stereotype” in its older sense, referring to a codified type that was fixed, though the brevity of the quoted passage likely masked disparities between the definitions. In citing Berenson’s earlier use of the term, and by making no effort to clarify its period meaning, Lippmann encouraged readers to imagine that the major redefinition of stereotype in *Public Opinion* was best seen as a modest, evolutionary change. This was important. Lippmann anticipated that *Public Opinion* would prove to be controversial. In it he took the provocative steps of introducing psychology into political science, questioning the utility of a free press, and raising doubt about the capacity of the public to make the informed judgments needed in a democracy. In John Dewey’s 1922 review of *Public Opinion*, the philosopher described it as “perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned.”

Other efforts to soften the book’s reception included giving it the blandest possible title, as Lippmann biographer Ronald Steel has noted, and making extensive use of quotations. While all of Lippmann’s writings necessarily built on the work of prior scholarship, *Public Opinion* was alone among Lippmann’s six books in including long quotations and detailed footnotes. Each of these choices worked to normalize the claims of this radical text.

In his effort to make the case for the applicability of Berenson’s insights on art to society, more broadly, Lippmann prefaced a lengthy quotation from the art historian with the observation: “Substitute in the following passage of Mr. Berenson’s words the words ‘politics,’ ‘business,’ and ‘society,’ for the word ‘art’ and the sentences will be no less true.” He then reproduced the following lines from *Central Painters*: “unless years devoted to the study of all
schools of art have taught us also to see with our own eyes, we soon fall into the habit of moulding whatever we look at into the forms borrowed from the one art with which we are acquainted. There is our standard of artistic reality. Let anyone give us shapes and colors which we cannot instantly match in our paltry stock of hackneyed forms and tints, and we shake our heads at his failure to reproduce things as we know they certainly are.”

The novel way in which Lippmann presented Berenson’s quotation suggests the utility of applying art historical approaches to a broad range of social constructs that have nothing to do with art. For as Lippmann explains, the substitution of “politics, business, and society” for “art” leaves both sets of sentences “true.” The passage reinforces Lippmann’s contention that “we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.” As he argued: “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.”

The final quotation Lippmann reproduced from Berenson’s *Central Painters* illustrated the stability of stereotypes by pointing out the degree to which turn-of-the-twentieth-century viewers judged male bodies through an ideal forged in the Renaissance. An extended quotation from Berenson explained the historical development of the bodily ideal before asking: “Who had the power to break through this . . . standard of vision and, out of the chaos of things, to select shapes more definitely expressive of reality than those fixed by men of genius? No one had such power.” The passage appears to argue for the impossibility of transcending stereotypes. We are told that “no one” has the power to break through the “standard of vision.” But recall that the previous Berenson quotation contained the line: “years devoted to the study of all schools of art [can] teach us to see with our own eyes.” The art historian maintained that conversance with art’s
myriad styles loosened one from the strictures of any single point of view, so permitting one to see the world with an innocent eye unclouded by types.

Berenson’s argument on the Renaissance bodily ideal is that no one had the power to discard this *particular* ideal. He understood that types were continually developed, circulated, and discarded, but was convinced that a select group of types were beyond the capacity of individuals to displace. Taken in the context of its chapter, the quote makes clear that the ideal male type was fashioned by the separate but complementary efforts of two artistic “geniuses,” Donatello and Masaccio. In Berenson’s telling, both men were inspired by the scientific age and the desire to depict things as “research was discovering them to be.” This put art on the road to naturalism, which Berenson believed would have eventually led to artworks that replicated the “chaos” of nature. To preserve the individuality and idiosyncrasies of all people and things was, for Berenson, to paint outside of social systems and reproduce the raw confusion of the natural world. Italian art avoided this undesirable end because Donatello’s move toward naturalism was tempered by his personal interest in “movement and action,” and Masaccio’s was checked by his concern for “tactile values.” Additionally, Masaccio curbed Donatello’s push toward action and Donatello, in turn, helped place limits on Masaccio’s move toward monumentality. The ideal male form emerged when each of these efforts and counterforces combined with the Italian humanists’ contemporaneous promotion of the antique.²⁶

Berenson held that the ideal was unassailable in the fifteenth century because it was a perfect expression of Italian Renaissance character and that it remained dominant in the nineteenth century because Europe still retained the essential character it acquired during the Renaissance.²⁷ The type was durable because it captured the ethos of both the quattrocento and modern era. Berenson knew that both artists of genius and second-rate hacks produced images
laden with fixed types. His concern was not with the use of types but with their quality. “Great art” was “the reproduction of the visual images haunting great minds,” which necessarily embodied the spirit of the age in which it was created.28 Lippmann of course did not hold Berenson’s belief in the possibility of naïve looking. He maintained that a given stereotype’s staying power with artists, politicians, and members of the public was a function of its imbrication in social systems. The durable types that Berenson took as expressions of artistic geniuses who captured the essence of their societies were, for Lippmann, simply those stereotypes most firmly entrenched in systems (such as laws of political economy or principles of politics) that effectively impressed “upon the world . . . our own sense of our value, our own position and our own rights.” As Lippmann explained, instead of offering “a complete picture of the world, [stereotypes] are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members.”29

Berenson believed that types capturing the spirit of an era could be dislodged only after society’s “essential character” had been altered. Types that lost their correspondence to society were susceptible to replacement by newer types that expressed more relevant social truths.30 Lippmann, in contrast, maintained that any stereotype could, in theory, be eliminated. He posited that individual stereotypes could be excised through careful study of both the things being stereotyped and the psychological state of the viewer who read it in stereotypical terms. Through study of the real attributes of things stereotyped and the psychology of the person seeing, simple pictures could give way to complex understandings.31 Lippmann cautioned that stereotypes were only theoretically disposable because their elimination required considerable labor. It was no easy task to replace a simple picture with a complex understanding, and so
jettison a picture “to which we are adapted” in favor of an understanding that feels foreign. Lippmann was careful to distinguish between our capacity to reject individual stereotypes and our continuing dependence on the process of stereotyping. It is this distinction that he likely had in mind when reproducing Berenson’s passage on the durability of the ideal male type. In quoting the art historian’s insistence that the “standard of vision” was resilient, Lippmann contrasted idealized types, which resisted change but were ultimately alterable, with what he termed—again quoting Berenson—“our manner of visualizing,” which was the fixed process of seeing in the modern world.32

What and how people saw was consistently of interest to Lippmann. But his attention to the links between images and knowledge—including the role of pictures in the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes—is not evidence that he privileged the visible field. It is simply a reflection of his belief that we must grapple with the dominant manner in which meaning gets made in order to expand the scope of what can be seen. If anything, Lippmann showed in Public Opinion his abiding interest in the unseen. Early in the introduction he declared: “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man . . . has invented ways of seeing what no naked eye could see, of hearing what no ear could hear, of weighing immense masses and infinitesimal ones, of counting and separating more items than he can individually remember. He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach.”33 Most obviously, the passage helped lay the groundwork for Lippmann’s first mention of “stereotype” on the page that followed, by noting how readers’ internal pictures bring coherence to the environment without regard for the appearance of the material world. But the
passage simultaneously referenced our ability to give visual form to that which is beyond human vision. Objects too immense or minute to be seen with the naked eye, along with nonvisual phenomena, are also made visible by social systems. In lumping together stereotypes that offer evident distortions of the optical world with those that visualize phenomena otherwise beyond human apprehension, Lippmann illustrated their complex and contradictory work.

