

# Benjamin Franklin and Restrictive Immigration

By NATHANIEL WEYL

One of the neglected facets of Benjamin Franklin's diversified intellectual activities was his attempt to formulate an immigration policy for the underpopulated American colonies. His writings on this topic date from the early 1850s and, therefore, antedate the Revolutionary War by two decades and are not motivated by the politics of national independence. At the time, Franklin was in his middle forties. While some of his observations seem insular, parochial and the result of restricted perspective, Franklin was already a man with a European reputation who had lived in England, invented the Franklin stove, founded the American Philosophical Society, and initiated experiments which would demonstrate that lighting and electricity were identical.

Franklin's most revealing comments concerning immigration appear in his *Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.*, which he wrote in 1851 and published, only after much hesitation and reflection, three years later. The fundamental argument of this essay, which was later praised by Thomas Malthus, is that immigration to new countries need not be encouraged since natural increase will invariably cure underpopulation. The political purpose of the essay was to convince the colonists that they should discourage both the importation of Negro slaves and free immigration either from the European Continent or from Catholic Ireland. Franklin remarked:<sup>1</sup>

The Negroes brought into the English Sugar Islands have greatly diminish'd the Whites there; the Poor are by this Means depriv'd of Employment, while a few Families acquire vast Estates; which they spend on Foreign Luxuries, and educating their Children in the Habit of those Luxuries; the same Income is needed for the Support of one that might have maintain'd 100. The Whites who have Slaves, not labouring, are enfeebled, and therefore not so generally prolific; the Slaves being work'd too hard, and ill fed, their Constitutions are broken, and the Deaths among them are more than the Births; so that a continual Supply is needed from Africa. The Northern Colonies having few Slaves increase in Whites. Slaves also pejorate<sup>2</sup> the Families that use them; the White Children become proud, disgusted

<sup>1</sup> Leonard W. Labaree (editor), *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961, Vol. IV, pp. 229-230.

<sup>2</sup> An obsolete verb meaning worsen.

with Labour, and being educated in Idleness, and rendered unfit to get a Living by Industry.

Franklin next proceeded to anticipate Malthus' law concerning the relationship of population growth to growth of the means of subsistence:<sup>3</sup>

There is, in short, no Bound to the prolific Nature of Plants or Animals, but what is made by their crowding and interfering with each others Means of Subsistence. Was the Face of the Earth vacant of other Plants, it might be gradually sowed and overspread with one Kind only; as, for Instance, with Fennel; and were it empty of other Inhabitants, it might in a few Ages be replenish'd from one Nation only; as, for Instance, with Englishmen.

Concerning the type and provenance of America's future population, Franklin had strong opinions:<sup>4</sup>

And since Detachments of English from Britain sent to America will have their Places at Home so soon supply'd and increase so largely here; why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.

24. Which leads me to add one Remark: That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionately very small. All Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English make the chief Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, *Scouring* our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants of Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.

<sup>3</sup> The *Essay on Population* would not be published until 1798, almost half a century later.

<sup>4</sup> *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 234. Emphasis in original.

This remarkable essay was written before Franz Bopp and the Grimm brothers, who were to pioneer in investigating the structure and affinity of the Indo-European languages, had been born. Ethnology was, one might say, approaching its infancy. The division of the Caucasian race into such ethnic subgroups as Nordic, Mediterranean, Alpine and Dinaric was unknown. The nordicist, Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, would not publish his *Essai sur l'Inégalité des races humaines* for another century.

Benjamin Franklin's implicit ethnic criterion for immigration seems to be an anticipation of subsequent doctrines of Nordic and Caucasian superiority. He opposes the slave trade which already "has blacken'd half America" and recommends the absolute exclusion of "all Blacks and Tawneys," or Africans and Asians. Within the Caucasian race, he expresses a strong preference for the "Whites" over the "Swarthy," which corresponds roughly to a preference for Nordics over other Caucasian ethnic groups. The fact that he places most Germans and Swedes in the swarthy category seems incongruous. The German immigration into the United States at the time, however, was primarily from the Palatinate (Bayerisch Pfalz) and adjacent areas, the population of which is preponderantly Alpine. The exclusion of Swedes is even more extraordinary since the Scandinavians, unlike the Germans, are a preponderantly Nordic group. At the time, there were less than 25,000 people of Swedish descent in the American Colonies and it is possible that those Franklin encountered were the descendants of thralls, rather than of jarls and karls. The thrall child, according to the *Rigsmal* or *Elder Edda*, had "swarthy skin . . . , fingers thick, a shriveled skin, and knotted knuckles". This child, who was fated to bind bast and carry faggots "unwearing all day long," was described as having "a hideous face . . . , a curving back, and sharp, protruding heels". Judging by this and other contemporary sources the thralls were not only members of a subservient class in Scandinavian society, but of a different ethnic group.\*

