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Bruce Dain. *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002. x + 321 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00946-2.

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Several strains of antislavery and pro-black thought appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century. English abolitionists like Granville Sharp argued that black men by virtue of entering British territory came under the protection of the British constitution, which in his mind always favored liberty at home and in the colonies. American abolitionists like Lemuel Haynes insisted that liberty was a natural human right never legitimately curtailed by enslavement at any place or at any point in the slave system, not in West Africa, nor in the Atlantic trade, nor in the Americas. Other abolitionists like Olaudah Equiano and John Marrant, both of whom traveled between the New World and the Old, asseverated that black men earned their freedom by participating in such forms of society as authorship, commerce, religious worship, and military or naval service. Of course, these strains of thought informed one another and appeared in combination in some critiques of the slave trade and slavery.

Such ideas rested on two important assumptions. One assumption was that race signified something about differences among groups of people in hair, skin, features, and, for a few commentators, mental and emotional qualities, but that it did not indicate fundamental variations in humanity. Here the roots of "signify" are relevant: "sign" and, beyond that, "saw" (related to "sickle"). Race signified external differences among peoples; in doing so, it cut very little into an understanding of a common humanity and left intact the universalism of both Christianity and the Enlightenment. As Bruce Dain notes in *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, when those with an interest in physiology sought to understand race, they sliced merely into one of the middle layers of the skin in search of the major differences between black and white. The other assumption was that no matter how natural was the right to liberty, it was in society and under the protection of social institutions that freedom was sustained and the slave trade and slavery were to be eradicated. Indeed, the problem as early abolitionists saw it was that slaves were liable not only to forced labor but also to exclusion from the social contract and from the benefits of civil society. Eighteenth-century abolitionists had little need of a "state of nature" in which individual freedom thrived.

Those arrayed against blacks shared these assumptions, displaying, though rarely publicly, a deep discomfort that the enslaved were so much like the master class. The war-time letters of the delegates to the Continental Congresses, among whom were many slaveholders, show, for instance, that they understood that black slaves suffered under the slavery that republican thought suggested might be the fate of Anglo-Americans, though rarely did a white man admit that in public. Similarly, colonizationism–the beliefs and practices that would see African Americans removed from North America–presupposed that blacks and whites shared a common humanity, and were destined to mingle socially and sexually were they to exist as free people in one society.

Virtually all scholars who have examined eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American thought about race observe a slide into racial determinism, a new sense that differences among groups of people were so deeply rooted in primordial times or human morphology or, in some general sense, nature itself and were, accordingly, so overwhelmingly influential for individuals' social lives that blacks and whites could never live cordially and equally in one society. Nature itself was cast as the enemy of black freedom. This was not the first racism, but it was a new and virulent form. Its major thrust in American life was to add force to the removal of blacks from the social contract and the benefits of civil society; in this it became an instrument for forcing some of the handicaps of enslavement onto free blacks wherever they lived before the Civil War and onto most African Americans after the war. Nineteenth-century racism undid eighteenth-century abolitionism in two ways: blacks and whites came to be seen as fundamentally distinct in a way that earlier men and women could hardly have comprehended, and the social institu-

tions that the first generations of abolitionists imagined would protect freedmen and freedwomen failed miserably. Perhaps widespread abolitionism was possible only once the eighteenth-century version had crumbled. In any event, slaves were freed in the nineteenth century, but not in the way that the first abolitionists had desired. Ideology served to remove black people from American society, even from its history, in many ways. Part of this process was the creation of paradisiacal and romantic images of a "natural" Africa, which not only were unlike eighteenth-century views but also became another technique for removing blacks from common humanity.

Bruce Dain's *A Hideous Monster of the Mind* describes this slide into racial determinism more fully than does any other work. The movement was, in fact, not a slide at all, but more like the progress of a river with whirls and eddies as well as channels departing temporarily from the main flow. Dain demonstrates that "race theory" developed in several enterprises: republican political thought, natural science, moral philosophy, responses to the Haitian revolution, colonizationist impulses, abolitionism, and ethnology. Each one of these added to the coalescence of a new racism. Dain notes that racism was challenged from within these enterprises by blacks or whites who thought they had a better understanding of, say, politics or science. The history and the science rallied to support racism were often naive or outdated. (Dain eschews the notion of pseudoscience, presumably because he sees it as anachronistic.) Dain also argues convincingly that blacks and whites developed race theories as they responded to each other in debates over the place (or lack of place) of African Americans in the republic. A more nuanced picture of the nineteenth-century development of racism is presented in *A Hideous Monster of the Mind* than in any other work. Some of Dain's treatments of individuals as he traces a movement from the Revolution to the Civil War are among the best available. The few pages on Phillis Wheatley at the beginning of the book are among the most accurate and most thoughtful comments yet published on her poetry.