In *Public Opinion* Lippmann made stereotypes visible in order to spur the development of better systems for nurturing an informed public able to make educated decisions. Lippmann knew that stereotypes worked only to the extent that audiences failed to distinguish between them and the things they represented. When viewers did not differentiate between a stereotype and its referent, the stereotype was effectively accepted as real. To make stereotypes visible as stereotypes, he needed to demonstrate the distance between their simplified picture and a complex understanding of the thing represented. He typically did so by providing readers with the exhaustive context that he believed newspapers rarely supplied. The distance illustrated offered proof that stereotypes were arbitrary social constructions, while simultaneously pointing to dangers inherent in basing public opinion, and government policy, on so flimsy a foundation. The need to demarcate the distance between stereotypes and their objects required Lippmann to distinguish between the “real” person or event and its stereotype. To separate stereotype from referent he needed to argue for the stereotype’s failure to capture an essential feature of the thing for which it stood.

* * *

The stereotype concept was naturally enough a product of its era. Its form and meaning were rooted in early-twentieth-century discourses of philosophy, psychology, political science, and art history. This was also true of the specific stereotypes that Lippmann used as examples.
throughout his text. Readers understood stereotypes on religion, nationality, or race through those generalized discourses that animated the stereotype concept, as well as through more particularized sets of discourses that each stereotype invoked. Racial stereotypes, for example, were then given form by the vigorous debates over anthropology, sociology, genetics, social Darwinism, and eugenics that animated US culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. Rather than fixing its meaning, such discourses established the parameters for how reporters, intellectuals, academics, artists, and members of the public would come to understand a given stereotype. While I will have more to say in chapter 2 on how racial stereotype was deployed in the culture of 1920s America, chapter 1 lays the groundwork for that discussion by illustrating how the discursive context of the decade demarcated the boundaries for what stereotype on race could mean. In other words, before attending to the specific ways in which Lippmann’s contemporaries put racial stereotypes to use, I illustrate the limits and possibilities of the intellectual field on which they played.

In the early 1920s no discourse played a more significant role in establishing the meaning of racial stereotype than did eugenics. The English scientist Francis Galton developed the science of eugenics in the 1860s. It was tirelessly promoted in the United States by the biologist Charles Davenport from the platform of his Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island, New York. Eugenics is the science of improving the quality of the human stock, through one or more of the following means: environmental alteration, selective mating, elimination of inferior genes.34 Whereas Darwin, and the social Darwinists who followed, had made general pronouncements on an organism’s inherited physical fitness, Galton’s eugenics made the more specific claim that talent and character were also hereditary.35 While all eugenicists believed in the importance of heredity, their ranks cleaved over the role played by the environment in human
development. Mainline proponents, who were invested in “biology as destiny,” are infamous for supporting “negative” eugenic policies, which subjected those deemed feebleminded, criminal, or racially inferior to sterilization, marriage restrictions, capital punishment, colonization, and restrictive immigration controls, while reform eugenicists, who accorded the environment a major role in human development, are more closely associated with “positive” policies that worked to improve nutrition, sanitary regulations, education, and labor opportunities for the disadvantaged.\textsuperscript{36}

Today eugenics is overwhelmingly remembered for the excesses of negative eugenics. In the popular imagination it is equated with the genocidal programs of Nazi Germany and a host of early-twentieth-century US scientists and politicians who sought restrictions on the procreation and immigration of “unfit” populations.\textsuperscript{37} But in the 1920s its appeal was broad, joining scientists, politicians, and members of the public across the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{38} The historian Daniel J. Kevles has documented the broad acceptance of eugenic thought in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He notes that it was then a frequent topic of popular magazine and newspaper articles, and lectures at philosophical societies, schools and universities, women’s clubs, medical and nursing associations, and YMCAs; Eugenic societies sprang up in many states, most notably Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Utah, and California; major eugenics organizations were founded, including the Galton Society, Race Betterment Foundation, American Eugenics Society, which was funded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and George Eastman, and the Eugenic Records Office, supported by the Carnegie Foundation. Prominent advocates of eugenics during the period included Theodore Roosevelt; Alexander Graham Bell; Charles E. Eliot, president of Harvard University; Charles R. Van Hise, president
of the University of Wisconsin; David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University; Herman J. Muller, future Nobel laureate in genetics; Emma Goldman; and Margaret Sanger.  

Eugenics proceeded along different tracks in different countries, depending on the symbolic threat that loomed largest in the popular imagination. Eugenicists in the United Kingdom addressed the danger posed to the nation by the inferior stock of the working class, while their US counterparts overwhelmingly attended to the threat nonwhites posed to the country’s racial fitness. In the 1920s mainline eugenicists in the United States held that there was no more important work for improving the nation’s fitness than staunching the epidemic of miscegenation. They feared that the country’s mulatto population was rapidly expanding as a result of interracial sex and that such unions would lead inexorably to the dilution of white bloodlines and the gradual decline of the white race. While sexual relations between blacks and whites had steadily declined since the Civil War, reaching a low point in the first decades of the twentieth century, eugenicists saw in miscegenation a growing threat to the Caucasian race. In order to protect the purity of white blood, mainline eugenicists lauded efforts to bar Asian immigration and limit European immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Some even sought to resurrect the nineteenth-century dream of black colonization. In addition, they supported a host of laws aimed at regulating relations between whites and blacks, including bars to interracial marriage, mandatory sterilization of the “unfit,” and tightening of the legal definitions of who was black or white. As a host of historians have documented, the desire to police a strict boundary between white and black led to the legal and social ascendancy of the “one-drop rule” for defining racial identity. The rule held that a single drop of black blood was sufficient for classifying an individual as black.
The one-drop rule sought to provide a clearly delineated test of one’s racial identity that kept the white bloodline untainted by defining as black all mixed-race people. The rule replaced more relaxed and fluid conventions for black racial classification that had existed in many pockets of the country in the antebellum period. Historians have described a number of factors that contributed to the rise of more rigid racial definitions of black identity in the aftermath of the Civil War. In the nineteenth century, the one-drop rule was spurred by Southern white resentment for the solidarity that mulattoes showed toward darker blacks during and after the Civil War and with the psychological need of whites in the North and South to clearly demarcate their differences from an “other.” With the collapse of the free-slave binary, which had helped give European-Americans their identity prior to emancipation, whites invested more heavily in the divide between white and black. In the early twentieth century, acceptance of the rule was accelerated by passage of the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924. The act was spurred by fear that recent waves of immigrants from eastern and southeastern Europe had higher rates of “defects” (insanity, crime, feeblemindedness, dependency, tuberculosis, and epilepsy) than did native-born whites and that such immigrants posed a threat to the quality of white racial stock. Once the symbolic threat posed by inferior Europeans was eliminated by the constriction of immigration, blacks took center stage as the most significant other against which whiteness was defined.

The one-drop rule brought legal clarity and social confusion. It had the unintended effect of creating a large pool of white-looking people who were legally black and, in the context of a discriminatory system that accorded social and economic benefits to whites, encouraged blacks with sufficiently light skin pigmentation to “pass” as white. As the historian Joel Williamson has famously explained in his study of racial mixing in the South, this gave rise in the 1920s to white
fears of “invisible blackness.” The specter of white-looking blacks mingling freely in polite society and intermarrying with whites destabilized the white-black border that gave coherence to whiteness. This led whites to deem invisible blackness as a grave threat to the biological and cultural purity of their race. While Williamson analyzed invisible blackness in the South, it was a national concern during the first decades of the twentieth century.