Franklin had strong, negative reactions to German immigration. As a citizen of Pennsylvania, he lived in the American colony in which the bulk of German settlement was concentrated. In a letter to Peter Collinson, probably written in 1753, he urged that "Methods of great tenderness should be used and nothing that looks like hardship be imposed" upon them. "Their fondness for their own Language and Manners is natural. It is not a Crime." These "methods of great tenderness" included denying all Germans public office unless they could speak English intelligibly and invalidating all deeds and contracts written in a foreign tongue. Franklin thought Collinson's proposal to subsidize intermarriage

\* There seems some evidence that the Scandinavians referred to Lapponoid elements their ancestors had displaced in northern Scandinavia under this name.—*Editor.*

between Englishmen and Germans “ would either cost too much, or have no Effect ”. He believed :

The German Women are generally so disagreeable to an English Eye, that it wou’d require great Portions to induce Englishmen to marry them. Nor would the German Ideas of Beauty generally agree with our Women; *dick und starke*, that is, *thick and strong*, always enters into their Description of a pretty Girl: for the value of a Wife with them consist much in the Work she is able to do. So that it would require a round Sum with an English Wife to make up to a Dutch Man the difference in Labour and Frugality. This Matter therefore I think had better be left to itself.

Franklin approved of Collinson’s seventh proposal, that of discouraging further German immigration as many “ complain of late great Importations, and wish they could be prevented ”. He added:<sup>5</sup>

They say, the Germans that came formerly, were a good sober industrious honest People; but now Germany is swept, scour’d and scumm’d by the Merchants who, for the gain by the Freight, bring all the Refuse Wretches poor and helpless who are burthensome to the old Settlers, or Knaves and Rascals that live by Sharking and Cheating them. The Stream may therefore be well enough turned to the other Colonies you mention. And our Land Owners will have no Cause to complain, if English, Welsh, and Protestant Irish are encouraged to come hither instead of Germans, which will still continue the rising Value of Lands; and at the same time by mixing with our Germans restore by degrees the Predominancy of our Language etc.”

Franklin was just as concerned about the quality of immigration into the American Colonies as with its provenance, color or ethnic origin. Humane English judges, rather than impose capital punishment for minor offenses and for crimes committed by juveniles and by adults driven by hunger and extreme poverty, habitually deported convicted felons to the American Colonies. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* and other newspapers complained bitterly about this practice and called attention to the large number of robberies, manslaughters, murders and acts of piracy and of arson committed by convict servants in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia.

On May 9, 1751, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* published an ironic letter on this subject, signed *Americanus* and written by Franklin:<sup>6</sup>

In some of the uninhabited Parts of these Provinces there are Numbers of these Venomous Reptiles we call RATTLE-SNAKES! Felons-Convict from the Beginning of the World:

<sup>5</sup> *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, op. cit.*, Vol. V, pp. 159-160.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, pp. 131-133.

These, whenever we meet with them, we put to Death, by Virtue of an old Law, *Thou shalt bruise his Head*. But as this is a sanguinary Law, and may seem too cruel; and as however mischievous those Creatures are with us, they may possibly change their Natures, if they were to change the Climate; I would humbly propose, that this general Sentence of *Death* be changed for *Transportation*.

In the Spring of the Year, when they first creep out of their Holes, they are feeble, heavy, slow, and easily taken; and if a small Bounty were allowed *per Head*, some Thousands might be collected annually, and *transported* to Britain. There I would propose to have them carefully distributed in St James's Park, in the Spring-Gardens and other Places of Pleasure about London; in the Gardens of all the Nobility and Gentry throughout the Nation; but particularly in the Gardens of the *Prime Ministers*, the *Lords of Trade* and *Members of Parliament*; for to them we are *most particularly* obliged.