"Effacing the Individual," the concluding chapter of *A Hideous Monster of the Mind*, deals with Frederick Douglass and James McCune Smith's race theory, in particular what Dain views as their dilemma. The two black men absorbed racial innatism and racial determinism even as they defended black rights to freedom and citizenship–without ever resolving the paradox into which they had fallen. Douglass appears, in this chapter, as less sophisticated than his friend, McCune Smith, a Scottish-educated physician and skilled user of statistics. The determinism of racists reappeared in Douglass's writings, converted by means of a Pyrrhic victory into something good. Blacks possessed innate, positive traits that in freedom would combine with whites' innate traits to improve American civilization. It was McCune Smith who perceived that possessing innate traits was actually being possessed by them. He insisted that blacks had individuality that whites should acknowledge and accept, yet he also could not resist the forces within his culture that swept individual black men and black women into a racial group defined by its shared innate qualities. "He was," writes Dain, "extremely annoyed and angry his whole life at being put into a position wherein he could not evaluate black people or himself as individuals. The effacement of individual African Americans into blackness, and of progress into iron laws of race, seemed to make his life as a physician and intellectual worthless.... Although in the end McCune Smith's attempt to escape race failed, his efforts to show black people as individuals were virtuosic; they might be seen as pioneering the social history of African American life" (pp. 237-239).

Representing a race cost McCune Smith a personal price he was loath to pay. Moreover, he was afraid, according to Dain, that blackness would ultimately be lost in the United States. Blacks, as McCune Smith knew them, had developed in Africa. "Once America absorbed the Negro, there would be no real mixture with lasting effects, so to speak, only a progression toward whiteness," writes Dain. "The Negro would be gone for good as if he had never been there, since no place in America had the conditions to produce the Negro type.... That would mean that in the end blacks would have to whiten up to count as Americans. As black individuals their lives had no meaning except self-sacrifice. Perhaps beneath all, he welcomed an end to blackness and [to] the possibility of typological thinking and racial classification" (p. 263).

History has proved McCune Smith wrong, of course. African Americans did not disappear, but rather changed along with the course of their national history–one of the very experiences that nineteenth-century innatists asserted could never be. African Americans today are different from the ones McCune Smith knew, but so are whites. Consideration of these facts suggests a further level of analysis of the race theories that Dain presents. Race theory–the process of formulating claims about unity and division among human beings, including claims about qualities possessed by some groups but not others–became part of democratic culture in the American republic. Just as in religion, in which a variety of beliefs, practices, and denominations became legitimate, even, in the eyes of many, desirable, so in thought about race. No person, no group, not even a racially defined

body, could declare the nature of blackness for the nation. Blackness itself became a runagate.

Indeed, as the origins of racial difference retreated, as Dain describes so well, from the subcutaneous layers to some essence, whether in the body or in the past or in nature, race became even more malleable and more open to popular definition. An evangelical sense of inner spirit allowed the explosion of democratic religion in the early nineteenth century. Similarly, the new sense of racial innatism made race theory more flexible and more open to democratic defining and redefining–an evangelicalism of race. In democratic society, blackness became a runagate precisely because it was innate, an "essence," a "spirit." What Dain does not emphasize–although the book implies it–is that nineteenth-century race theory expressed some widespread understanding of the nature of blackness even though the theorizing we encounter in *A Hideous Monster of the Mind* was mostly an activity of the very well educated. Racism was at large in nineteenth-century America, and academics and scientists partook. If we think about race theory as part of democratic culture–in our own time a part of popular culture–we can understand both McCune Smith's anger and the modern history of race more precisely.

The black physician was angry that he was categorized as a black man and not treated as an individual. Yet his own writings and other activities presupposed that he was black and that blackness was a relevant category. McCune Smith's anger could be more accurately described as the ire of a man who wanted in vain the power to decide when his society would consider him as an individual and when it would consider him as a member of a racial group. Yet in a democratic society, definitions will be challenged and will be revised, and in the United States it seems obvious that race will be among the elements of our cultural and social life most open to contest and change. Any individual's power to oblige others to treat him or her as an individual in this way, but a member of a racial group in another way, has for long been quite weak.

To ask the question of more modern times: what are racial characteristics today? No doubt many of our contemporaries believe in innate racial characteristics and accept a form of racial determinism. If their beliefs ultimately derive from the race theory Dain describes, they do so in a way that has little place in his argument. Political theory, science, and segregationist impulses seem today to have little role in determining commonly held notions about race. Democratic popular culture–cinema, music, and sports–seem to have been for almost half a century the sources of convictions about innate racial characteristics. These convictions lack the horrible cruelty of earlier racism, but they mislead our nation in some ways, nonetheless. Thus we might understand the various spheres in which race theory developed, as described by Bruce Dain, as epiphenomena of a democratic society. Then we might comprehend that we are in the midst of a similar process, less, for instance, scientific in nature, but still integral to American democracy.

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