One of the 1920s’ most influential voices on the dangers posed by race mixing was that of Earnest Sevier Cox, a Southern Methodist preacher, amateur ethnographer, political activist, and committed eugenicist. The itinerant Cox studied at an unaccredited college in Tennessee, received a business certificate from a school in Georgia, ran a loan company in Louisiana, worked as a reporter in Oklahoma, taught school in Tennessee and Oklahoma, and attended a religious school in Illinois, before stints studying theology at Vanderbilt University and then sociology at the University of Chicago. Between 1910 and 1915 he meandered throughout Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America before returning to the United States to write and revise *White America* (1923), his self-published polemic on the dangers posed to white racial purity by the presence of blacks in the United States. The book held that the cultural achievements of human populations were the product of each race’s particular biological attributes acting on their environments. In Cox’s estimation, “the higher culture of the world today is originated and sustained by peoples of the North American breed of Caucasians,” while the Negro “has no cultural possessions save those which he has received from the white man.” In order to protect white society, Cox advocated the repatriation of blacks to Africa, the exclusion of Asian immigrants, and restrictive European immigration policies to prevent Jews and other “inferior” Caucasians from entering the United States. Cox pointed out that segregation had historically offered few protections against race mixing and that the only way of
safeguarding the purity of Caucasian blood was to physically separate superior from inferior races.

*White America* made clear the unique danger posed to the racial order by mixed-race people. As Cox wrote: “it is this mixbreed element in the United States . . . who constitute the immediate peril to the white race and the institutions of civilization. The near-whites are bucking the color-line and making good in every state in the American Union. The North, the South, the East, and the West are suffering these aggressive negroids to enter white society and to inject the blood of Africa into Caucasian circles. …The near-white is a cancer that will eat deeper and deeper into the heart of the white race.” Numerous white anthropologists, ethnologists, and mainline eugenicists of the era echoed this fear of racial mixing, cautioning that “the mulatto . . . constitutes the most serious feature of the race problem today” or that “the presence of a considerable number of people of mixed and colored blood presents one of the genuine problems remaining in race relations.” Writing in 1926, Cox hammered home the unique dangers of invisible blackness: “We [whites] dwell with 3,000,000 mixbreeds, and we are just becoming conscious that the offspring of an illegal union of the [white and black] races is, racially, not to be distinguished from the product of a legal union [of whites].”

While whites in the United States had long deemed miscegenation a damaging and immoral practice, the specific dangers it posed evolved over the early decades of the twentieth century. Earlier warnings on racial mixing typically addressed its deleterious effects on both blacks and whites. For much of the nineteenth century, conventional wisdom held that mulattoes were an intermediate race that, because of their white blood, had greater abilities and social expectations and, because of their black blood, had no hope of enjoying the benefits of white society. White blood brought mulattoes both benefits and drawbacks. As a prominent white
sociologist explained: “The members of the primitive [pure black] group, recognizing the hopelessness of measuring up to the standards of the white race, are generally content and satisfied with their lower status and happy among their own race. It is the mixed-blood man who is dissatisfied and ambitious.” Stoddard worried about blacks displacing whites or whites becoming black. And, crucially, he saw the threat as an external one to whiteness.

In the twentieth century, white Americans continued to believe that miscegenation left mulattoes ill-fitted for society and that it would eventually overwhelm the white race, though their main concern now centered on its immediate threat to whites. Rather than describing the distant danger of a disappearing white race, they raised alarm over the daily darkening of contemporary whites, as attention shifted from miscegenation, in general, to mulattoes, in particular. White Americans had long imagined that even minute quantities of black blood were visible in the physiognomies of mixed-race people. Yet the one-drop rule, and the consequent increase in the number of white-looking blacks, made white belief in the legibility of blackness untenable. Whites were compelled to reconceptualize the racial threat. What had once been a lamentable, but conscious choice to mix with someone of another race became a chance accident of marrying, siring, or fraternizing with blacks that was outside of one’s control. What began as the mainline eugenicists’ crusade to encourage whites to make racially correct choices descended into a helpless fear of one’s racial stock being undermined by an unseen enemy lurking within the white community. Miscegenation transformed from an external to an internal threat.
Readers of mainline eugenic and ethnographic texts in the 1920s were confronted with many examples of the damage invisible blackness wrought. Authors raised the specter of “full-blooded Caucasians . . . put under suspicion as mulattoes” and whites unknowingly taking “up into [their] blood a race of human flesh-eaters.” Readers were shaken by stories of light-skinned blacks accepted inadvertently into marriages with both members of the First Families of Virginia and the San Francisco elite. Several authors detailed stories of unnamed white couples from respectable families giving birth to babies “black as coal, and with hair as kinky as the veriest young Congo that a Negress of that race ever gave birth to in America.” Such births were explained as a normal “reversion to type” of the unsuspecting parent whose line traced back to a distant female slave.\(^{53}\)

Southerners are famous for raising the alarm over invisible blackness, but their concerns were shared and amplified by prominent voices in the North. When Cox failed to find a commercial publisher for \textit{White America}, he turned for advice to Madison Grant, a patrician New Yorker, lawyer, and ardent eugenicist. Grant was the author of the influential \textit{The Passing of the Great Race} (1916), which read European history as a monumental racial struggle and was written, in part, to help promote US federal restrictions on immigration from southern and eastern Europe and state sterilization laws for “criminals, the diseased, and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately worthless race types.” Cox sought out Grant because \textit{The Passing of the Great Race} spurred him to write \textit{White America}. He was struck by the truth in Grant’s observation that when races live side by side “but one of two things can happen; either one race drives the other out . . . or else they amalgamate and form a population of race bastards.” While Grant did a better job
that Cox in cloaking his racial animosity toward nonwhites in the language of science, he was clear in his belief that miscegenation was “a frightful disgrace to the dominant race.”

Grant helped Cox update his manuscript by pointing him toward current scholarship that aligned with their shared racial values and, subsequently, wrote a glowing book review of *White America* for the *Richmond News Leader*. Cox also found a sympathetic audience in Charles Davenport, a Harvard-trained biologist and the most prominent US scientist who advocated for mainline eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century. Davenport’s research paid considerable attention to the genetic consequences of mating between whites and blacks. His best-known published work is the coauthored study *Race Crossing in Jamaica* (1929), which analyzed the “relative capacity of negroes, mulattoes, and whites to carry on a white man’s civilization.” Reviewing Cox’s *White America* in the *Eugenical News*, he called it a “stirring volume” by a man who hopes to save his country from the fate of Haiti. Grant and Davenport were establishment figures who offered Cox’s book an imprimatur of social and scientific respectability that significantly increased its reach in the North.

