

SOME MID-19TH CENTURY AMERICAN ATTITUDES

The following two selections reflect attitudes of a majority of Americans by the mid-19th century. These are some early expressions of the developing “scientific” notions of racial superiority/inferiority based on races having fundamental biological differences. Over the 19th century, these ideas were developed and extended and culminated in Social Darwinism which was used to explain why some people or groups of people succeeded and others did not. Modern biology and genetics have disproved the idea of fundamental biological differences between races.

To understand the immigrant experience in the United States, it is important to consider how these attitudes would affect the way each group of immigrants was treated.

1. From a speech by Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri in Congress seeking support for the U.S. claim to the Oregon country (1846). There were few Chinese in the U.S. at this time.

It would seem that the White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth: for it is the only race that has obeyed it ... The Red race has disappeared from the Atlantic coast, the tribes that resisted civilization met extinction... Civilization, or extinction, has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the trace of the advancing Whites, and civilization, always the preference of the Whites, has been pressed as an object, while extinction has followed as a consequence...

In a few years a great population will grow up there [the Pacific coast], luminous with the accumulated lights of European and American civilization. Their presence in such a position cannot be without its influence upon eastern Asia...

The Mongolian, or Yellow race, is there, four hundred millions in number... a race once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization, but torpid and stationary for thousands of years. It is a race far above the Ethiopian, or Black... and above the American Indian, or Red; it is a race far above all these, but still far below the White, and, like all the rest, must receive an impression from the superior race whenever they come in contact.

The sun of civilization must shine across the sea; socially and commercially, the van[guard] of the Caucasians, and the rear of the Mongolians, must intermix... They must talk together, and trade together, and marry together... Moral and intellectual superiority will do the rest, the White race will take the ascendant, elevating what is susceptible of improvement—wearing out what is not... And thus, the youngest people, and the newest land, will become the reviver and the regenerator of the oldest...

2. *Hinton Helper, a South Carolinian, went to California to seek his fortune in the gold fields. He was not successful. He spent five years there during the first wave of Chinese immigration doing a variety of jobs and living in several places. During that time he wrote letters home to friends and family which he published in book form after his return to South Carolina. His opinion of California, its people, and its society was in general negative.*

Is this Chinese immigration desirable? I think not; and contrary to the expressed opinions of many of the public prints throughout the country, contend that it ought not to be encouraged. It is not desirable, because it is not useful; or, if useful at all, it is only to themselves—not to us... In what capacity do they contribute to the advancement of American interests. Are they engaged in any thing that adds to the general wealth and importance of the country?

But the Chinese are more objectionable than other foreigners, because they refuse to have dealing with us...They will not become permanent citizens, nor identify their lives and interests with the country.

...But I am inclined to look upon them as an inauspicious element of society. They have neither the strength of body nor the power of mind to cope with us in the common affairs of life... No inferior race of men can exist in these United States without becoming subordinate to the will of the Anglo-Americans... They must either be our equals or our dependents. It is so with the Negroes in the South; it is so with the Irish in the North; it was so with the Indians in New England; and it will be so with the Chinese in California. The Indians, it is true, would not submit to be enslaved; but they had to suffer exile, hunger and death as a consequence of their intractability. Certain it is, that the greater diversity of colors and qualities of men, the greater will be the strife and conflict of feeling.

Source: Hinton R. Helper, *The Land of Gold, Reality versus Fiction* (Baltimore, 1855, pp. 92-96).

● QUESTIONS

1. According to Benton what defines a race as being “superior”?
2. What happens to “inferior” races when they come into contact with “superior” races?
3. What action does Benton propose for improving the Mongolians? What would Helper think of Benton’s suggestion for treatment of the Mongolian race?
4. List at least 3 reasons why Helper thinks Chinese immigration is not desirable. Are these reasons all related to race?
5. How would this general view affect the treatment of immigrants?