There is no human Scheme so perfect, but some Inconveniencies may be objected to it: Yet when the Conveniencies far exceed, the Scheme is judg'd rational, and fit to be executed. Thus Inconveniencies have been objected to that *good* and *wise* Act of Parliament, by virtue of which all the Newgates and Dungeons in Britain are emptied into the Colonies. It has been said that these Thieves and Villains introduc'd among us, spoil the Morals of Youth in the Neighbourhoods that entertain them, and perpetrate many horrid Crimes: But let not *private Interests* obstruct *publick Utility*. Our *Mother* knows what is best for us. What is a little *Housebreaking*, *Shoplifting* or *Highway Robbing*; what is a *Son* now and then *corrupted* and *hang'd*, a Daughter *debauch'd* and *pox'd*, a Wife *stabb'd*, a Husband's *Throat cut*, or a Child's *Brains beat out* with an Axe, compar'd with this "IMPROVEMENT and WELL PEOPLING" of the Colonies!

Thus it may perhaps be objected to my Scheme, that the *Rattle-Snake* is a mischievous Creature, and that his changing his Nature with the Clime is a mere Supposition, not yet confirm'd by sufficient Facts. What then? Is not Example more prevalent than Precept? And may not the honest rough British Gentry, by a Familiarity with these Reptiles, learn to *creep*, to *insinuate*, and to *slaver* and to *wriggle* into Place (and perhaps to *poison* such as stand in their Way) Qualities of no small Advantage to Courtiers! In comparison of which "*Improvement and Publick Utility*," what is a *Child* now and then kill'd by their venomous Bite—or even a favourite *Lap-Dog*?

I would only add, That this Exporting of Felons to the Colonies, may be consider'd as a *Trade*, as well as in the light of a *Favour*. Now all Commerce implies *Returns*: Justice requires

them: There can be no Trade without them. An *Rattle-Snakes* seem the most *suitable Returns* for the *Human Serpents* sent us by our *Mother Country*. In this, however, as in every other Branch of Trade, she will have the Advantage of us. She will reap *equal Benefits* without equal *Risque* of the *Inconveniencies* and *Dangers*. For the *Rattle-Snake* gives *Warning* before he attempts his *Mischief*; which the *Convict* does not.

To the best of my knowledge, no competent study has ever been made of the effect on the gene pool of the American population of the injection of criminals and incorrigible delinquents under the deportation policies of the British Crown. To what extent, if any, is the chronic poverty and comparatively low I.Q. of White Appalachia<sup>7</sup> the consequence of immigration policies which Franklin sought to reverse? On *a priori* grounds, one would suppose that, while Franklin's rhetoric may have been excessive, his fears were well-grounded.

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel D. Mtrron Hirsch, *An Experimental Study of the East Kentucky Mountaineers*, Genetic Psychology Monographs, Vol. II, No. 3, March 1928, pp. 189-241. Hirsch found that 1041 children from five to fifteen had an average I.Q. on seven different tests of 84.6.

# Ethical Relativism: The Rise and Ruin of an Anthropological Dogma

BY ROBERT E. KUTTNER

Early workers in cultural anthropology, which is also called social anthropology or ethnology,\* were often untrained observers who wrote accounts of their travels to primitive and backward regions of the world. The primary activities of these explorers, missionaries, traders, and colonial administrators left them little time to meditate on abstract techniques in science. The materials they collected on the tribal societies they visited, while of great value as a storehouse of facts, were often uncritically interpreted or even misjudged because the observers lacked the objectivity of professional scientists. This situation is not necessarily a condemnation of these early reports; the truth of the matter is that the social sciences had not themselves developed into formal disciplines with standardized methodologies. Observation did not wait upon the lagging growth of anthropology and sociology for refined methods of gathering pertinent data. The analyses of the data, however, suffered from the inadequacies of the pioneer savants. They gave us much of the information we have on vanishing cultures, but were not always able to make the best use of their findings.

A major problem confronting the unsophisticated observer is the objective interpretation of some alien or primitive custom. To use common examples, it seems strange to see people eating with chopsticks in Asia, and almost incomprehensible to remove shoes before entering a Moslem mosque. Yet it is "normal" for the European to eat soup with a spoon and to remove his hat when entering a church. Naturally, experienced travelers have no difficulty in equating these simple acts with their own customs, but for other more exotic forms of behavior they may fail to make allowance for diversity and come to hasty conclusions about barbaric rituals and primitive superstitions.

To correct this built-in European bias, preparation for anthropological expeditions involved careful conditioning against premature judgments and evaluations. It was pointed out that European standards could not be applied indiscriminately to non-European cultures, and that attempts to analyze raw data from purely Western

\* The "Oxford" school use the term ethnology as the synthesis in terms of *races* of physical anthropology or of *peoples* of cultural anthropology. This schools uses *ethnography* for ethnology as used here by Dr Kuttner. Germanic writers tend to use ethnology for ethnography. Ethnology is comparative: ethnography is descriptive.—EDITOR.