We know that Grant supplied the general inspiration for Cox to write *White America*, and it is likely that a second New Yorker, Dr. Robert Wilson Shufeldt, introduced Cox to the particular dangers of invisible blackness. Shufeldt was an ornithologist, ethnographer, and retired army surgeon whom Cox acknowledged in *White America* as a naturalist with knowledge of the Negro “second to none.” As early as the 1980s, Shufeldt began publishing academic journal articles that laid out his fears of invisible blackness. In the twentieth century his views found a mass audience with the publication of his two books: *The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization* (1907) and *America’s Greatest Problem: The Negro* (1915). Noting that some Negroes in Washington, DC, “are so white that it takes a very keen eye to detect the Ethiopian
blood in them,” Shufeldt warned his readers: “They are dangerous from whatever point man may elect to view them, as they may possess all the vicious and sensual traits of the negro, without the color of the latter’s skin as a warning flag to the unwary.” And he went on to caution that mulattoes “have better opportunities to contract white alliances in marriage, and thus insidiously pass savage Ethiopian blood into the veins of the Anglo-Saxon American.” Shufeldt scorned white progressives who, he claimed, were standing by as “the entire white race [is] rotted by heroic injections into their veins of all the savagery and criminality there is in the negro.”

In the imagination of those who feared invisible blackness, whites’ absorption of the inferior social and cultural traits of blacks was both the cause and the product of blacks’ increasingly white appearance. As blacks looked more white, whites acted more black.

In their efforts to understand the mechanism by which organisms inherited character traits, twentieth-century eugenicists moved away from correlating physical signs of difference (such as skin color, cranial shape and volume, skull proportions, etc.) with specific behavioral and intellectual characteristics to focus on how “blood” and, later, genes controlled the inheritance of traits. In modern parlance, they shifted from the study of phenotypes (an organism’s physical expression of genes) to attend to genotypes (its fixed arrangement of genetic material). This shift from external to internal evidence accelerated, first, as invisible blackness threw into question the value of physiognomic evidence, and second, as reform eugenics and the science of genetics began to displace mainline eugenics toward the end of the 1920s. The move away from reading visible traits cleared the way for more evidence-based approaches to studying human differences, but before the broad acceptance of the scientific advances developed by geneticists—including the understanding of complex gene interactions and sophisticated mathematical models for calculating genetic probability—the shift from visible traits to invisible
chemical codes allowed long-standing racial prejudices to flow unchecked. As one prominent geneticist observed in 1930, even scientists find it “distressing” when firmly held beliefs are contradicted by scientific observation. The result is often that “the old ideas persist along with the new [scientific] observations; they form the basis—often unconsciously—for many of the conclusions that are drawn.”

The racial conclusions and policy prescriptions of mainline eugenicists were widely embraced in the interwar period, though they were by no means met with universal acceptance. By the turn of the twentieth century, a handful of anthropologists and sociologists had begun to chip away at the biological basis for race, which posed a significant challenge to the assumptions of eugenicists. And in the 1920s, a few nascent reform eugenicists consciously rid their work of the social biases of their mainline colleagues and decoupled studies of innate ability from both racial and class identity. The former group problematized the link between physical signs and racial identity by arguing that racial categories owed as much to nurture as nature, while the latter argued that while race might exist, there was no reason to assume that its physiognomic signs were connected to talent or character.

No one did more to unsettle the links between race and visibility in the academy than the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas. Through his research, publications, and lectures, Boas illustrated the sloppy deductive reasoning and unchecked biases that tainted the majority of scholarly and popular studies of race up through the 1920s. His systematic study of the methodological shortcomings of academic research called into question more than a century of study of “primitive” peoples, which invariably found nonwhites physically and intellectually inferior. Boas knew that ethnologists, physical anthropologists, and popular writers made pronouncements absent knowledge of local cultures, or facility with their languages; and that
they judged their subjects through the lens of Christian religious values, racialized biases against nonwhites, and reductive theories on the evolutionary “stages” of human development. He devoted significant energy to exploring how the ideological baggage that scientists brought with them to work tainted physical anthropology.

Boas cautioned that unexamined beliefs led scientists and members of the public to internalize simple pictures of groups that short-circuited efforts to observe, analyze, and understand individuals. He laid out the problem in terms that would have been familiar to readers of *Public Opinion*. Writing in “The Problem of the American Negro” in 1921, he observed that the accumulated biases of observers ensured that “when we talk about the characteristics of a race . . . we are dealing with an abstraction which has no existence in nature. …We form the picture of an ideal personage who combines in himself the striking traits of the race.” Keenly aware of how individuals were trapped within idealized pictures, so losing their unique attributes and identities, he noted that in “the popular mind, the negro appears as a class . . . generalized by the white man and . . . combined with dogmatic beliefs regarding the physical and hereditary mental make-up of the race.” By drawing attention to biases that observers projected onto their subjects, Boas brought to anthropology a new methodological rigor and scientific dispassion.

But his most consequential contribution to the understanding of race was his insistence that we account for the role of the environment in human development. Politically progressive eugenicists had, of course, long advised that even the best racial stock could not hope to attain its full potential under poor environmental conditions. Boas agreed on the point, but his argument went much farther. Over several decades, in dozens of published articles, he made the radical case that the environment played a significant role in producing racial difference. In an 1894
address, given for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Boas noted the
twin assumptions of European and European-American researchers: that whites embodied the
pinnacle of intellectual and cultural achievement and that physiological distinctions between
races were necessarily signs of difference in aptitude and character. Armed with these
assumptions, whites consistently read any physical deviation from the norm of whiteness as a
sign of inferiority—physical, psychological, and cultural. In the address, Boas conceded: “There
is no doubt that great differences exist in the physical characteristics of the races of man.” But
he went on to argue: “the question is not if differences exist, but if any one race is anatomically
considered superior to others.” Nutrition, occupation, climate, and childhood environment were
all social factors Boas enumerated that played significant roles in producing physiological
variations in human populations, and whose effects were routinely mistaken for biological
differences. He ultimately concluded that those physical variations separating blacks from
whites that could not be explained by environmental factors “are few in number and . . . not of
such a character as to stamp one race as lower than the other.” Boas’s environmentalist
arguments acknowledged visible racial differences (including skin pigmentation, brain weight,
head shape, and facial features), but in cleaving such differences from long-standing racialized
valuations, he helped problematize both biological determinism and the visibility of race.
Blackness for Boas was a footnote of evolution that said little about black ability or potential.

The impact of Boas’s work on race rippled out slowly through academic and public
circles. In the first decade of the twentieth century his insights helped spur the rise of cultural
anthropology in the United States, particularly once his graduate students at Columbia University
began to secure academic and curatorial jobs. By the second half of the 1920s his former
students chaired every significant department of anthropology in the country. During these
decades black artists and intellectuals also embraced his work, finding in it reassurance that the conditions of black Americans were better explained by structural inequities than genes. (Chapter 2 will explore in greater depth the influence of Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois on black thought.) Boas’s work would go on to play a significant role in consolidating the sociohistorical theory of race in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the decades prior it remained vigorously contested. Critics attacked cultural anthropology for forsaking what many saw as its responsibility to help clarify the connections between biology and race. Rising fears of Japanese imperialist expansion abroad, and the influx of undesirable Europeans and growth of mulattoes at home, convinced many anthropologists of the need to keep their discipline open to racial psychology.

Boas is rightly credited for his role in revolutionizing the study of race in the United States by questioning the significance of the differences separating white from black. But his efforts to strip from race its hierarchical associations nonetheless allowed it to remain tethered to biology. Boas did not question race as a division of human populations, nor that its physical signs had psychological implications. He repeatedly observed: “differences of structure must be accompanied by differences of function, physiological as well as psychological; and, as we found clear evidence of difference in structure between the races, so we must anticipate that differences in mental character will be found.” In the early twentieth century virtually everyone agreed that racial differences were real and at least partially linked to biology; the tussle was over their significance. In allowing the link between race and biology to linger, Boas provided his detractors an opening to attack cultural anthropology. James Bardin, a professor at the University of Virginia, spoke for many defenders of physical anthropology in 1915 when he scoffed at the beliefs of those who “are certain that we cannot change the Negro’s facial angle,
[and] are equally certain that we can change his mental angle and make it like our own; while we consider it absurd to think that we can do anything to make the Negro’s physical skin become white, we believe firmly that we can make the physical analogue of his skin exactly like our own. But is this a fact? Racial psychology says no.”

Bardin held that since the physiological differences separating races were biological, and hence immutable, the psychological and intellectual differences that sprung from them could not be subject to environmental change.

In the 1910s and 1920s many of the most vociferous supporters of white racial supremacy found in Boas’s work support for their arguments. When Cox submitted the manuscript for *White America* to Madison Grant for comment in the early 1920s, it contained multiple references to Boas’s work. Cox’s selective reading of Boas provided backing for his argument on the inherent differences between the races, and by extension, for the biological dangers mulattoes posed. The citations were removed at the urging of Grant, who counseled Cox that Boas’s work had been “discredited,” but even Grant’s fourth revised edition of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1921) footnoted Boas’s publications as supporting sources. In conducting research for his book *America’s Greatest Problem: The Negro* in 1914, Shufeldt wrote to Boas in the hope of obtaining research results that supported his thesis. Boas replied: “you would not wish to include an expression of my opinion in your book, because I am not at all convinced that the miscegenation of races is a bad thing from a biological pint of view.”

Boas had published *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) three years earlier, which brought his social constructivist view of race and positive assessment of racial mixing to a wide reading public. How revealing, then, that Shufeldt nonetheless felt it worthwhile to solicit his input and that he lauded Boas in *America’s Greatest Problem* as “an eminent anthropologist.” Twenty-first-century readers are
likely to see the racial beliefs of Cox, Grant, and Shufeldt as antithetical to those of Boas, but the ideological lines of affinity were clearly more complex in the 1910s and 1920s.

The early-twentieth-century thinker who most cogently articulated a social theory of race was the sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. Throughout his long career—which stretched from the turn of the twentieth century to the early 1960s—Du Bois repeatedly returned to the consideration of race’s origin and significance. Writing in “The Conservation of Races” in 1897, he acknowledged the understandable tendency of blacks to downplay racial differences, given how such differences had historically been used to question their “natural abilities.” While insisting: “purely physical characteristics . . . between men do not explain all the differences of their history,” he nonetheless conceded that “in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races.” At the turn of the century, Du Bois explained that race was produced: “First, [by a group’s] race identity and common blood; secondly, and more important, a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life.” Race may have had a biological component but, as Du Bois maintained, “no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences” that separated groups.72

Du Bois’ philosophy of race found confirmation in his quantitative research. His exhaustive sociological study of black life in Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Negro (1899), provided a detailed, statistically grounded analysis of life in the city based on surveys he conducted with 2,500 black households and his examination of census records and government archives.73 The study corroborated prevailing white expectations by producing evidence that Philadelphia’s African Americans exhibited greater criminality, disease, unemployment, and illiteracy than their white neighbors. But whereas most whites took such failings as proof of the
innate inferiority of Negroes, Du Bois explained them as the legacy of slavery, structural impediments, and the ongoing racial prejudice of whites. *The Philadelphia Negro* offered compelling evidence that the secondary traits Americans consistently took as signs of racial identity and worth were socially produced. His analysis pointed to the “Negro problem” as fundamentally social, not biological.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Du Bois avidly consumed and promoted the limited corpus of sociological and anthropological research that supported his position on race. In 1897 he assumed responsibility for organizing the annual Atlanta Conference of Negro Problems at Atlanta University. He transformed the conference from one focused on the telltale signs of the Negro problem into one that delved rigorously into its social roots. With attention to the lingering repercussions of slavery, economic exploitation, and racism, annual conference topics offered detailed sociological considerations of the black church, crime, health, economic cooperation, and the family. Du Bois turned a regional conference into one that attracted international attention with a roster of distinguished speakers that included Max Weber, Franz Boas, and Jane Addams. Under his guidance, the 1906 delegates’ adopted then-radical resolutions, including: “The Conference does not find any adequate scientific warrant for the assumption that the Negro race is inferior to other races.”

Reporting on the First Universal Races Congress, which took place at the University of London in 1911, Du Bois granted the “tremendous differences in the present conditions of men,” but added approvingly: “practically every anthropologist present laid the chief stress on environment in explaining these differences; not simply physical environment but the even more important social environment.”

Du Bois, as Boas, never fully severed race from biology. He argued that research had yet to adequately account for the powerful effect exerted by the social sphere on race, and that it was
ultimately of much greater consequence than biology. As late as 1940, he observed: “The mark of [African] heritage is upon me in color and hair. These are obvious things, but of little meaning in themselves; only important as they stand for real and more subtle differences from other men. Whether they do or not, I do not know nor does science know today.” No matter how forcefully he argued for attending to the social sphere, his writings consistently noted physical racial differences and acknowledged the possibility that they stood for “real and more subtle differences” in psychology and aptitude.

The philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that even if Du Bois himself never fully made the move from “thinking of the Negro race as a natural, biological kind to thinking of it as composed of people who share a socially made identity,” his writings provided Americans a roadmap “to make this move without him.” By carefully reading Du Bois’s work within the intellectual currents of his era, Appiah makes a compelling case for how Du Bois’s description of race showed alignment with modern identity theory. But because Du Bois’s theories of race were complex, ambivalent, and evolving, a case can be made for their alignment with a range of twentieth-century perspectives on race. During the same years in which his writings opened the door to race as a social process, they provided support for its biological grounding.

In 1925 Du Bois provided Margaret Sanger with a supportive statement to be read at an international birth control conference. It opened with the line: “Next [in importance] to the abolition of war in modern civilization comes the regulation of birth by reason and common sense instead of by chance and ignorance.” That he saw a specific role for birth control in improving the quality of individual races was made explicit in his 1932 essay, “Black Folk and Birth Control.” In it he claimed: “the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and
disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.” He concluded the essay by urging blacks to appreciate that “among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity really count.” And in a 1922 essay on interracial marriage he urged: “it is…undoubtedly a great human duty to improve the human stock by rational breeding and by eliminating the unfit and dangerous.”

Du Bois was cognizant of the potential for the birth control movement to be misused in order to advance a racialized agenda, according to the historian Herbert Aptheker, but the dangers did not dampen his faith in eugenic science. He maintained that selective mating would reduce the incidence of inherited disorders and diseases and improve physical and intellectual fitness, as did all eugenic proponents in the 1910s and 1920s. Believing that society was the primary cause of blacks’ physical, intellectual, and cultural shortcomings, Du Bois, however, was unique for advocating a biological solution to a social problem. Despite his forceful promotion of racial uplift through social reforms, he nonetheless saw eugenics as a needed tool for improving the quality of black stock. The unintended result was that the eugenic program he described was barely distinguishable from that of mainline eugenicists. Du Bois joined with his eugenicist peers in advocating that the reproduction of the “mass of ignorant Negroes” be restrained. That he attributed their condition to a different cause did not diminish the extent to which his approach to eugenics neatly replicated the racialized outcomes of his mainline peers. Du Bois revolutionary philosophy of race coexisted with his support for mainstream racial programs.

At the same moment when a select group of advanced anthropologists and sociologists made visible the links between race and society, a nascent group of geneticists developed a more
scientific approach to the study of biological heredity. The geneticists aimed to detach eugenics from the racial and class prejudices that infected the work of mainline practitioners, fully account for the role of the environment in an organism’s development, and verify the links between genes and expressed traits. Unlike the majority of their mainline eugenicist colleagues, the geneticists knew from their research that the expression of human traits was contingent on multiple genes acting in particular environments. By the first decades of the twentieth century there existed a growing body of research illustrating that genetically identical organisms could follow dramatically distinctive developmental paths depending on the environments to which they were subjected. Genes set the outside boundaries for potential development, but within those boundaries there was significant room for variation. As the Harvard-trained geneticist Herbert Spencer Jennings explained: “every creature has many inheritances; which one shall be realized depending on the [environmental] conditions under which it develops. …What their parents leave them are certain packets of chemicals which under one set of conditions produce one set of characters, under other conditions produce other sets.”

Jennings took direct aim at the ways in which genetics was then employed to advance nativist immigration policy. He attacked what he called the “false biology” that illustrated higher rates of “defects” (insanity, crime, feeblemindedness, dependency, tuberculosis, and epilepsy) among recent immigrants than among native-born whites. In his testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, prior to the passage of the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, Jennings cautioned that “under the heavy handicap of ignorance of the language, customs and laws of the country in which they arrive, often also under the handicaps of poverty and lack of education, [immigrants] have tried to make their way in our fierce competitive life. Will not mental, moral and physical breakdown occur more frequently in
that class than in [native-born whites]—even if the [biological] inheritance in the two cases be equal? Beyond question; the immigrant class are bound to show a greater proportion of defects due to environmental pressure than the native class."

Jennings’s political commitment to derailing legislation intended to exclude nonwhites, Jews, and southern Europeans from immigrating to the United States coexisted with a bedrock belief in racial essentialism shared by his more conservative compatriots. In the final paragraph of a long 1924 article in which he attacked the spurious use of science to restrict immigration, and patiently laid out the importance of environmental factors in the expression of genetic traits, Jennings asked: “Are the differences between men due more to heredity or to environment? If we compare ourselves with our [European] ancestors of 10,000 years ago, they are due mainly to environment. …If the comparison is of ourselves with the Bushmen of South Africa, possibly the differences are mainly due to heredity.” While a lack of scientific evidence did not dissuade Jennings from hazarding a guess that the differences between white and black were genetic, he declined to speculate as to the root of evident differences separating whites. He concluded the paragraph by urging further study to determine if the physiological distinctions evident among the “diverse races” of Europe (and American whites) were hereditary or environmental.

In The Biological Basis of Human Nature (1930), Jennings provided a more sustained consideration of the gulf separating white from black. In a chapter titled “Race Mixture and its Consequences” he wrote: “it might well be anticipated that the European whites and the African bushmen would differ in mentality as they do in physical characteristics. …On genetic grounds the presumption is that such differences will be found.” He went on to cite research conducted by the eugenicist Charles Davenport, which showed that blacks possessed superior musical abilities to whites and that whites displayed superior intellectual abilities to blacks. Nowhere in
The Biological Basis did Jennings make claims that these were qualitative differences. He maintained a veneer of scientific disinterest by noting: “judgments of [racial] superiority and inferiority must of course rest on relative fitness for certain purposes.” But he left no doubt that a racial hierarchy existed, writing: “to the superior race, admixture with the inferior one is adulteration; it means a lowering of quality.” Because Jennings wrote in an era when Americans privileged intellectual over musical ability, the majority of European and European-American historians of race consistently ranked African Bushmen (and Australian aborigines) at the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder, and racial differences were reflexively read in hierarchical terms, his readers needed no help in decoding the racial valence of the passage.

Lippmann—much like Boas, Du Bois, and Jennings—argued for greater consideration of environmental forces in the production of race. He definitively rejected the anti-immigrant and antiblack strain of mainline eugenics exemplified by the writings and advocacy of men such as Cox and Grant. In the same year that Public Opinion was published, Lippmann wrote a six-part series in the New Republic that mounted a spirited attack on the popular idea that IQ tests offered proof of innate intelligence. The tests gained prominence during World War I when, under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences, Robert M. Yerkes, president of the American Psychological Association, led a team of psychologists, which included Lewis M. Terman of Stanford University, to design and implement a test that allowed the Army to quickly sort the inductees who were flooding its ranks in the US buildup to the war. With the conclusion of the war, schools, universities, and corporations embraced the test as a scientific means of ranking their students, employees, and applicants. Yerkes and his colleagues promoted the tests as a reliable gauge of innate intelligence that cut through differences in age, educational background, race, and class. In the 1920s the tests were frequently proffered as evidence that
native-born blacks and recently arrived European immigrants lacked the innate potential of native-born whites. Lippmann was unconvinced. In the New Republic, he cautioned: “the claim that we have learned how to measure hereditary intelligence has no scientific foundation.” He noted several glaring problems: the tests were designed without intelligence ever being defined, intelligence was in any case too multifaceted an entity to be tested in a fifty-minute sitting, and there was no evidence that what was tested was innate, rather than a product of the environment. Disdainful of those who used the tests to advance a racialized agenda—such as Terman, Lothrop Stoddard, and the Harvard professor of psychology William McDougall—Lippmann wrote: “I hate the abuse of scientific method which it involves. I hate the sense of superiority which it creates, and the sense of inferiority which it imposes.”

Lippmann’s distaste for sloppy and dishonest research was strong, as was his disinclination to see racial or class hierarchies conflated with an individual’s potential for achievement. His faith in individuality and aversion to social stratification made him reluctant to consign people to broad categories that supposedly set the parameters of their worth. In Public Opinion he explained that because the social differences among men are vastly greater than the biological distinctions, those of us interested in understanding the unique attributes and predisposition of human populations, must first “fix our attention upon the extraordinary differences in what men know of the world.” Only after accounting for the considerable variations in how diverse groups interpret the world is it possible to make claims about innate differences separating such groups. In a later passage he warned of the dangers in speaking of “collective minds, national souls, and race psychology,” admonishing readers to consider how patterns of values or morals that unite groups are sustained across generations by the instruction of “parents, teachers, priests, and uncles,” rather than by “germ plasm.”
In making the case that differences among groups are better explained by examining social rather than biological factors, Lippmann left open the door to biology’s role. In this, too, his thinking resembled that of Boas, Du Bois, and Jennings. He wrote: “I do not doubt that there are important biological differences [among human populations]. Since man is an animal it would be strange if it were not.” Believing simply that there was greater variety in human social conditions than in human biology, he urged his readers to begin the study of human differences with the social realm. Lippmann cautioned that we not generalize “about comparative behavior until there is a measurable similarity between the environments to which behavior is a response.” Rather than taking biology off the table, Lippmann instead pushed off its study until the time when we can control for the changes induced by the social sphere. His reticence to attribute specific traits and aptitudes to biology must not be confused with belief in the ultimate power of nurture.

In his advocacy of eugenics Lippmann made clear that biology mattered. His An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society (1937) lists the various factors that had left some Americans handicapped in their capacity to attain success, including childhood malnutrition and neglect, substandard home lives, poverty and squalor, and “the deterioration of the stock from which they spring.” And he went on to argue that for the sake of an efficient economy and to meet our moral obligations in a liberal society, we need to ensure “not only that the quality of the human stock, the equipment of men for life, shall be maintained at some minimum of efficiency, but that the quality should be progressively improved.” To achieve this end, Lippmann repeatedly urged “public investment in the eugenic and educational improvement of the people.” Lippmann’s support for eugenics was all the more remarkable given his evident understanding of its excesses as then practiced in German and Italy. The Good Society advocates for the
compatibility of eugenics and liberal democracies, even as it expresses disapproval of eugenic policies practiced by the National Socialists and National Fascist Party.\textsuperscript{90}

In addition to his advocacy for an active eugenic program, Lippmann advanced the intriguing claim in \textit{Public Opinion} that the social sphere was inadvertently influencing human evolution. He made the breathtaking assertion that stereotypes could catalyze changes in human biology. Lippmann observed: “a stereotype may be so consistently and authoritatively transmitted in each generation from parent to child that it seems almost like a biological fact.” This sentiment is obviously in keeping with his argument for how stereotypes become naturalized in culture. But his next sentence pushes farther: “In some respects, we may indeed have become, as Mr. Wallas says, biologically parasitic upon our social heritage.”\textsuperscript{91} “Mr. Wallas” was of course Graham Wallas, the aforementioned social psychologist and political scientist, who was also an advocate of positive eugenics.\textsuperscript{92}

In the passage to which Lippmann alluded, Wallas wrote: “Man has been increasingly dependent on his social heritage since the beginning of conventional language and of the art of flint-chipping, that is to say, for perhaps half a million years.” Wallas described “social heritage,” or what he sometimes called “social inheritance,” as the vast body of knowledge and habits that individuals acquire over time and that groups pass down to each generation through formal and informal education. He explained that it is such heritage that makes possible the technological and cultural advances enjoyed by citizens in advanced societies. After noting our dependence on social heritage, he went on to write: “This fact has brought about important modifications in our biologically inherited nature. We have become biologically more fitted to live with the help of our social heritage, and biologically less fitted to live without it.” In a footnote, Wallas clarified the point: “This statement does not, of course, involve any Lamarckian
assumptions of the biological inheritability of acquired characteristics. It is only necessary to
assume (a) that those families which were more able to acquire and hand down social heritage
would tend to survive, and (b) that those parts of our bodily and nervous structure which the
existence of social heritage rendered unnecessary or less necessary for survival would tend to
degenerate.”

Wallas knew that traits acquired over a lifetime could not be biologically transmitted to
offspring. It was clear to him that biological changes in human beings occurred only over many
generations. The passage claimed that those families, groups, and races with the greatest
quantities of useful social heritage were more likely to see their offspring flourish, reproduce,
and, in time, raise their own successful children. The biological traits of groups with copious
social heritage were thus likely to become overrepresented in the population over time. As an
example, Wallas suggested that the burgeoning European social knowledge of applied sciences
over the past two centuries was linked to the disproportionate growth in “European breeding-
stocks” over those years. At the same time that social knowledge gave certain biological traits a
reproductive advantage, it also stripped from other biological features their utility and that, over
time, led features without function to disappear.

Wallas held that “man has evolved, and is still evolving, certain modifications of
structure and instinct” in response to social knowledge. His text offered revealing examples of
how the social realm had altered the racial fitness of human populations. In explaining the
importance of social heritage to highly developed societies, he claimed that if a catastrophe
wiped out all social knowledge in the world, “nine tenths of the inhabitants of London or New
York would be dead in a month and 99 per cent of the remaining tenth would be dead in six
months.” Lest we think that this dire prediction is based solely on the density of the urban
environments, which would complicate efforts to feed, clothe, and house large populations absent social knowledge, Wallas made much the same argument for residents of “country districts,” reasoning that they would not “invent, in time to preserve their lives, methods of growing food, or taming animals, or making fire, or so clothing themselves as to endure a northern winter.” And he concluded: “the white races would probably become extinct everywhere,” but that “a few primitive races might live on fruit and small animals in those fertile tropical regions where the human species was originally evolved.”

If pressed to consider the racial implications of his assessment, Wallas may well have noted that his prediction turned more on climactic conditions than racial fitness. After all, the survivors in his doomsday scenario were those living in the tropical regions of the world where the climate and resources required for subsistence are present throughout the year. Considering, however, that significant numbers of European colonists lived in tropical climates when he penned his book, his decision to frame the issue in terms of “white” versus “primitive” races is of note. It seems evident from his example that in a world devoid of social heritage, the biology of “primitive” peoples left them better fitted to survive off of the land than did the biology of whites. Whether this was because whites responded to their social heritage by shedding those original biological traits that allowed early man to flourish, because primitive peoples’ social heritage allowed them to adapt their biology more perfectly to the natural world, or some combination of the two, it is not possible to conclude from his text.

*Our Social Heritage* raises the specter of socially produced racial distinctions becoming biologically rooted over time. In the book’s logic, people separated arbitrarily into “races” would acquire distinctive social heritages based on the disparate conditions they experienced, including varying access to resources and their treatment within the broader society. A
discriminatory society would necessarily lead different groups to develop different social heritages, which would, according to Wallas, eventually result in each group “evolving . . . modifications of structure and instinct.” Traits that fitted groups more perfectly to their social conditions would, in a society invested in the construct of race, be interpreted as evidence of the immutability of racial difference. In articulating how social knowledge could influence biology, Wallas made it easier for his contemporaries to confuse social with biological distinctions, since social difference was now the gateway to biological evolution.

Wallas’s attention to the relation between the social and the biological was an outgrowth of efforts to cure what he understood as the great psychological strain endemic to the modern world. He shared the common late-nineteenth-century concern that the unprecedented pace of urban growth and industrial development in the West had stripped from people the comfort of communal life enjoyed in small towns and villages in the preindustrial era. In the so-called “Great Society,” people fended for themselves as atomized individuals in impersonal, large-scale metropolises. Wallas appreciated that the rise of this new social order brought many material benefits (and appeared irreversible), but also that it caused great psychological strain to individuals unmoored from older networks of support and identification. Convinced of Darwin’s central insight that human beings’ slow evolution was the result of their interaction with the environment, Wallas maintained that human beings were necessarily fitted for an environment that had passed. While it had always been the case that the glacial pace of evolutionary change ensured that our psychological and physical states were perennially out of sync with current social conditions, the problem grew as the pace of environmental change accelerated. With each passing year, human beings in advanced societies found themselves less and less perfectly fitted to their worlds.
In Wallas’s estimation the psychological distress caused by the gap between human nature and human society could not be eliminated. At best one could reduce it through social engineering. His novel argument was that useful social engineering required the introduction of reforms that proceeded from biological realities, rather than ideological beliefs. Tailoring society to better address the psychological needs of human beings would reduce the strain they experienced. That is to say, instead of creating a society that embodied abstract utopian principles, one needed to modify the current environment to better address biological needs. That these needs were tethered to a society that no longer existed did not make them any less real. Even during Wallas’s lifetime, his approach was controversial with progressives. Fellow reformers worried that his emphasis on the rigidity of human nature would play into the hands of conservatives by providing support for the supposed immutability of human biology. For those inclined to dismiss the role played by the environment in human development, Wallas’s attention to human qualities embedded in the distant past would have proven to be validating. In making a case for reform programs that begin with biology, and in imaging the ways in which various racial groups remained biologically distinct, Wallas clung to a nineteenth-century worldview, even as he crafted nuanced arguments on the imperative of social reform in the twentieth century.99

When Lippmann made passing reference to Wallas’s idea that human beings had become “biologically parasitic upon [their] social heritage” it was little more than an intriguing aside. Lippmann did not explore the idea and it is unlikely that many of Public Opinion’s first readers puzzled over the remark for any length of time. After all, it was tangential to Lippmann’s overarching thesis and just one suggestive line in a book filled with insights. I do not believe that Lippmann’s citation led readers of Public Opinion to ponder the ways in which his new
definition of stereotype, as a socially malleable and simplified mental picture, retained links to biological conceptions of identity; nor do I think that it sold them on an essentialist understanding of race. Lippmann’s reference is better seen as a symptom of the idea’s ubiquity, rather than a catalyst for change.  

In sifting through the complex racial terrain of the early twentieth century, there is a temptation to make order by grouping period actors at one of two poles of racial belief—labeling them either social constructivists or biological determinists. The opposition was frequently described by historians, politicians, and scientists in the first decades of the twentieth century and is one that retains currency today. Yet histories of the period so structured run the risk of distorting our understanding of the era, given that the opposition is unrepresentative of the significant divide that separated Americans in the 1920s. It is not that the opposition is false, but that it was not the dominant axis on which period beliefs revolved. Notwithstanding what they wrote and said about race, the overwhelming majority of Americans acted as if race had a biological root. Virtually everyone weighed the degree to which the environment played a role in the expression of biological traits, not whether or not race was the product of nurture. As we saw, the large tent of eugenics held those who perceived no role for the environment in influencing development with those who believed that it was a major factor in determining the expression of biological traits. At the moment when *Public Opinion* was published, the vast majority of its readers—spanning political divides and racial identifications—conceived of race as both biological and environmental.

Lippmann invented stereotype to illustrate the distance between the simplicity of public opinion and the complexity of the modern world. In so doing, he highlighted our propensity to project meanings and identities onto the things and people around us. The stereotype concept
was linked to Lippmann’s interest in accounting for the role of the environment in identity formation, but it was born into a discursive context in which identity and biology were firmly linked. Rather than seeing stereotype resolving this apparent contradiction in 1920s culture, I attribute its power to its capacity to allow for both. Since stereotypes were taken as simplified pictures of the real world, they could coexist with a biological model of race. For many Americans, stereotypes hid biological realities behind their artificial pictures. And because society’s racial stereotypes collectively captured the worldviews of those invested in biological identity, their definition as simplified pictures also supported social constructivist views of race. That is to say, the perfect ideological alignment between society’s racial stereotypes and the definitions of race espoused by biological determinists made it easy for those so disposed to see the artificiality of stereotypes offering evidence of the artificiality of race. In bundling together physiological signs, aptitudes, and traits, stereotype at once reified race and acknowledged its environmental production. This ideological flexibility was ideally suited to accommodate a category of identity as fluid as race. At the moment when Americans remarked on the disappearance of race, stereotype gave to race a new visuality that expressed what was then broadly taken as its biological base and social superstructure. Lippmann’s invention helped explain how race operated and, by giving it its particular visual form, allowed it to perform a dizzying range of social work.
NOTES

5 Ibid., 104.
6 *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 218, 1558.
10 Wallas, *Our Social Heritage*, 78.
12 Lewis, Sinclair, *Main Street, the Story of Carol Kennicott* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).
14 For the description of Clemenceau’s mental picture, see: Ibid., 82; For Lippmann’s distrust of eyewitness reporting, see: Ibid., 79–80, 82–83.


Ibid., 80, 81; The phrase “great, blooming, buzzing confusion” as a metaphor for how babies see the world comes from William James. See: William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 488; Embedded in James’s reference to the mental chaos experienced by the child is a racial undercurrent, for James sees the experience of babies and “primitive savages” in identical terms. See: William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 299.

Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 84–5. Note that the ellipses are present in Lippmann’s original quotation.


Ibid., 66–67.

Ibid., 9.


Ibid., 84.

Ibid., 29.


For counterexamples that illustrate positive eugenics advocated by conservatives, see: Kevles, Daniel J., *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, 85.


Kevles, Daniel J., In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity, 57–60, 85, 63–64.


Ibid., 92–93.


Cox, Earnest Sevier, White America (Richmond, VA: White America Society, 1923), 61, 309.

Ibid., 9, 27, 61–62.

Ibid., 246.


Cox, Earnest Sevier, The South’s Part in Mongrelizing the Nation (Richmond, VA: White America Society, 1926), 16.


Galton, Francis, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871), 339–340; H. G Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 111; Cox, Earnest Sevier, *White America*, 314; For evidence that even opponents of the 1924 Immigration Act tended to accept the existence of a racial hierarchy and that their argument was over which ethnic and racial groups should be excluded, see: Jacobson, Matthew Frye, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, 86.

Lippmann nonetheless held the typical period prejudices of men of his race and class. He ascribed traits to various racial and ethnic groups that corresponded to dominant stereotypes. He wrote of the “slave morality of the Negro” and chastised Jews for sparking anti-Semitism with their “bad economic habits” and resistance to discarding those “differences” that made them “other.” Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 148; Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 189.


89 Ibid., 24–25.


91 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 93; Lippmann’s interest in how social constructs might impact human biology may also have been supported by Berenson’s idiosyncratic interpretation of the power of Renaissance art. When Berenson concluded his discussion of the Renaissance male bodily ideal, he claimed: “after five centuries of constant imitation of a type first presented by Donatello and Masaccio, we [Europeans] have, as a race, come to be more like that type than we ever were before. For there is no more curious truth than the trite statement that nature imitates art.” Influenced, no doubt, by the selective application of Darwinian evolutionary theory and turn-of-the-century eugenicists, Berenson imagined that pictorial ideals could exert an influence on human biology. Berenson, *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, 67.


93 Wallas, *Our Social Heritage*, 14, 17.


95 Wallas, *Our Social Heritage*, 16–17.


97 Ibid., 7.

98 Ibid., 62–63.

99 Ibid., 68; For my understanding of Wallas’s philosophy, I am indebted to Wiener, Martin J., *Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas*, 98–126.

No one outside the Royal Family knows the reason for it. But that’s what it is… Dan Teng explained, “The rebellion started half a year ago with the Tianhun School being split in half. In just a single night, the entire continent was plagued by this rebellion! The Li from the Western River Province and the Sun in the Quiet Frontier Province joined the rebel army, however, and the fifth house, the Wang from the Eastern Shu Province announced their neutrality in the matter. It was unknown what the Five Elemental Schools were thinking. The Crafting School, on the other hand, took the side of the Royal Family. There was also reports of the highly reclusive Fate School starting to appear! All in all, there was only one word that could describe the state of the continent—chaos!